

# FEMINIST INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGY

Latina Explorations for a Just World



Editors **María Pilar Aquino &  
María José Rosado-Nunes**

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# Feminist Intercultural Theology

## Toward a Shared Future of Justice

*María Pilar Aquino*

This chapter represents a modest effort of reflection on my understanding of feminist intercultural theology as an alternative ethical-political project for advancing toward a new world of justice. The central concern guiding my reflection has reference to the need to clarify the social function of a critical feminist theology of liberation that is expressed in intercultural terms. From my point of view, the recent development of critical intercultural theories offers us new theoretical tools and new conceptual resources for enriching and expanding the emancipatory vision of feminist theologies.

The themes I present in this chapter are inconclusive, because a feminist intercultural theology, with its distinctive frameworks of intercultural praxis, has hardly begun to be developed in many parts of the world. Therefore, my contribution to this book is simply an initial exploration of how a feminist intercultural theology might contribute to the search for answers to the problems and concerns presented to us by today's realities. I have divided my reflection into three parts. First I put forward some arguments for the need to strengthen interactive communication between the feminist theological frameworks and the emergent intercultural frameworks. In the second part I present some key understandings of the concept of *interculturality*, and I also consider some approaches to the basic conditions for intervening in the intercultural deliberations that aim at a continued development of a *critical ethical-political* paradigm of theological interpretation.<sup>1</sup> In the third and final part, I focus my reflection on the contribution that a feminist intercultural theology makes to the development of new ways of knowledge

that bolster our conviction that another world of justice is truly possible in this world.

### ARGUMENTS FOR INTERCULTURAL FRAMEWORKS

Intercultural philosophical approaches are proving to be a valuable resource for clarifying the social function of religious discourses and have already begun to bring about changes in the theological sciences, especially in the understanding of their ethical horizon. Among the many possible explanations for this, I consider relevant only three arguments that are important for the purposes of my reflection. The first argument states that the multidimensional, simultaneous processes being impelled by the present social model of imperial capitalist globalization are raising questions and concerns that the Western European Christian tradition is unable to deal with in any significant fashion.<sup>2</sup> Due to its kyriarchal<sup>3</sup>-monocultural and Eurocentric character, this tradition appears to be obsolete and incapable of offering visions that are convergent with the values and aspirations of the social, intellectual, and religious movements that seek answers to the growing problems of social injustice. While more than two-thirds of the world's population experiences on a daily basis the heavy burdens of the profound social inequalities produced by that social model, only a privileged minority of the world enjoys its benefits. The most immediate experience of people around the world is shaped by the suffering and the anxieties that come from poverty, social violence, fatal infirmities, and increasing human insecurity. The present epoch is characterized by a worldwide crisis of human rights. It is precisely in terms of such experience that people are interpreting their human and their religious existence. From my own experiential position in the Americas, I can see clearly that this kyriarchal Christian tradition not only has not contributed to forging systems that engender social justice, but that it also is still failing in its mission to provide people reasons to assert their hope that another world is possible.

The second argument recognizes that in the context of Latin America, even though the political panorama has changed significantly in the last few years, the cultural and religious ambience not only continues to be adverse to women's dignity and human rights but has actually gotten worse. Recent studies point out that, although there is some evident reform of political and social institutions, there has been no advance in terms of developing and consolidating a democratic culture.<sup>4</sup> M. Lagos, director of the prominent firm *Latinobarómetro*, states: "Unfortunately,

after ten years, almost nothing in the region has happened as regards democracy. . . . Everything changes so that everything stays the same.”<sup>5</sup> Among other causes, these studies point out that the attitudes and the values in favor of an antidemocratic political culture remain constant. The inadequate development of a culture of respect for human rights finds expression in poverty and the deepening of social inequalities, which affect principally the lives of women. From my viewpoint, another main cause, ignored by these studies, is the antidemocratic presence and activity in the region of Roman Catholicism and the fundamentalist Christian churches. By virtue of their hierarchical, authoritarian, and sexist character, these churches act as real obstacles to the development of democratic cultures. In many countries conservative Roman Catholicism, with its absolutist dogmatism, has intervened in the public realm in order to prevent the juridical recognition or the approval of changes in legislation to protect the human rights of women.<sup>6</sup>

Latin America and the Caribbean are not the exception, however, for in recent years the attacks against the human rights of women have increased similarly in other countries as well. Amnesty International points out that “this attack, especially regarding women’s sexual rights and reproductive rights, was led by conservative U.S.-backed Christian groups and supported by the Holy See and some member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.”<sup>7</sup> For the Latin American and Caribbean region it would be naive and absurd to ignore the negative function that kyriarchal Roman Catholicism exercises as regards the achievement of human rights for women. Going back to its origins in the Eurocentric colonial project, kyriarchal Roman Catholicism has historically had, and continues to have, a major influence in the cultural frameworks that ground the values, visions, and forms of life in this region. The kyriarchal theology of Roman Catholicism continues to give backing to cultural environments that accept the subordination of women and that give permission for men, as a social body, to function as a privileged human grouping that is allowed to degrade, humiliate and violate women. In most countries the Catholic Church has failed to offer alternative cultural models for transforming the apparent inertia of the cultural and social privileges enjoyed by men, and it has been negligent in abandoning the mentality of privileges that the present cultures reproduce.

In order to illustrate this assertion, I will describe a situation that I recently experienced, a sordid scene that still seems to me to be strewn with absurd images.<sup>8</sup> As associate director of the Center for the Study of Latino/a Catholicism, I happened to be visiting a Latin American country to explore the possibilities of holding a symposium on feminist intercultural theology, similar to the symposium that produced this book. In

the midst of many meetings that I had, one afternoon I was to be present in a session that was attended by several colleagues and friends, all men. Upon entering the meeting, I did not think it unusual that my presence was unacknowledged, because I understood that my first duty was to familiarize myself with the topic that the group was discussing. However, after forty minutes of feeling not only that my presence there was being ignored, but that I was being rendered invisible, I was gripped by a distinct sense of being excluded for the simple fact of being a woman. I was not wrong in feeling that way. A few minutes later I tried to intervene in the conversation, which was on a topic of much interest for me, related to the processes of the commissions of truth and reconciliation in Latin America. At the moment of seeking to utter my first words, however, one of the participants said to me in a strong, serious, authoritarian voice: "Ma'am, shut your mouth. Did you ask your boss for permission to speak?" At that I became frozen, as if I were petrified by the horror of the situation. Suddenly, the scene was blanketed in a solid silence, which nobody dared to break. I seemed to be living in a mean, unreal world, but that situation was quite real and those of us who were there were real people. What was absurd about the situation is that I was there precisely to seek out spaces for organizing an event on feminist intercultural theology, and that in such a circumstance my person suffered aggression for no reason at all.

Experience revealed to me that that participant who so despotically silenced me thought that he had permission to degrade me as a person. But he revealed also that another participant in the meeting believed he had permission to convey the idea that I was his subordinate and that somehow I owed obedience to a person who gave the erroneous impression of being my "boss." In that dynamic of power and control, in order for that person to be recognized as "the boss," it was necessary for me to be degraded. In the midst of my amazement, I was able to realize that the consummate arrogance and overinflated egos of those colleagues and friends had been nourished by cultures and religions that were profoundly sexist. In my view, those dynamics of kyriarchal power continue to function because the dominant antidemocratic cultures have not changed at all, and the mentalities of dominion and control continue the same as always. With the exception of one other participant, I have not received any apologies from those perpetrators of women's degradation for that aberrant and unnecessary disgrace that they made me undergo. This personal experience only confirmed for me the need we have of intervening theologically for the radical transformation of the kyriarchal cultures, and religions that dominate the world. In my opinion, there will be no changes in our societies without radical changes in the cultural

frameworks. There will be no respect for women without radical changes in the kyriarchal societies, cultures and religions. The conceptual frameworks of the intercultural critique seek to contribute to the development and the consolidation of democratizing environments, so that present-day world realities cease being forever the same. For that reason, interculturality is not so much a new theme for theology as it is a new rationality that expands the ethical-political horizon of theology.

The third argument asserts that the function of theological knowledge can be clarified by answering these questions: What happens to the world's reality when God's presence and activity takes place there? And what happens to God's reality when it takes place in the world? According to Ignacio Ellacuría, the central concern of theology is making clear "which historical acts bring salvation and which bring condemnation, which acts make God more present, and how that presence is actualized and made effective in them."<sup>9</sup> This concern leads me to recognize that for present-day world realities, so characterized by the universality of social injustice and women's subordination, theological activity can and should understand that its function is in direct relation to those currents of thoughts and emancipatory social movements that seek to fortify processes favoring a social justice paradigm. In my view, the processes of struggling to make a new social paradigm possible in the world are precisely those where God's presence and activity become real in the world. Feminist liberation theologies, by keeping step with the processes aimed at promoting transformative visions and practices in favor of a new world of justice, are becoming increasingly integrated into the frameworks of critical intercultural thought.

Nonetheless, in light of these three arguments, we should recognize that the intercultural theological frameworks are not products already assembled, much less finished goods. What is more, these frameworks can come into existence only when there are people like you and me, interested in contributing to the creation of intercultural feminist processes and spaces. Intercultural perspectives do not happen outside of what we are and what we do; rather, they develop in those metaphorical and physical border spaces where we relearn the thinking process on the basis of new situations of interaction and contextuality and a new consciousness of cultural diversity. The processes of communication among the diverse contextualities are producing a new notion of universality, one based on our shared struggles to make concrete the conviction that another world is possible. The development of a feminist intercultural theology in different contexts around the world is a sign of hope, because it shows that alternative modes of critical thought are already coming into existence.

## FEMINIST INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES: UNDERSTANDINGS AND CONDITIONS

First, I wish to state that it is difficult for me to offer a univocal understanding of the meaning of the concept of interculturality. In fact, the mere attempt to offer such a univocal understanding would be contrary to the very nature of intercultural frameworks, insofar as they are continually being elaborated and expanded in every process of cultural interaction.<sup>10</sup> Cultures are not fixed products, but processes that change through human intervention and that are continually affecting the whole social context in its different local, regional, and global levels. In general, the common tendency of the kyriarchal mode of knowledge is toward seeking and establishing definitions that explain things in a clear and distinct fashion. The monocultural and Eurocentric character of kyriarchal knowledge functions as a key that locks off the possibilities for modifying such definitions by other modes of knowledge, since the definitions are already unilaterally established. However, the meaning of the concept of interculturality cannot be encapsulated in locked-up definitions, since people themselves are the actors and the subjects of the intercultural process. People, therefore, enter into the dynamics of transformation as interacting participants of diverse cultures and as bearers of agendas for change.

Along the same line, there is another difficulty in defining this concept. On the one hand, the meaning of interculturality is linked to the historical context of each people and each culture, so the meaning depends on the realities, the resources, and the challenges of that context. For example, due to the particular configuration, significance, and implications of the intercultural processes, they will necessarily be different in contexts as diverse as Rwanda, Guatemala, Nepal, or the United States. Naturally, the priorities, the strategies, and the resources involved in intercultural processes will show variations, depending on the particular contexts of each people. On the other hand, in present-day global contexts, the processes generated by imperial capitalist globalization produce the simultaneous interaction—usually on unequal terms—of peoples and cultures all around the planet. In such contexts, according to the Korean feminist philosopher Choe Hyondok, intercultural praxis requires that we take into account the different constellations of power in order to analyze the implications and the consequences of intercultural processes.<sup>11</sup> We must therefore ask questions about what interests are represented worldwide, what type of values underlie the cultural interaction promoted by the present globalization, and who is obtaining

the benefits of such interaction. Even so, taking into account the difficulties mentioned here and being conscious of the dimensions and the complexity of intercultural processes, I continue to emphasize the importance of fomenting spaces of critical deliberation for the purpose of developing understandings of interculturality that express shared commitments. Through communication and shared dialogue, intercultural approaches offer alternatives for deliberating about our common commitment to forging, out of our diverse cultural contexts, a world free of violence and injustice. To this end I here present briefly some of the understandings of interculturality that have helped orient my own reflection.

- In its most existential dimension, interculturality is understood as taking a position before life or as a “conscious way of life in which an ethical position in favor of living together (*convivencia*) with differences takes form.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, interculturality is an experience that emerges from daily life because that is where human interaction occurs and that is what people use to explain their existence.<sup>13</sup> Such an experience goes beyond mere tolerance or simple recognition of cultural diversity, for it understands that diversity as an opportunity for improved human development, cultivated by dialogue. Interculturality, in the words of Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, is a form of “consciously knowing the finality for which we work . . . in order to know what we should take care of today and how we should do it.”<sup>14</sup>
- As a social force for change,<sup>15</sup> interculturality is an international social movement composed of practitioners who are present at different levels of existing social institutions and who work in diverse fields of human activity, including churches and universities. For S. Wesley Ariarajah, “intercultural hermeneutics has been used to denote a number of movements within the theological scene that relates to interpretation and explication that involves two or more cultures.”<sup>16</sup> This social movement seeks to strengthen the relations among different cultures so that they can develop jointly, as equal subjects, “a model for living together”<sup>17</sup> in solidarity and peace. By affirming an ethical horizon of emancipation, interculturality can also be understood as a current of thought and action that is committed to the “emergent and insurgent moral forces of our epoch,”<sup>18</sup> those that have as their project the construction of a just world.
- In its development as a framework for thought and action, interculturality is understood fundamentally as an *alternative political-cultural project* that seeks, according to Fonet-Betancourt,

“the reorganization of current international relations . . . [and] the correction of the asymmetry of power that exists today in the world of international politics.”<sup>19</sup> As such, interculturality aims at transforming the relations of domination and subordination that are rooted in today’s cultures and societies. The objective of this transformation is the creation of just conditions that affirm the rights and the human dignity of marginalized social groups.<sup>20</sup> In order for theologies and religions to participate in this objective, it is imperative to strive for their intercultural transformation in such a way that “they become what they should be: ways of participating in God’s truth.”<sup>21</sup>

- As a new scientific paradigm or disciplinary model, interculturality is understood as a “methodology that allow us to study, describe and analyze the dynamics of interaction among different cultures and that views interculturality as a new discipline.”<sup>22</sup> In this understanding, interculturality “is the theory and method of interpreting and understanding across cultural boundaries.”<sup>23</sup> This is not, however, a narrow methodology, but rather “an interaction of diverse methods”<sup>24</sup> that intersect and enrich one another so as to participate more effectively in the project of constructing a new world based on justice.

By joining together these understandings of interculturality, I can discern their distinct orientation toward the transformation of existent realities, with the aim of modeling a world where there is a place for all peoples and where human dignity and human rights become possible. In this new world, the subordination of women will no longer exist because the kyriarchal cultures and religions will have ceased to exist. In order for such a world to be possible, however, it is necessary to participate actively in the design and the expansion of the spaces of intercultural dialogue. The conditions for participating in this dialogue include the following.

According to Fernet-Betancourt, the intercultural frameworks of thought present, above all, a hermeneutic challenge that involves the “need to reconsider the presuppositions of our own theory of understanding.”<sup>25</sup> In order to intervene in theological dialogue in intercultural terms, at least four basic conditions are necessary.<sup>26</sup> First, we must historicize the hermeneutical question. Such historicization refuses to continue fomenting the creation of theories based on purely abstracting thought; that is, theories disconnected from the social contexts in which marginalized cultures have developed plural forms of knowledge for

the purpose of supporting visions and practices of social change. The intercultural proposal undertakes the task of analyzing and evaluating the models of human knowledge that have dominated the world from antiquity up to the present. From an intercultural feminist perspective, the dominant models of knowledge known to us have been and continue to be kyriarchal-monocultural and Eurocentric. Since these models continue to declare themselves to be universal, it is not surprising that they ignore or subordinate the emergent models of rationality, like critical feminist theory, that develop theories that are rooted in processes of social change and propose emancipation and justice as the primary objectives of knowledge. For intercultural frameworks of thought, it is important to pay heed to the words of caution offered by Uma Narayan, who recommends that we avoid replicating the limitations of the previous theories of knowledge, including even the emancipatory theories, since they “constructed their emancipatory projects and subjects as Universals, even as they excluded many groups of people from their political vision. We need to remember that many political projects that sought to redefine and empower marginalized groups constructed their own forms of exclusion and marginalization.”<sup>27</sup> For that reason, hermeneutical historicization requires that we transcend any theories that promote the fragmentation and dispersion of the social groups that develop emancipatory kinds of knowledge, and it also requires the transformation of the material conditions where the diverse cultural voices enter into contact on unequal terms.

A second condition is relativizing our own ways of thinking. In order to enter into the spaces of intercultural dialogue, each participant in the dialogue must relativize his or her own ways of understanding humanity and the world. This relativization means that the different parts in the dialogue renounce the prescribed certainties that kyriarchal-monocultural and Eurocentric knowledge has bestowed on them. Historically, such certainties have prevented cultures and peoples from knowing and understanding other peoples and other cultures in terms of their equal originality, dignity, and value. However, since the dominant forms of knowledge express the values and interests only of those social groups that are situated in structural positions of power and privilege, this relativization of one’s own ways of thinking also involves a turning toward the emancipatory modes of knowledge developed by the subordinate cultures. Possibly the major challenge here is how to accede to those emancipatory modes, not from the customary kyriarchal horizons of understanding, but from a new situation of egalitarian encounter and exchange. In order to reach a common future of well-being and justice

that benefits the whole of humankind, it is essential to have discursive exchange on the basis of equality.

The third basic condition for intercultural dialogue is renouncing dogmatic attitudes and unilateral positions. Such renunciation means that the parts interested in the dialogue recognize that the world can and should be different, and that they understand that there are other models of thought that can help bring about this different world. In this sense, intercultural dialogue does not promote recuperation or reconstruction of the kyriarchal-monocultural frameworks of thought, but rather supports the radical transformation of the current models of thought. From an intercultural feminist perspective, the renunciation of conceptual absolutisms and doctrinal dogmatisms is essential for making egalitarian communication and open deliberation possible. To attain this perspective, the plural voices in theology are invited to become involved in processes of interchange and critical deliberation with the aim not only of overcoming fragmentation, but also of working together for a new organization of religions and of the world. In this way, the feminist practice of interculturality seeks to transform the supposedly universal character of kyriarchal-monocultural knowledge and to offer emancipatory models of knowledge so that justice comes to be truly universal from within each culture and society. Thus, the intercultural theological approaches seek to make universal a proposal for discourse that affirms the dignity and human rights of every person and promotes the integrity of creation in all parts of the world. For this reason, not only do intercultural theological frameworks accept and value cultural diversity, but they also recognize and affirm that it is precisely in the ethical-political space of justice where cultures and religions should join together.

The fourth basic condition for intercultural theological dialogue is having a keen awareness, as a starting point, that the cultures known by humankind up to the present time have produced values and ways of life that perpetuate a *politics of inequalities*, especially in the relations between men and women. In general, the existing cultures have found in religions the ethical-political arguments needed to establish patterns of thought and behavior that place women in positions of subordination. Intercultural approaches to religion and theology, therefore, deliberately avoid any romanticization or uncritical understanding of one's own cultural tradition. However, such approaches also recognize that cultures, in their diversity, offer emancipatory visions of the world and of human relations that are helpful in searching for new ways of living that banish the subordination of women. In this regard, Fernet-Betancourt states that each culture, as a vision of the world, "has something to say to

everybody,” so that all cultures come to be valuable resources “for seeking a common life strategy for all.”<sup>28</sup> An intercultural understanding of religions and theological activity, then, involves a commitment to eliminating that politics of inequalities because, theologically, it is contrary to God’s purpose for humankind and the world. Fornet-Betancourt points out that cooperation or interaction among cultures can be deceitful if there is no clear affirmation of a *politics of transformation* “that combats effectively and unequivocally the asymmetry of power that characterizes the current world ‘order’ and that becomes more acute as globalization progresses. Only by creating conditions of equality and social justice at a global level will it be possible to guarantee a free interaction in which all cultures can . . . promote, from within, mutual transformations in their ways of life.”<sup>29</sup> Consequently, feminist intercultural theology affirms as an ethical-political religious imperative the transformation of those cultures and religions that have bred values and ways of life that are hostile to the dignity and human rights of women.

These four conditions for intervening in theological conversations on intercultural terms support the continued development of a feminist intercultural theology that (1) contributes to the search for answers pertinent to the aspirations and struggles of social groups committed to the transformation of kyriarchal cultures, religions, and societies, and that (2) provides support for the religious visions and spiritualities needed to maintain such commitment. In the present contexts of imperial capitalist globalization, there is multiple and simultaneous incidence of cultural fragmentation, neoliberal homogenization of cultures, and social inequalities. Since the harmful effects of this situation mainly affect women, a feminist intercultural theology is the one most able to respond to questions about the function of religions in bringing about social and cultural conversions from a global politics of *subordination* to a global politics of *emancipation*. What is equally important, this type of theology helps us to achieve better the radical turn away from the divisive politics inherent in the logic of identities toward the integrative politics inherent in the logic of emancipatory democracy.<sup>30</sup> With the aim of facing the challenges that the present contexts present for theological activity, feminist intercultural theology seeks to strengthen the development of a *critical ethical-political paradigm of biblical and theological interpretation*. Since the dominant interpretative paradigms continue to be kyriarchal-monocultural and Eurocentric, their transformation must be a common task shared by the theological community in its diverse cultural spheres. In the words of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, an emancipatory feminist paradigm of interpretation understands that

the task of interpretation is not just to understand biblical texts and traditions but to analyze their power of persuasion in order to change and transform western malestream epistemological frameworks, individualistic apolitical practices, and sociopolitical relations of cultural colonization. . . . Biblical [and theological] interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions. Only in such a rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm of biblical [and theological] studies will liberation theologies of all colors have the possibility of engaging the discourses of biblical [and theological] studies on their own terms and on equal terms with Eurocentric malestream scholarship. By beginning with the religious experiences and articulations of the marginalized and colonized—of those wo/men traditionally excluded from interpreting the Bible, articulating theology, and shaping communal Christian self-understanding—they can change the starting point of traditional biblical [and theological] interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

#### **FEMINIST INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGY: FOR A NEW WORLD OF JUSTICE**

“Another World Is Possible” is the declaration or slogan that each year brings together hundreds of social movements, human rights organizations, religious leaders, government representatives, public-policy leaders, researchers, intellectuals, and activists from all parts of the world. Organized by the World Social Forum,<sup>32</sup> this encounter joins together all these organizations and individuals who “are committed to building a planetary society directed toward fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth.”<sup>33</sup> Those of us who hold that another world is indeed possible are guided by a new vision, one that supports the struggles to overcome the destructive processes of the present-day kyriarchal globalization<sup>34</sup> and that illuminates the search for alternatives that open the way to a world free of divisions and violence. This vision speaks of a new kind of globalization in solidarity, one which “will prevail as a new stage in world history. This will respect universal human rights, and those of all citizens—men and women—of all nations and the environment and will rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples.”<sup>35</sup> The feminist theories and theologies of liberation that have emerged around the world share this vision and are actively working to make it a reality in the world. Moreover, they are just as

insistent that the systemic subordination and dehumanization of women and the sexual violence against them should be a central part of every agenda of transformation, so that these realities are eliminated from all cultures, societies, and religions.

From the viewpoint of Christian tradition, feminist theologies of liberation imagine and visualize a new world, and they use their interpretative resources to create religious languages that sustain every effort to establish the social conditions most compatible with that world of justice and liberation desired by God. The redeeming and creative presence of God in the world is truly expressed only by the historical realities of justice, solidarity, peaceful living together (*convivencia*), and human fulfillment. The very content of these realities, therefore, is understood to be the expression of God's glory on earth. According to Elizabeth Johnson, "In biblical terms, yearning for salvation, for victory in the struggle with evil, for deliverance of the poor from want and of the war-torn from violence is consistently expressed in the hope that God's glory will dwell in the land or will fill the earth or will shine throughout heaven and earth."<sup>36</sup> The central role that this vision has for every struggle for social change means that, in the present context of kyriarchal globalization, feminist theologies have committed themselves to developing and promoting the kinds of knowledge and practice that transform those conditions that are contrary to God's purpose. Their function is to foment and sustain, in religious-political terms, visions of justice that give impulse to every effort to change the present situation. For the Christian community, the duty of working for justice emanates from the biblical affirmation that all of humankind—men and women alike—has been created in the image of God and that the equality and dignity of each person, as a child of God, is affirmed in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26–28). For that reason, no person has reason or is permitted to subordinate another person or to destroy God's creation. According to this biblical affirmation, everything that harms the world or degrades humanity is contrary to God's liberating purpose and so formally constitutes a sinful reality that must be eradicated. For feminist liberation theologies, the struggles for justice and for the elimination of violent cultures is a historical, theological, and ethical-political necessity, given the present situation of the world and of the kyriarchal-monocultural religions.

If I could name one aspiration that people of all cultures value and share in common, it would be the aspiration to experience the well-being and happiness of their everyday life. Experiencing a peaceful existence and the satisfaction of one's basic emotional and material needs is something that all persons treasure for themselves and for those around them. I believe that this aspiration is universal and that it exists in all the

world's cultures. In the current model of society, however, its fulfillment is literally impossible for more than two-thirds of the world's population. What is more, the present kyriarchal cultures and religions not only have been useless in preventing this situation, but they have also contributed to exacerbating the politics of inequalities, with its exclusionary institutions and its monocultural and sexist discourses. Nevertheless, as Tapio Kanninen points out, "in the light of the unfortunate but increasing prominence of religion as a divisive force in our world, the time has come for religion also to play its role in uniting people and creating conditions for peace."<sup>37</sup> The proposal to develop a feminist intercultural theology is concerned with making explicit the relation that exists between the real conditions in which people live, the function of cultures in inculcating values and aspirations, and the role of religious discourses in maintaining or changing the values and aspirations that originate in the conditions in which the people live.

The intercultural conceptual frameworks, according to Hyondok, have "the intention to transform reality, and not simply describe and explain the reality."<sup>38</sup> It is for that reason, in my opinion, that feminist intercultural theology broadens its array of instruments: in order to make more evident the roads that lead to the strengthening of visions of a world transformed on the basis of the contexts of each culture and the new scenarios of communication and interaction among the cultures. In view of the widespread aspirations for a new world of well-being and justice, contemporary processes of social change must amplify and intensify the spaces of communication and dialogue that exist among the emancipatory traditions present in the different cultural worlds. For feminist intercultural theology, a new world of justice is the only world that we can call our home. In this regard, Mercy Amba Oduyoye states that "our future as women is in living our true humanity in a world that we have helped to shape, and in which even now we have begun to live and enjoy, conscious of our situation and seeking consciously to change structures and attitudes. Even the prospect of being a part of this calls for celebrating."<sup>39</sup> For me, participation in this change of structures and attitudes already aims toward the creation of new cultural environments that respond to people's profound aspirations. What is more, people's active involvement in the present processes of change makes it evident that, in the crossing of cultural frontiers, we are already living in that different future of which we dream. For many of us women, the reason for our hope lies in the fact that, by our feminist theological practices in diverse cultural environments, we are intervening together in opening up and exploring what María Cristina Ventura calls "the new possibilities to exist with human dignity."<sup>40</sup>

From the viewpoint of the frameworks of intercultural thought, these possibilities of living in a human and dignified manner are broadened at the world level because, from within each culture and from the global interaction of cultures, an *alternative politico-cultural project* is already under way, and a *critical ethical-political paradigm of biblical and theological interpretation* is burgeoning. Feminist intercultural theology seeks to express these developments in a form that is systematic and coherent in its methods and contents. For feminist theological activity, intercultural thought is an aid for clarifying the function of theology in present-day contexts, and it contributes to visualizing conceptual strategies for advancing toward new cultural environments that support just and humanizing social relations. According to Fernet-Betancourt, cultures “are not roads already made, ready to be traveled on with a pre-arranged itinerary,”<sup>41</sup> but are concrete processes “by which a given human community organizes its materiality on the basis of the ends and values that it wishes to attain.”<sup>42</sup> Because cultures are not static historical formations, reality itself generates plural discursive practices that often are divergent and favor interests that are contrary to the people’s aspirations. In this context, it is important for me to affirm that feminist intercultural theological activity deliberately accepts its ethical-political dimension, especially as regards its commitment to the struggles for human dignity, the human and reproductive rights of women, and a new world of justice.

The proposal for a feminist intercultural theology is not a prescription or a finished product. I propose that it can be understood as a process of critical deliberation, which, in interaction with other liberating theological languages, seeks to contribute to the construction of different realities. With its religious language and resources, this theology seeks to participate in processes of change in order to replace:

- the paradigm of domination with the paradigm of justice,
- the paradigm of subordination with the paradigm of human dignity,
- the paradigm of capital with the paradigm of human dignity,
- the paradigm of a predatory market with the paradigm of an inclusive community,
- the paradigm of domesticating religion with the paradigm of transformative religion,
- the paradigm of absolutist Christianity with the paradigm of dialogical Christianity,

the kyriarchal-monocultural paradigm of interpretation with the critical ethical-political paradigm of interpretation, as proposed by feminist intercultural theology.

Taking these hoped-for changes into account, I have no hesitation in recognizing that this theology affirms an option for hope. Fornet-Betancourt holds that intercultural thought affirms such an option because it enters into the scenario of present-day reality “as an alternative for articulating the concrete hopes of every person who dares today to imagine and to rehearse still other possible worlds.”<sup>43</sup> In our present historical reality, the option for hope and the affirmation that another world is possible are ethical and religious imperatives for the theological community in every part of the world.

To conclude my reflection, I would like to note also that, by adopting the inputs of other theologies of liberation, feminist intercultural theology affirms that theological knowledge should function as a principle of liberation in the church and society.<sup>44</sup> Theology is therefore obliged to abandon its historical function as a mechanism for producing dehumanizing discourses and for validating systems of domination. Consequently, feminist intercultural theology, both in its aims and in its contents, is articulated according to the simple criterion of what harms or what helps “the very fact of living”<sup>45</sup> of the people. In the same way, for its epistemological coherence and consistency, this theology assumes the *feminist option for the poor and the oppressed* as its fundamental principle of biblical and theological interpretation.<sup>46</sup> This option has a twofold consequence for feminist intercultural theology: its contents are developed in response to the aspirations and struggles of women for an existence free of human degradation, and primacy is given to those insurgent traditions for a just world that are born in our own cultural environments.

Finally, I would suggest that this type of theological discourse needs to be undertaken as a collective task and as a reflection rooted in the concrete, lived contexts of our communities. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the most common experiences of people in these contexts have to do with poverty and the lack of basic human rights. The immediate consequence for our theological work is our need to continue raising questions about how religious languages operate in social life, what ethical-political consequences they have, what type of relation they establish with social and religious movements involved in social transformation, what impact they have in the local struggles to promote justice, what types of answers they offer to the struggles for the human and reproductive rights of women, what religious resources they provide

for affirming the human rights of the homosexual community, what incidence they have in “the very fact of living” of the people, and what type of common future we can visualize on the basis of the cultural and religious frameworks of interpretation advocated by intercultural thought. Even though further explorations are needed, I believe that a feminist intercultural theology has abundant religious resources that can offer visions and interpretative strategies that affirm the right of every person to live free of misery, fear, violence, and social insecurity. Still another part of our task, as Narayan points out, is to continue opening up spaces within the institutions of society, so that there is a place for every person, especially for “those who are socially marginalized and powerless, so that they may become active participants in articulating their interests, commitments, and visions of justice.”<sup>47</sup> This is so precisely because intercultural frameworks are aimed at fomenting interaction among cultures for the sake of achieving justice at the global level. Our own work is dedicated to the continued strengthening of the imagination of the theological community so that we may contribute better to the design of viable routes toward a common future for the whole of humankind. With our religious languages and resources, our work is called upon to show that another world of justice is possible in this world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On this paradigm, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 32–33.

<sup>2</sup> On this, see S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Intercultural Hermeneutics: A Promise for the Future?” *Voices from the Third World* 29, no. 1 (2006): 91.

<sup>3</sup> The term *kyriarchy* is a feminist analytical category. This is “a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (*kyrios*) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (*archein*) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001], 211). Also, as explained by Schüssler Fiorenza, “the neologism *kyriarchy-kyriocentrism* (from Greek *kyrios* meaning lord, master, father, husband) seeks to express this interstructuring of domination and to replace the commonly used term “patriarchy,” which is often understood in terms of binary gender dualism. I have introduced this neologism as an analytic category in order to be able to articulate a more comprehensive systemic analysis, to underscore the complex

interstructuring of domination, and to locate sexism and misogyny in the political matrix or, better, patrix of a broader range of oppressions” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 5).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Zovatto, “Cultura Democrática: Poco Cambia Pese a los Cambios,” *Latinobarómetro*, Observatorio Electoral Latinoamericano, Noviembre de 2005, available from <http://www.observatorioelectoral.org/informes/tendencias/>; Internet (accessed December 11, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Zovatto, “Cultura Democrática.”

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, a typical case from Nicaragua in Roland Membreño Segura, “Deshumanización y Fundamentalismo Cristiano: A Propósito del Aborto Terapéutico,” *El Nuevo Diario* (Managua, Nicaragua), edición 9425, Miércoles 8 de Noviembre de 2006, available from <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/2006/11/08/opinion/33345>; Internet (accessed December 13, 2006); Violeta Otero Rosales, “La Iglesia Católica y el Aborto: Por Abortos Clandestinos Mueren Mujeres,” *El Nuevo Diario* (Managua, Nicaragua), edición 9392, Viernes 6 de Octubre de 2006, available from <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/2006/10/06/opinion/30665>; Internet (accessed December 13, 2006); Tania Sirias and Edgard Barberena, “Más Voces Internacionales en Defensa del Aborto Terapéutico,” *El Nuevo Diario* (Managua, Nicaragua), edición 9435, Sábado 18 de Noviembre de 2006, available from <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/2006/11/18/nacionales/34263>; Internet (accessed December 13, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, “Key Issues: Stop Violence against Women: Women’s Right to Freedom from Violence,” in *Amnesty International Report 2006: The State of the World’s Human Rights*, available from <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/index.html>; Internet (accessed December 12, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> I have slightly changed some elements of this scene in order not to reveal the names of the place or of the actors, but I have not forgotten any of them.

<sup>9</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 251.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning this, see Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, *Filosofar Para Nuestro Tiempo en Clave Intercultural* (Aachen, Germany: Verlag Mainz, 2004), 12–14.

<sup>11</sup> Choe Hyondok, “Introduction to Intercultural Philosophy: Its Concept and History,” in *In Quest of Intercultural Philosophy: Communication and Solidarity in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Department of Philosophy (Gwangju, Korea: Department of Philosophy, Chonnam National University, 2006), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Unless I indicate otherwise, this paragraph has as its primary source Fonet-Betancourt, *Filosofar Para Nuestro Tiempo*, 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, *Interculturalidad y Globalización: Ejercicios de Crítica Filosófica Intercultural en el Contexto de la Globalización Neoliberal* (Frankfurt/IKO; San José, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 2000), 68.

<sup>14</sup> Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, *La Interculturalidad a Prueba* (Aachen, Germany: Verlagsgruppe Mainz in Aachen, 2006), 22.

<sup>15</sup> On the understanding of the social forces that orient history, see Ignacio Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la Realidad Histórica* (Madrid: Trotta, 1991), 449–57.

<sup>16</sup> Ariarajah, “Intercultural Hermeneutics,” 93.

<sup>17</sup> Hyondok, “Introduction to Intercultural Philosophy,” 7.

<sup>18</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *La Interculturalidad a Prueba*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *Filosofar Para Nuestro Tiempo*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *Interculturalidad y Globalización*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *La Interculturalidad a Prueba*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *Filosofar Para Nuestro Tiempo*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ariarajah, “Intercultural Hermeneutics,” 92.

<sup>24</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *La Interculturalidad a Prueba*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía: Ejercicios Teóricos y Prácticos de la Filosofía Intercultural Desde Latinoamérica en el Contexto de la Globalización* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 39.

<sup>26</sup> See Fornet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural*, 39–43. Concerning this, see also Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Hacia una Filosofía Intercultural Latinoamericana* (San José, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones, 1994), 19–26.

<sup>27</sup> Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 37.

<sup>28</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural*, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, “Interacción y Asimetría entre las Culturas en el Contexto de la Globalización: Una Introducción,” in *Culturas y Poder: Interacción y Asimetría Entre las Culturas en el Contexto de la Globalización*, ed. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 25.

<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 150–56; see also 176–80.

<sup>31</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 46–47. Bracketed material is mine.

<sup>32</sup> World Social Forum, “Another World Is Possible,” English version available from <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>; Internet (accessed November 14, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> World Social Forum, “Charter of Principles,” English version available from <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>; Internet (accessed November 14, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> On my understanding of the term kyriarchal globalization, see “The Dynamics of Globalization and the University. Toward a Radical Democratic-Emancipatory Transformation,” in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 385–406.

<sup>35</sup> World Social Forum, “Charter of Principles.”

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 53–54.

<sup>37</sup> Tapio Kanninen, “Prevention and Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts: The United Nations Perspective,” in *Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts*, ed. Luiz Carlos Susin and María Pilar Aquino (London: SCM Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>38</sup> Hyondok, "Introduction to Intercultural Philosophy," 17.

<sup>39</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 207.

<sup>40</sup> María Cristina Ventura, "Prácticas e desafios de la teología Afro-dominicana en un mundo globalizado," in *Teología Afroamericana II: Avanços, Desafios e Perspectivas: III Consulta Ecumênica de Teología Afroamericana e Caribenha*, ed. Antônio Aparecido da Silva and Sônia Querino dos Santos (São Paulo: Centro Atabaque de Cultura Negra e Teologia, 2004), 139.

<sup>41</sup> Fernet-Betancourt, "Interacción y Asimetría," 24.

<sup>42</sup> Fernet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>44</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios: Para Anunciarlo y Realizarlo en la Historia* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1984), 211.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Concerning this, see María Pilar Aquino, "The Feminist Option for the Poor and Oppressed in the Context of Globalization," in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 191–215.

<sup>47</sup> Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, 37.