

Towards a theological agenda of the WFTL 2011-2013

Theological Seminar at the WFTL 2011

Co-building a planetary Agenda for Theology for the next (two?) years

0. Introduction: This is an activity of the WFTL:

(Trying to provide a framework for the "seminar on theological elaboration" within the objectives of the WFTL)

- Taking place in the context of the WSF, a privileged and unique setting for theology, the objective of this seminar of the WFTL is to elaborate an "agenda" for theology at a planetary level. **We are not defending our own local or regional priorities** in order to place them on the global agenda for theology. Taking our local visions to the global level, we want to programme-suggest a global theological agenda. We take it for granted that local and regional agendas persist.
- We need to clarify whether this theological agenda of the WFTL should be conceived in relation to the communities of faith and religious allegiance (Christian or other) **or in light of a theology with a macro-ecumenical responsibility** that is interreligious, supra-religious, planetary and "axial," etc. Or should the two responsibilities be combined? In any case, as WFTL, our theological work is intended to be multi-religious in principle, even though in fact there is still much that is lacking in bringing about this dimension. (This is a challenge to be studied at Dakar.)
- We are thinking not so much of a "theological agenda for the WFTL" that is **unique and exclusive**, but rather of a broad range of thematic priorities and operative proposals (theological consultations, inter-institutional collaborations, collective publications...) taken up here as an orientation to help advance our theologies on the planetary level during the next (two?) years.
- **We do not have nor are we looking for a common language**, a single, universal categorization that would be valid for everyone. We do not have that totalizing pretention, which is epistemologically impossible and that we explicitly want to avoid. We are simply looking for a broad platform on which, with different languages and on the basis of different categories, we can understand one another, dialogue, and, while incorporating the differences, collaborate in some priorities that we have taken up in common.

The schema in which we situate these ideas

- The WFTL does not speak for or in the name of all theologies, but rather out of and for the "contextual liberating theologies that work for 'another world that is possible'." We want to take up this recognition as the schema within which we align our proposal:

- **LIBERATING** theologies: motivated by the "principle of liberation" that conceives reality as history as a utopian-liberating process on the basis of the option for the poor (which includes very different "poverties")
- **CONTEXTUAL** theologies that are incarnated in their local contexts, based on reality and that return to it with a militant commitment with a practice of historic transformation, both locally and globally.
- theologies of **ANOTHER WORLD THAT IS POSSIBLE** that we will call **AXIAL**, that is to say, which find their center of gravity more on the side of the future than of the past, that consciously accept that we are in an axial time of ruptures and of new dimensions, and that attempt realistically to construct that other theology that is possible in the midst of the cultural and paradigmatic *tsunamis* that we are experiencing.

We structure our proposal within this same three dimensional schema. No doubt, there are many other possible focuses and categorizations. We propose this one motivated by its simplicity and only as a point of departure.

1. For a work agenda of Liberation Theologies for the next (two?) years
A proposal for priorities in three dimensions (liberation, contextuality and axiality)

• *In the liberation dimension*

We believe that, in spite of the short history of our liberating theology, its consistency, its meaning and its fundamental positions have reached maturity in the last several decades and, in spite of the bad times we are going through, they remain firm and are not in danger. The foundation of liberating theology, the "liberation principle," enjoys good health and is not a matter for preoccupation in itself at this point. Nevertheless, would it not be important to make our classical foundations face the new academic positions in political philosophy and sociology? For some time already these latter disciplines have been proposing a reconsideration of politics precisely around "the idea of justice" (Rawls, Sen). Should we not be intensely involved in that debate? Should we not also incorporate those current advances in a renewed version of the very grounding of our liberation theologies in order to be able to dialogue better with this very important and quite current line of thought?

Certainly we need to pay a more sharpened attention to accompanying the **world economic crisis**. We need to denounce with more prophetic energy and a more theoretical economic penetration the "turning of the screw" that is bearing down on the poor and the middle classes at the hands of world economic domination. This tightening is led by the large multinationals and the world economic system, by those euphemistically and falsely so-called "markets." It occurs within the context of a cultural hegemony, with the communications media at its service, that has managed to impose itself. That hegemony is presented as an inevitable and beneficial sacrifice for humanity. As theologies of liberation, we have the obligation to challenge that neoliberal cultural hegemony that weighs down on the poor. We need to accompany more closely and more efficiently the popular initiatives and movements, and even those coming from governments, which currently offer resistance. Concretely, in Latin America we are seeing this in the ALBA [*Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas – trans.*] and in the Bolivarian movement. Perhaps we need to revisit theologically, in light of "that other world that is possible"—and of the Reign—the topic of the borders and links between faith and politics as well as our relationship with the civil and political mediations that are showing up autonomously in society. We cannot remain passively on the margin,

In a more theoretical field, the encounter, the interconnection, the re-elaboration of the liberating dimension of theology the "liberating principle," does need attention in line with the new paradigms of the current "**axial epoch**" we are experiencing. This will help prepare a liberating theology for the new epoch, a theology of holistic liberation that is really axial, or post-axial. This re-reading that has already begun needs to be incorporated into our operative agenda for the coming years. We cannot live off the proceeds of a liberating theology whose theoretical foundations were established in a period that is no longer that of today and that requires these new approaches and interconnections.

• *In the contextual dimension*

The contextual dimension of our theology is constituted by many faces and urgencies, according to the irreducible variety of the different geographic, social and human locations in which we move. On this level, each theology has to better grasp the needs proper to its own context and in this way its local or regional operative agenda.

Faced with a global agenda, the WSF is an ideal location to perceive the pressing needs of our context on a planetary level. In this seminar, we can discern them and by consensus choose those that seem the most pressing for us from among those that we perceive in the WSF. If that is acceptable, we merely suggest these priorities as a point of departure for debate:

- the victims of the world economic crisis
- the victims (human and other) of the coming climate disaster (Earth, water, the community of life, humanity, the accumulated cultural and spiritual patrimony, and so on)
- the victims of the intercultural and interreligious conflicts
- the victims of wars and armed conflict.

- *In the axial dimension (theologies of "another world is possible")*

On the historic heights of these times, after almost 50 years of liberating theology and ten years of the World Social Forum, we believe that there is sufficient clarity to provide a notable impulse toward this third dimension whose axis is bending the horizon for some time already. The "other world that is possible" is not only what we want to build through our efforts; it is also a radical cultural transformation that we are experiencing as the result of a concurrence of forces that we don't understand or control. It is a real cultural *tsunami*. We are—as the best observers are noting—in an "axial time," in a transformation that twists reality around an axis whose exploration can help us adjust to the movement in its new dimension. Only by decisively adopting this awareness of **axiality**, will we be able to help construct the other world that is possible and its corresponding theology, the "other theology that is possible." As theologians, men and women particularly oriented toward the greater breadth of the horizon of the future, we need to adopt a vision that is more clearly determined in favor of this new time that we are already living in. We need to adopt immediately a collective awareness of its truly "axial" quality—with all that implies—and take it as a priority in this second decade of the WFTI-WSF to discover, walk with and support that axial transformation, including all the ruptures that would be required.

We propose grouping together in five paradigmatic nodes.

- The **gender paradigm**.

From the beginning, this paradigm has accompanied the liberating theologies, making itself present in the feminist movements and theologies (and also in the womanist, *mujerista*, the theology of African women, that of Asians and others) with a set of **specific instruments** (such as the category of gender analysis that has become a required instrument of reference for all theology) and a range of thematic developments that have notably enriched its proposal, taking in a **wide range of aspects** implied in corporality, sexuality, sexual orientation, racism, ethno-racism, gender violence, the marginalization of women, the feminization of poverty, the cross between ecology and feminism, and so forth. One can say that, for several decades already, this is one of the most effective and active veins in the whole range of the movement of theologies of liberation. This is not a sectorial thematic field (theologies "in the genitive case"), but rather part of **fundamental theology** that implies a transversal transformation in the whole theological field and a global attachment to life: from the most everyday practice to the image of God as God and other religious symbols. Everything is transformed by this new perspective that goes beyond patriarchy, *kyriality*, and a rationalism torn away from the multi-relational and holistic *oikos* that at some point we separated from our ancestral history.

Even though this perspective and the cause that moves it is not "a matter for women," but rather a profoundly human and humanizing reality, and even though one doesn't have to be a woman to feel the urgent need to take up this cause resolutely, we believe that it is above all the specific group of women theologians present in this forum, who will be able to propose to us, with deeper knowledge, the priorities (both in thematic content and in hermeneutic focuses) that we ought to take up for the global theological agenda that we will try to elaborate in this WFTL. And that is so, not only because they are experts in feminist theology, but also because it is women who most suffer sexism in their own flesh, and because, as theologies of liberation, not only do we want to speak in favor of the poor, but also to **welcome in our theology the voices** of those persons' oppression silences.

- The **pluralist paradigm**.

The inclusivism that is currently hegemonic in the Churches and among theologians is nothing more than a form of moderated exclusivism. We need to cross the bridge definitively and pass over into the new emerging territory that is "**pluralism in principle**." Our religions were elaborated in a time when the exclusivism, absoluteness and unicity of each religion were possible. That time is now past, even though religions strive to extend it with the complicity of theologies that have not yet woken up. The step that happens between exclusivism to inclusivism does not resolve the problems; it only postpones them. It is time to reconstruct our whole theology on the evidence of "pluralism in principle," to put an end to the myth of religious superiority in principle, and the shifting of the horizon

toward a “profound re-ligation [*binding together again* – trans.],” that situated us beyond the historic exclusivisms and inclusivisms.

The greater part of our theologies are still confessional, inclusivist and quite often crypto-exclusivist. They are not prepared to **dialogue and collaborate/interchange with other religions** on the basis of equality. They do not explore the possibility of doing theology in a planetary interreligious perspective by assuming their responsibility, which is the only way to make possible a fraternal living together of religions as also a covenant of all those in favor of Peace and the Common Good of Humanity and the Planet.

Only this theology—one that is axially “pluralist,” that definitively abandons exclusivisms, superiorities, self-attributions of uniqueness and absoluteness and the accompanying vision of proselytizing the world—can be an “axial” theology,” that is to say, one belonging the new time, a theology that with lucidity takes up the axes that the world today is turning on. **To reconvert all traditional theology** on the basis of a new pluralist perspective could be a priority task in which many of us could propose to come together in these next (two?) years.

And even though this goes beyond our strictly theological area, should we not ask ourselves whether the WFTL could study the possibility of a Macro-ecumenical Forum of religions and spiritual traditions, given the urgencies of the climate and of the current economic crisis?

- The **ecological paradigm**.

Many theologies continue to move in the framework elaborated during the last 4,000 years by the mythical religious stories of the “history of revealed salvation,” ignoring totally what we know today about the 13.7 billion years of cosmic history of this universe, which is perhaps only one of the many universes that could exist.

Many theologies **continue to be dualist**, imagining that they are faced with a higher, second level, one that is supernatural, divine, eternal, for which one must live, in the face of the lower level on which we live and that is natural, pernicious and full of temptation, ephemeral, a simple material setting of resources to be used. Our theologies continue to speak—sometimes somewhat embarrassingly- of a **heavenly salvation of the human after death**, as if that were the only objective of human life. It continues to be an anthropocentric theology that shuts us up in our particular software and closes us off and alienates us from the Earth and the cosmos. Our theology will not cease legitimating the destruction of nature as long as we do not change its vision. We will not cease to destroy nature as long as we do not acquire the religious conviction that we are part of it.

Most of our religions and many of their theologies still hold to the divine and to the sacred by confining it in a so-called “**transcendence**,” by which this world is deprived of divinity and even of sacredness, thirsty for re-enchantment.

The planet is confronted with the **sixth massive extinction of life**, not this time by an asteroid but by human beings themselves who, with their lifestyle have in fact become a strong geological force for the destruction of biodiversity at a rhythm that is a thousand times greater than that before the apparition of human beings and provoking, by atmospheric contamination, a planetary warming, one that almost certainly will be greater than 3°, which is considered the limit beyond which an irreversible chaos is unchained that will lead to a massive extinguishing of life and humanity itself. And our religions and theologies, that did not denounce this suicidal orientation in past centuries, still today appear reticent, slow to take up the life or death urgency that already is costing thousands of victims every year and that in 20 years is calculated to rise to a million.

Much of our theology still thinks that ecology is important but that it is only another chapter to be encased in the antiquated scheme of traditional thinking, the same scheme that has led us to the current ecocide. We really need to develop that theology with new foundations, which we have already begun. It is an oiko-centered theology that breaks with the old distinction between the natural and the “supernatural,” and that undoes the strictly transcendental idea of divinity that de-sacralizes and empties the divine dimension of nature. It is a theology which dialogue with **deep Ecology**, a theology that refuses to grasp reality as a “history of the salvation of humanity” and that goes beyond anthropomorphism in favor of an *oiko-centrism*, that is to say, a theology that is axially new and conceived on another axis.

We ought to agree to introduce into our immediate theological agenda this extremely urgent priority to develop this theology that has already begun. Indigenous and feminist theologies have much to say and to contribute in this area.

- The **post-religional paradigm**.

There is already a common ground, in civil society itself: a crisis of religion that has already reached half the planet, while in the other half a religious revival is exploding in our churches; there are new religions, new syncretic spiritualities and an neo-pentecostal avalanche that frequently turns back to archaic religion. Which of these **two halves of humanity** are closest to the future? The hugely contradictory data that we observe can lead to the most disparate diagnoses. But, looking up to see the widest possible panorama of the river of history, we can see that, in spite of all the meandering and whirlpools, the river as a whole presses its waters in a single global direction. Populations that come from poverty and achieve education and modern urban culture soon feel uncomfortable with their traditional religiosity.

Religion is submitted to new study about its origin and its functional mechanisms, is no longer considered a privileged knowledge and the only instrument of spirituality, of contact with the divinity in the way it had always been considered. And everywhere the thesis is propagated that "religions" and not religiosity or "re-ligation" are also human constructions that arose in the era of the agrarian revolution, out of a rural matrice, with an expiry date linked to the disappearance of that same agrarian period, a disappearance that many analysts believe they can detect in our contemporary scene. Spirituality, religiosity, "religation" are essential to being human. Religions, the concrete forms in which that religation took place in the agrarian period are not; they **can be radically transformed or indeed disappear**.

This vision is already present in many cultural contexts and in the mainstream anthropological studies of our societies. Obviously, it is not in the field of vision of the religious institutions, nor of the popular masses who have lesser access to education. This is one of the major challenges in which almost everything is gambled over religions. There is an urgent need to **reevaluate religion** (a new theological reflection on religion a **new "theology of religion,"** a need to study explicitly and deeply the possibility, as announced, of it being surpassed. Does this mean in the direction of a non-religious human or a supra-religious one? We need to effectively give "priority to religation over religion," by converting the former into a real beneficiary of theology.

This whole problematic—that we will call "post-religional" not to say post-religious, in so far as people don't lose its profound religious dimension when they abandon the modalities of religion—includes, among its many contents the **reevaluation of theism**. Held as without room for doubt and indispensable in the majority of traditions, today its epistemological note is lowered. This does not happen without an impact on our coexistence that is now quite close among theist and non-theist religions. The eclipse of God and the crisis of religion have already acquired significant dimensions in Europe and in the first world in general. But, already there are also quite a few sectors on other continents that are beginning to feel it even in sectors that are in a neo-pentecostal effervescence. Will most of our theologies continue ignoring this need for a new reflection on religion itself, a reflection and a reconversion of the religious toward what is "post-religional: (the spirituality beyond religions), while they still have clients of the old tradition that continue listening to them. Should they not already be preparing the future, which is so present in large sectors of today's humanity?

In this challenge, the **European experience** seems to us to present a real "theological location." Its presentation in this same seminar on "the crisis of religion" and "the crisis of God" expresses better and confirms this problematic. No doubt European theologians have much to contribute to us all in this respect.

- The **epistemological paradigm**.

There enters a new paradigm with special force for defining the new epoch of this axial time we are experiencing. It supposes a radical change that affects everything else: the change in epistemology. Human beings are changing in this very subtle dimension that is difficult to perceive. We are changing our way of knowing, our uncritical assumptions that have been unquestionable up till now including the basic axioms and postulates that have been used up till now along with the forces and dimensions implied by them.

For a long time we were installed in a comfortable "ingenuous realism" that postulated the ***adequatio rei et intellectus***, a direct correspondence between what we think or express and reality. We have been interpreting in a literal way the beliefs that were carried by religious myths, as if these were descriptive of reality and even of metaphysics because they had been revealed from outside by an

absolute authority. We held on to some quite stretched links with metaphysics, rationalism and essentialism that are marginal to what is evolving, chaotic and process oriented.

The new epistemological paradigm that is advancing considers new knowledge **not as describing reality** but simply as modeling it and it considers that religious knowledge is also a human construction, elaborated on the basis of approximative metaphors that, with time, end up being displaced and obsolete. They can even become harmful in a determinate new cultural setting because of the global vision they imply. For some time now we are witnessing already the **dissolution of metaphysics**, which implies a radical crisis of foundations, above all for traditional Christian theology. Just as Kant was asking long ago and in another sense, the new paradigm asks us to “wake up from the religious dogmatic dream” that has kept us asleep until now. We are moving from a metaphysical and dogmatic paradigm to one that is epistemological and hermeneutic. It will no longer be possible to continue living in the traditional religious world of religious beliefs that are borne along by myths held to be literally certain. The epistemology that is focused on knowing things as they are in themselves, ingenuously, uncritically, mythically, is becoming impossible in the new knowledge society toward which we are moving. In many areas of the planet people are experiencing **a rupture in the transmission of religion**: new generations feel incapable of accepting what has been left to them by their elders. Religions will no longer be able to consist in “believing,” in bowing to revelation coming from outside, or in accepting truths or doctrines. Perhaps we are moving toward a religion without truths, without doctrines, reduced to its essence: religion, spirituality. Everything that has been elaborated over thousands of years and expressed through that ancestral epistemology needs to be reformulated.

The growing cultural and religious pluralism in our societies adds another dimension to this new epistemological perspective: **interculturality**. We are already aware of the limitation of any specific cultural tradition as well as of the necessity of compensating for its atavistic, exclusivist tendency of turning in on itself. The world of monoculturalism has ended, whether it is imposed or hegemonic. We have to make a definitive move to interculturalism or to pluriculturalism. Is there a way of finding a common field (categories, language, epistemology...) in which we can come together for dialogue, to do theology and to engage in the historic praxis of liberation?

The **new sciences**—above all quantum physics and cosmology—continue to spread inevitably in public opinion and in the communications media, even where one would think that people’s concerns were on more primary issues. Every day they gain acceptance among people tired of our perplexing traditional religious statements that have not yet come to terms with the radicality of the new areas of science. Many of our classical religious questions seem to have more to do with those new sciences than with religion and the traditional auxiliary sciences of theology. For that reason a new way of facing the questions becomes necessary with a new dialogue between theology and science. It is a burning issue and a priority that cannot be postponed.

An epistemological revolution is upon us, urging us on the one hand to **reevaluate the securities of objectivity** that we thought we had in our religiosity, and on the other hand, to reinterpretate religion more precisely as religion, liberated from truths, doctrines, dogmas, morality, canons, and institutionalizations. This is a truly axial change. Is this not a good moment for the WFTL to propose confronting all this at a global level, even if it might be only an initial exploration?

No doubt there are many other possible focuses, many other categorizations and also many other local visions about global priorities. For that reason our proposal can be complemented and corrected. With all modesty, EATWOT/ASETT offers this our vision for debate at the WFTL, just as it was asked of us.

2. Elaboration of operative proposals

- A.** Choose the **priorities in this seminar** that will constitute our planetary theological agenda – granted that this is not the only level of our own theological agendas. Do so through debate in groups divided along linguistic, geographical and regional lines and including a further methodological criterion. Come to a realistic choice: not an interminable list of priorities as if we wanted to make a list of all the perspectives and elements that preoccupy us and that we should not leave out of a “Summa” of liberation theology. Rather it should be a realistic selection that is

limited to a manageable number of thematic priorities that can be carried out adequately in the following (two?) years (until the next WFTL?) on the collective planetary plane that we wanted to organize for the first time in a WFTL.

B. Decide on a methodology for carrying out that “theological agenda.”

EATWOT puts forward this methodological proposal, as a simple point of departure for debate:

- In this seminar of the WFTL, **perhaps we will only be able** to have a broad debate and choose a few methodological priorities and orientations to work on in this first experience of elaborating a “theological agenda for the WFTL” on a global or planetary level.
- The Permanent Secretariat of the WFTL, perhaps assisted by some chosen representatives could remain for a few days in Dakar in order to give adequate form to that proposal for an agenda that could lay out in more detail:
 - the **priorities chosen** as lines of action
 - the **areas of investigation** that would be undertaken
 - the **thematic consultations** that could be carried out at the local, regional and/or international level
 - the appropriate **publications** (books, journals, monographs, congresses or events) and will immediately circulate that “theological agenda,” which the WFTL proposes to animate.
- We could allow a month—or more if required—for the theological institutions to study the proposal and consider whether they want to participate in a more active way by taking on some of those initiatives and committing themselves to carry them out in one of the levels (local, regional, international/world). The Secretariat would receive the eventual offerings/initiatives and would commit to providing useful orientations for better coordination. They could, for example, in this way:
 - With each thematic axis or priority, establish a “**period of exploration and provocation**,” inviting academic bodies and major theological organizations-associations, to publish position papers or “declarations of basic principles” with respect to the theme.
 - Carry out, as a result, some “**theological consultations**” on each theme. These might be undertaken by the institutions that have offered to take up the idea, or by the WFTL (mainly at the international or world level or any that have not been taken up by specific entities).
 - Facilitate in consequence a time for the **largest possible participation** in the investigation and reflection, through the production of collective **books** and/or monographs in international **journals**, These books and journals should all have a digital version that could be accessed freely by all—theologians, students and the general public. They should welcome the participation on their pages of as many people as possible, selected by a competition.
 - The Secretariat could undertake the animation and coordination in carrying out these tasks, trying to bring them to an acceptable stage of development before the next WFTL.

We need some major institutions, continental or world associations, universities, theological communications media (journals), and financial agencies to concretely support the programming to be developed in the coming (two?) years, using that methodology. And we all need to feel invited to bring our theological work together in this global agenda without overlooking our theological agendas at the local or regional level to which we have not referred but that continue under our local and regional consideration.

EATWOT, at this point, places itself at the service of the international theological community and offers its various projects and platforms to assist in developing this methodology.

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