

GOD at the MARGINS

Making Theological Sense
of Religious Plurality

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INTRODUCTION

Where Christians Find God

Often when Christians in the West think about where to find or experience God, they imagine God as distant, “out there somewhere.” Some hold on to childhood images of an old man with a beard and a staff, kindly watching over the world. God remains in heaven, observing from afar. That is to say, God is remote.

Paradoxically, even though many people do not consider God relevant to their daily existence, they assume God is responsible for much that happens in life. So while this God (usually thought of as male) directs things in the world and is somehow responsible for everything that exists, God is at the same time somewhat hands off in matters of daily life. Recent research suggests many Christians share the assumptions of a perspective called “moralistic, therapeutic deism,” which implicitly holds that God exists and wants people to be nice and fair, that the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, that God is not involved much in people’s lives unless needed to resolve a problem, and that nice people go to heaven.¹

Even when bad things happen, many people often assume these difficulties or even tragedies are somehow part of God’s plan. Tornadoes happen. Parents get sick. Friends die. Loved ones lose jobs or end marriages. Many ascribe sometimes inexplicable suffering in their own lives and the horrendous suffering in the world to God’s will. Despite doing so, they frequently insist on God’s goodness, asserting that what appears painful, bad, or evil somehow serves the designs of a good creator.

1. Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–63.

God in the Everyday World

Amid a world that contains real suffering, who has walked through the woods and not felt a sense of peace and tranquility? Who has stood atop a mountain and not felt at one with nature? Who has held a newborn baby—perhaps a niece, nephew, or cousin—and not felt awe? Most people have experienced moments of real connectedness with the world, even felt a sense of the interrelatedness of all reality. Are these not spiritual experiences—encounters with the divine as mediated through our human experience? Most religions, including Christianity, have strong traditions of discovering God quite profoundly within nature. Saint Francis of Assisi, for example, regularly experienced the divine not only reflected in the created world but also inherent in it. Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin serves as perhaps the most inspiring modern witness of this. He recognized the created world as utterly infused with God's presence, referring to the world itself as "entirely lit up from within" with God's presence.²

In addition to encountering God in nature, people often experience God in their interpersonal relationships. This relates to the idea that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, as in the doctrine of *imago dei* (Latin for "image of God"). This doctrine teaches that all persons are created in a way that reflects the divine. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taught that human beings image God through the intellect, while other Christian thinkers, such as Saint Augustine (354–430) and Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), have emphasized that human beings most closely image God through different kinds of love relationships.

Falling in love, for example, often causes one to view the presence of the beloved as part of God's plan or to feel like the beloved actually makes God present. Some experience God in the passing away of a loved one. For example, when a grandparent or parent dies peacefully after a long and painful illness, people often see that death as a release from suffering; they sense that God has drawn that loved one to God's very self. After a loved one experiences healing from illness or injury, many express gratitude to

2. Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 11.

God for being part of their healing. Some become aware of God's presence when another person offers them forgiveness and extends kindness unexpectedly.

In addition, Christians often think of experiencing God through worshipping practices. These may include the celebration of the sacraments and other liturgies, the proclamation of biblical readings, preaching, and praying on one's own or with one's family. Some Christians and their traditions hold that God is especially present in such practices.

By looking carefully at everyday life, Christians hold, one can discover that God's involvement in human life is far more than orchestrating things from above. The Christian tradition strongly asserts that humanity finds God not only "out there" but also in nature, intimate relationships, and religious ritual and prayer, and that God is reflected in human beings themselves.

God at the Margins

Are these the only places to find God? Should Christians look in other places as well? The Christian tradition has at times overlooked some aspects of reality as places to find God. In theology, these places are referred to as "the margins," meaning the edges, mostly unseen by all except those who dwell there. People at the margins are those who are rendered largely invisible in a particular society and are often overlooked by those with economic and political power. Historically, in the United States marginalized groups have included but are not limited to those who are black, poor, female, and LGBTQ. Prior to the late twentieth century, theologians tended to exclude the experiences of the marginalized as sources for their work. In addition, Christians have tended to disregard the validity of religions other than Christianity and have, in a sense, relegated their adherents to the margins. Many have experienced social, political, or economic marginalization in countries such as the United States, where Christianity is dominant, and theologians and church leaders have until recently relegated non-Christians to the margins by disregarding the significance of their religious beliefs, practices, and experience.

African American churches (both Catholic and Protestant), for example, have a long and rich history in the United States,³ but the wider Christian tradition has not fully appreciated or used the life and insights of these churches in thinking about God.⁴ Those outside the African American community have tended not to consider the black struggle for liberation from discrimination as a place to find God.

Similarly, the lives of people living in poverty have garnered little attention as a place to find God or as a source for theological insights. Christian theology has traditionally been the work of educated and economically privileged people—for many centuries mostly the ordained—and poverty was often understood as suffering to be alleviated or even a punishment for a sinful life. Theologians and mystics conceptualizing God as all-good, all-powerful, and supremely rational looked to their own privileged lives and experiences. Rarely, if ever, did theologians in earlier times look at the lives of the poor as a place to find the divine.

Women's lives, like those of people living in poverty, have also received little consideration as a place to find God. Western thought has at times characterized women as irrational, subservient, and not worthy of the rights shared by men.⁵ Indeed, women's experiences were not looked upon as manifestations of divine presence to the extent that men's experiences were. Women learned to look to men for religious guidance, and theology was done by men. Because of this, theology typically reflected only men's experiences and understandings of God. Women's thought was generally not considered worthy, and to the degree women's experiences of God and thinking

3. Diana L. Hayes, *Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 24, 82, 118, 194.

4. In the introduction to his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), self-described black theologian James H. Cone explains that the underuse of African American theology was the impetus for his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Similarly, Cone notes that the purpose of his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970, rev. 2010), was to provide theological foundations and arguments so that black and white theologians would take black theology seriously (cf. xv). Likewise, he wrote *God of the Oppressed* (1975, rev. 1997) because "most white theologians ignored black liberation theology" (ix).

5. For instance, women did not gain the right to own property or vote in the United States until 1900 and 1920, respectively.

about God differed from men's, it was not appreciated as a unique reflection of the divine.

Christians have largely ignored the *religious other*—a contemporary theological term for people who do not share one's religious beliefs—as a place to find God. For Christians, *religious others* might mean Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or Jews. The lives of entire populations of spiritual people have rarely been seen by Christians as contexts within which God is present and active. Instead, many Christians regard religious others as misguided about religion and in some cases even dangerous or evil. Christians have taught that non-Christians can attain salvation but also have considered the non-Christian to be in a “gravely deficient situation.”⁶ Throughout the history of Christianity, Christians have not typically seen other religions and the lives of their adherents as places of value for discovering God's presence, and today still do not embrace non-Christian religions as sources for developing Christian thought about God and related topics.

Different Margins

In recent decades those at the margins of Christianity and society have become more visible to others. More and more theologians are recognizing that Christian theology has overlooked various populations as places to find God and are working to overcome this weakness in their fields of study. Many theological movements today teach that God is present with people whom the Christian tradition has too often not paid attention to. Black, liberation, and feminist theologians and theologians engaged in interreligious work hold that God is experienced in unique and significant ways by African Americans, by people who are poor, by women, and by religious

6. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), Vatican Web site, August 6, 2000, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, 22. Although this phrase sounds harsh and often is misunderstood, in context Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) is affirming the possibility of non-Christian salvation; however, he notes that non-Christians are at a disadvantage when compared to Christians who have “the fullness of the means of salvation.”

others.⁷ These theologians claim not only that God's presence can be found in the lives of these people and communities but also that God is present in a special or privileged way with these people and that this presence is important for the development of Christian thought. Starting with the figure of Jesus, who ministered to people at the margins and who himself suffered at the hands of those in power, theologians are recognizing that the experiences of people who dwell at the margins of society and Christianity are privileged places to find God and that Christianity is impoverished if it overlooks this reality.

Today, theologians emphasizing that God is truly present in the lives of those at that margins of society and of Christianity seek to augment traditional theologies with theologies done from the margins. This book shows how doing theology "from the margins" has propelled theologians to pay attention to the experiences of the poor and the experiences of women and has led to notable changes in the way interreligious scholars regard the religious other as a source for theology.

The main purpose of this text is to introduce readers to interreligious work being done from the perspective of Christianity. In addition to exploring this work, the text provides overviews of liberation and feminist theologies. This is because these theologies contribute to ways of thinking that lead theologians to consider God's overlooked presence with people in particular contexts, even outside Christianity itself. In recent decades, theologians involved in interreligious work have begun to explicitly draw on liberation and feminist theology. The result is that Christian interreligious work is now being done *as* a theology of liberation and *out of* feminist sensibilities. To appreciate the progress made by bringing liberation and feminist theologies into the interreligious conversation, it is important to have some understanding of these theologies. This text's brief overviews of liberation and feminist theologies (see chapters 1 and 2) and more in-depth exploration of interreligious work (see chapters 3, 4, and 5) will help readers to see the broadening of sources for Christian theology, just as

7. Eco-theology is another important field that emphasizes God's presence in the environment and the whole of creation. Arguably, other theologies emphasizing God's presence at the margins ought to point toward eco-theology, since as one comes to appreciate God's intimate presence in different marginalized groups, one ultimately comes to a deeper awareness of God's presence throughout creation.

theologians have begun to more clearly see the religious significance of the lives of those who have traditionally dwelt at the margins due to factors such as gender, religious identity, and economic poverty.⁸

Liberation Theology

The first contemporary theologies to recognize the marginalized came to be known as liberation theology. Liberation theologians emphasize that God is found in a special way among people living in poverty. Borne of social justice work in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, liberation theology understands God as being especially present among people struggling for survival in economically unjust systems. With their members struggling with landlessness and economic uncertainty, Christian communities in such places as Peru, Guatemala, and Brazil began to articulate how God was with the poor in their struggle. Far from siding with ruling-class landowners, leaders of local congregations, and those members of the Catholic Church's hierarchy who supported the wealthy, liberation theologians believed that God took the side of the oppressed—those living in poverty in Latin America.

Liberation theology—now well-known among theologians, church leaders, and some politicians in Latin America, Europe, India, and the United States—did not initially find much traction in Europe or the United States. Some economically privileged people have fought against liberation theology and have dismissed it as just an academic trend in the West or as a political movement. Yet its fundamental insight—that God is on the side of the oppressed—poses a significant challenge to those who think of God as primarily in the churches whose members are relatively well-off. Liberation theology challenges class privilege by expanding people's awareness

8. A single book cannot begin to represent all movements, and this project does not address several important theologically marginalized populations. Although this book mentions black theologies, womanist theologies, and Asian and Hispanic theologies, its scope does not allow for a full treatment. This is in no way meant to denigrate the importance of these theologies. This book holds that the fields of liberation theology and feminist theology have begun to inform interreligious work today. As a liberative approach continues to inform interreligious theologies, one would hope that black, womanist, and Asian and Hispanic experiences will more greatly impact the conversation. For an excellent introduction to black, womanist, and Asian and Hispanic theologies, see Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

of where God is present to the edges of society, to the margins where human beings live in dire poverty.

Feminist Theology

Theologians have identified a second margin from which to do theology: the experiences of women. Feminist scholars assert that God is present and active in these experiences and that when theologians recognize this, their theologies can enhance women's well-being and also serve the well-being of men by transforming society in ways that create justice and loving relationships for all persons.⁹ Like liberation theology, feminist theology holds that God is specially present in the lives of oppressed persons—in this case women. Women continue to suffer oppression from gender discrimination, and feminist theologians see God as present in significant ways in their struggles.

Interreligious Work

Theologians today have begun looking at another margin where God may be present—one outside Christianity. Having pushed the margins to include those who live in economic poverty and women, these theologians have moved beyond the bounds of Christianity itself. The work of these scholars, who understand the religious other and non-Christian religions as valid places to find God, is referred to as *interreligious work* because it aims to understand Christianity's relationship with other religions. These scholars understand the religious other as a gift because the other enables Christians to experience or understand the presence of God in new ways. Scholars in the field of interreligious work face the challenge of balancing the Christian understanding of Jesus' essential role in the salvation of human beings with the idea that other religions are good and perhaps as religiously significant as Christianity.

Margins Coming Together

Increasingly, the fields of liberation theology, feminist theology, and interreligious work are converging. As these three fields cross-pollinate

9. Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 47, cf. 65, 142, 154.

and scholars learn from each other, they generate work that seeks to inform interreligious thought with a commitment to economic justice and women's well-being. Put differently, scholars who do interreligious work with the commitments of liberation and feminist theology seek to ensure they take into account and further goals of economic justice for all and women's well-being. To be truly just, these scholars hold, interreligious work cannot counter—but instead must further—the aims of theologies that have come before. Indeed, the coming together of these three specializations makes sense, for liberation theology, feminist theology, and interreligious work have much in common. All three fields find God in places that, until recently, appeared unlikely as sites for divine presence in the minds of many Christians. All three fields hold that these places—the lives of poor people, of women, and of non-Christians—are privileged places to find God and that Christian theological understandings are inadequate if they don't factor in the experiences of these people as sources for theology.

Chapter 1 traces the historical development of liberation theology, which begins the trajectory of contemporary Christian theology's attention to the marginalized. This chapter explains why liberation theology developed and details its primary theological commitments. The idea, asserted by liberation theology, that God is specially present in the lives of the economically poor and in struggles to create systems of economic justice is also introduced. Latin American liberation theology is the "first wave," beginning the trajectory of modern Christian theology that finds God at the margins—a trajectory of thinking that, when applied to interreligious work, comes to mean that God should be found beyond Christianity itself.

Chapter 2 discusses feminist theology, a movement that explores the experiences of women as a place in which to find God and a source for theology. Far from being an angry movement that seeks to privilege women over men, Christian feminist theology sees itself as a universal movement seeking to transform the world into a better place for women, men, and the whole of creation by adding women's insights and experiences to augment the traditionally male theological conversation. This chapter describes three key subjects that have been transformed by feminist theological work: views of the person, how one speaks about God, and salvation. It concludes by suggesting that Christian understanding of God will grow richer as more

categories of people do theology. Like Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology expands notions of where to find God. This orientation to paying special attention to people and places that have been too often overlooked by theologians aligns with the commitment of interreligious work to explore the meaning and import of the presence of God outside Christianity itself.

Chapter 3 begins to explore the challenge of the religious other for Christian theology. Today, most Christians believe that adherents of religions other than Christianity can be morally good and that they—and sometimes their religions—have much to teach Christians. Yet how a Christian receives the gifts present in non-Christian religions largely depends on one's understanding of God's presence beyond Christianity. This chapter explains the approach taken in the subfield of interreligious work known as *theology of religions*, including its typical positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, as well as introduces newer, post-pluralist approaches.

Chapter 4 explains why the approach used by theology of religions has stalled as a way of thinking about non-Christian religions and, in light of this failure, discusses the value of engaging religious others through two newer subfields of interreligious work:

Subfields of Interreligious Work

theology of religions

A discipline that seeks to articulate the Christian theological understanding of non-Christian religions and the status of their adherents

interreligious dialogue

A discipline that seeks to learn about religions through dialogue with their adherents

comparative theology

A discipline that studies religions by comparing the sacred texts, theologies, and practices of two or more religions

interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. The chapter outlines the work of Leonard Swidler, Francis Clooney, and others who hold that theology must resist trying to develop theories that reconcile Christian beliefs about God with the existence of multiple religions and instead learn about these religions directly from their adherents. This chapter concludes with the subject of multiple religious belonging, which is the newest resource for thinking about religious multiplicity.

Chapter 5 revisits the subfield of theology of religions and explores how a form of it—informed by liberation theologies—may help reconcile Christian beliefs with religious diversity. The work of Peter Phan, Aloysius Pieris, and Paul Knitter is explored, each of whom turns to the religious other not only as a resource for theorizing about multiple religions, but as a privileged locus of God's self-revelation. From the perspective of a theology of religions *informed by liberation theology and feminist theology*, the religious other appears not just as a valid place for a Christian to find God but also as a privileged place. The trajectory of finding God at the margins has finally expanded, in theology of religions, to finding God present in unique ways beyond Christianity itself.

The conclusion brings the discussion of the book's thesis full circle. While Christians have tended to reference God from the perspectives of the relatively well-off, men, and Christians, God can also be discovered in places and among populations that Christians have tended to dismiss culturally and theologically. By making a commitment to finding God at the margins of society and of Christianity, one can see that the lives and experiences of poor people, of women, and of adherents of other religions constitute not only valid but privileged places in which to find and experience the divine. Attending to the experiences and realities of these groups allows Christians to expand their theological horizons and perceive the presence of God throughout creation: a perception deeply in keeping with the traditional Christian teaching that God is, indeed, everywhere.