

# **LIBERATION THEOLOGY REVISITED: AGENTIAL REALISM AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL TOOL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?**

*We are witnessing a new wave of socio-economic tensions throughout the world. Issues such as authoritarianism, populism, public health, unemployment, food provision, education, and inequalities, for decades largely associated with the Global South, have in a relatively short span of time become palpable challenges for many in the Global North too. The unprecedented pace of the globally changing social fabrics poses a question of the position of theology and theologians in what is emerging as the 'New Normal'. When it comes to the churches, faith, and congregations, it is pastoral practice which has to adapt and react first. Then systematic theological reflection has to follow in an attempt to interpret the changing circumstances and to create a theoretical background for pastoral activity. To explore how socially engaged theology can tackle issues emerging from the complexity of social fabric and to offer a framework for pastoral practice, this paper will analyse the applicability of the methodology of agential realism in liberation theology. Agential realism is a theoretical framework that emphasizes relational aspects across the disciplines of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, as developed by Karen Barad, a U.S. social theorist, philosopher, and physicist. This paper is one of the first to apply the epistemology of agential realism in theology, specifically in liberation theology, chosen because of its dynamic nature and pastoral and epistemological openness.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

**B**efore starting to wrestle with the peculiarities of agential realism, we will move down the timeline slightly, referring to the method of liberation theology as elaborated by the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff in his doctoral dissertation at KU

Leuven in 1976.<sup>1</sup> After receiving a lot of attention in the 1970s, liberation theology lost its impetus due to its internal incoherencies but also because of external pressures. In 2008 an Argentinian social theorist and theologian Ivan Petrella called for a revisiting of basic principles of liberation theology, in order to construct what he calls a new historical project.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of Petrella's revised version of liberation theology was to make liberation theology capable of offering new solutions to the persisting 21<sup>st</sup> century crisis. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to note that the term historical project does not necessarily imply large-scale interventions but rather it is seen as a way of tackling issues of pastoral practice on all levels, from micro to macro in the rapidly changing environment.<sup>3</sup>

Our hypothesis is that agential realism has the potential to better grasp and understand reality in its complexity and allows for practical applications of acquired insights in favour of balanced social, political, and economical solutions, based on ethical concerns. Therefore, the research question of this paper is the following: Can the methodology of agential realism add to the capacity of liberation theology to confront contemporary challenges?

We start with a brief overview of traditional liberation theology, continue with Petrella's criticism, and then dedicate the rest of the article to the reflection on the methodological and pastoral implications of the use of the method of agential realism in theology.

### **TRADITIONAL LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

In order to explore the capacity of agential realism (which is at the same time a theory, methodology, and a specific

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<sup>1</sup> Boff presented the methodology of the theology of liberation in his doctoral dissertation in 1976 at KU Leuven, Belgium. The dissertation was published in 1978 in Brazil by Editora Voze, Petropolis, and in 1987 an English edition appeared thanks to Orbis Books.

<sup>2</sup> See Ivan Petrella, *The future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-9.

metaphysical position) to be applied in theological reflection, we will compare liberation theology's 'canonical' methodology,<sup>4</sup> developed by Boff, with Barad's approach to knowledge-making practices covered by the term agential realism.

The traditional methodology of liberation theology tries to link theory and practice through the circle of the well-known 'See-Judge-Act'-method. The basic schema of this method was developed between the two world wars in the context of the Young Christian Workers movement, by the Belgian theologian Joseph Cardijn, as an epistemic apparatus used to analyse and act upon reality.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1970s, this method opened horizons and helped to address hidden power issues in Latin American societies, above all the absurdity of the oppression and exploitation among people who declare themselves Christians and attend sacraments regularly. Boff situates the See-Judge-Act method in the wider theological frame by ascribing it to the "second moment," which follows the "first moment" in the integral theological process. The first moment, according to Boff, consists of theologizing in the classical theological manner, i.e., in a more speculative way, while the second moment consists of the exploration of liberative aspects rooted in the first moment.

In liberation theology, the first moment is always, explicitly or implicitly, included.<sup>6</sup> The nexus of this relation is in the person and lifestyle of the theologian. Indeed, he or she must, at a higher or lesser degree, participate in the life of the community. Boff suggests that "before constituting a new theological method, the theology of liberation is a new way of being a theologian."<sup>7</sup> The participation in the life of the community can be realized in the

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'canonical' is introduced by Petrella, as Boff's methodology was published in *Mysterium Liberationis*, a publication whose purpose was to define 'orthodoxy' within liberation theology, see *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Cardijn, *Challenge to Action: Addresses of Joseph Cardijn* (London: New Life Publications, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> See Leonardo Boff, "Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 57-85.

<sup>7</sup> See Boff, "Epistemology and Method," 57-85.

whole spectrum of real possibilities, from sporadic contact with the poor and oppressed to joining poor communities in fullness, to living and working with the poor. This participation then allows for the see, judge, and act phases to be performed and it is enacted through the following mediations: the socio-analytic, hermeneutical, and practical one. Boff sees their functions as follows:

The socio-analytic mediation contemplates the world of the oppressed. It seeks to understand why the oppressed are oppressed. The hermeneutic mediation contemplates the word of God. It attempts to see what the divine plan is with regard to the poor. Finally, the practical mediation contemplates the aspect of activity and seeks to discover the appropriate lines of operation for overcoming oppression in conformity with God's plan.<sup>8</sup>

Boff elaborated his method in 1976. After the rise and fall of the canonical version of liberation theology in the 1970s and 1980s, Petrella revisited it in the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall and argued that liberation theology has been trapped by the 'end of history' atmosphere, where an unjust status quo is seen as unchangeable.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he argued that liberation theologians, together with local congregations of all kinds, should not cease their rereading of Christianity, in search of acceptable models of political and economic environments, where human dignity will be respected. A new historical project, according to Petrella, consists of a shift in the understanding of liberation theology, performed by and among liberation theologians, which will allow for the flourishing of liberative initiatives at various levels and in various forms. Therefore, it is more about creating space for a multitude of projects than about creating one unified and rounded-up

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 57-85.

<sup>9</sup> See Ivan Petrella, "Liberation Theology - A programmatic statement," in *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation*, ed. Ivan Petrella (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 165.

centralized program.<sup>10</sup> However, besides pointing to the deficiencies of Boff's canonical method and to their consequences, Petrella had not entered a more detailed elaboration on alternative methodologies apt for liberation theology. In what follows we will examine the properties of agential realism and its epistemological tools, to see how they can improve theologizing from a liberational perspective.

### **AGENTIAL REALISM AND ONTO-ETHICO-EPistemology**

The motivation to introduce Barad in theology, besides the growing application of agential realism in social sciences, is her attentiveness to the relation between ontology, epistemology, and ethics.<sup>11</sup> These three elements have been crucial for the liberation theologians from the very beginning. Liberation theology developed a whole new epistemology out of an ethical concern, which had ontological consequences, i.e., it changed the Christian worldview on the incarnational aspect of Christianity and the role of responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

We will revisit these issues in light of the metaphysics of agential realism, which is an aspect of the emerging trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thought covered by the term 'new materialism,' with a focus on transversal methodology and its ethical and political consequences. Agential realism is based on the epistemological inter-relatedness of matter, meaning, and agency, and as such connects ontology, epistemology, and ethics. For the sake of clarity, we will group the important concepts of agential realism into three categories, respectively. It goes without saying that these concepts will continually transgress the borders of the 'categories' we rank them in. We will show that the methodology of agential realism has implications that open up new horizons in theology and it offers a

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<sup>10</sup> See Ivan Petrella, *The future of Liberation Theology*, 144-9.

<sup>11</sup> See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 71.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, James L. Marsh, *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

sound methodological base to explore new ways of liberation theology-based pastoral practice.

## **ONTOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AGENTIAL REALISM**

### **Uncertainty and Indeterminacy**

Barad is both a quantum physicist and a social theorist. In this regard she emphasizes that her intention is not, as it often happens, to romanticize quantum physics. Instead, she is interested in “engaging in rigorous dialogue about particular aspects of specific discourses on quantum physics and their implications.”<sup>13</sup> One point she tries to clarify is the difference between Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty and Bohr’s principle of indeterminacy. As this issue is in the background of agential realism, we will mention the core of the discussion here.

The principles of uncertainty and indeterminacy are often confused, both in popular culture and among physicists. These two principles are often called “the cornerstones of the Copenhagen interpretation,” despite the fact they are mutually excluding.<sup>14</sup> The issue at stake is the impossibility of simultaneously measuring the position and the velocity of an electron. Heisenberg holds that this is an epistemic problem, i.e., a result of the uncertainty of our knowledge. Bohr, on the other hand, holds that “the problem is not primarily epistemological but ontological and semantic.”<sup>15</sup>

Barad builds the epistemology of agential realism on Bohr’s position. That is, what we try to do is impossible not because our epistemology does not catch the position and velocity of the electron simultaneously. It is the other way around: the nature of elementary particles is such that it is impossible to determine position and momentum simultaneously with any epistemology. Thus, according to Barad, we need a new understanding and a new methodology to relate reality (things) and knowledge. The new

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<sup>13</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

methodology requires overcoming the Cartesian distinction between “things” and “agencies of observation.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the relation between things and knowledge is dynamic and, when it comes to the essence, it is undeterminable in static terms. The indeterminacy, when recognized as a valid ontological category, helps to better understand reality and heals epistemological ruptures caused by deeply rooted dualistic divisions, like matter/meaning, body/spirit, practice/theory, or pastoral/systematic.

### **Complementarity and Theology**

The question of indeterminacy is directly related to another quantum physics technical term: complementarity. As this is an article about epistemological aspects of theology we will not go into technical peculiarities of complementarity but will give just an outline necessary to understand epistemological implications of the phenomenon.

At quantum levels of creation, the variables that are determinate in an act of measurement are complementary to those that are indeterminate in the same act of measurement, and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> As controversial as this might sound, complementarity is recognised as the basic ontological principle of elementary particles. Therefore, complementarity stays at the core of all what in theology is called creation, that is, to the created world and humans as a part of it. Be it technically that way, we will look at how the understanding of complementarity can help theological reflection/diffraction. So far, the principle of complementarity has not been an important part of theological reflection, neither in its ontological dimensions (complementarity as the core principle of creation) nor in its epistemological dimension (as epistemology and ontology are always closely related). Complementarity as a term, with the risk of simplifying for the case of clarity, is used for describing the impossibility of drawing sharp separations between

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<sup>16</sup> See *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

constituent parts of phenomena, i.e., of what is observed, how is observed, and who observes.

Applied to theological discourse, phenomena (=theological concepts) are constituted of an ontological core (=something that exists independent of our knowledge) and our intra-action with and within them through our theological practices. This is the realist position of Barad, to which I refer later in the text.<sup>18</sup> When this principle is ignored, i.e. when we try to impose our theological concepts as well-defined images of heavenly realms, we get into epistemological troubles. Ignoring complementarity as a core principle of all creation in theological discourse, which has been almost always the case in the history of theology, many theological concepts appear as controversial.

For example, theology sticks to the doctrinal elaboration of the dual nature of Christ almost completely ignoring epistemology of complementarity. Contrary, by acknowledging complementarity for what it is and by applying its principles in theology, our theological claims become apprehensible to a rational mind. The attempts of drawing parallels between theology and quantum physics have been with us for almost a century. Yet, with agential realism, we move to step forward in practical applications of quantum physics insights in theology.

Epistemology based on quantum physics allows for apparent contradictions which, in the end, are not contradictions on the quantum level but only on the level of our ordinary consciousness.<sup>19</sup> Therefore theological outcome, as several examples which follow will illustrate, epistemologically is analogue to the measuring of agency in physics. The outcome of measurement once is a particle, once a wave, depending on apparatuses we use; it is not a mistake or deficiency of apparatuses, but the way nature is on its deepest levels. It means that certain spiritual entities, for example, God, mercy, grace, love, forgiveness,

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<sup>18</sup> See Graham Harman, "Agential and Speculative Realism: Remarks on Barad's Ontology," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 30(2016): 126-32.

<sup>19</sup> See Lis Højgaard and Dorte Marie Søndergaard, "Theorizing the Complexities of Discursive and Material Subjectivity: Agential Realism and Poststructural Analyses," *Theory & Psychology* 21(2011): 338-54.



sin, or renunciation, can be defined in different ways, sometimes completely opposing each other, and yet both ends of the apparent contradiction are epistemologically justified.

If we take an example of another centuries-old theological debate on the relation between God's justice and God's love, according to the principle of complementarity, justice and love might come in friction only when observed with our rational mind incapable to deal with apparent contradictions.<sup>20</sup> By refusing contradiction on the deeper level of reality, scientific research ends up in endless loops. The same happens with theology. When the principle of complementarity, as applied by agential realism, holds differences together as the two poles of the same stick, we get an epistemological tool that can be used across the disciplines.<sup>21</sup> Apparent contradictions in most of the cases are not contradictions at all, but a result of different human intra-actions within heavenly and earthly realms through different theological practices.<sup>22</sup>

## Theology and Creation

The human understanding of reality depends on knowledge-making practices which partly differ and partly coincide in various disciplines. In humanities, they are usually designated as 'methodologies.' As already said, from an agential realist perspective, the term methodology has a wider sense than a set of intellectual procedures of knowledge production. In the case of liberation theology, agential realism's concept of apparatuses includes (1) methodology in the narrow sense; (2) the theologian as a person and his or her environment; (3) existing knowledge from various closely or distantly related fields; and (4) the state of the world events. In other words, all creation is part of theological reasoning.

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<sup>20</sup> See discussion in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D.B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> See Højgaard and Søndergaard. "Theorizing the Complexities," 338-54.

<sup>22</sup> See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 308.

Theology, like other disciplines, is not an isolated activity pending in a vacuum, but part of human intra-action with the whole of creation. The direct object of theology is God. Looking from the agential realist standpoint, which is close to the liberation theology reasoning, it is important to approach God as an entity that is not dissociated from everything else but involved in this world, here and now. This notion of God's involvement with the world has always been present in theology but emphasised by the rise of liberation theology, which brings forward explicit understanding of the relation between God and creation in dynamic terms.<sup>23</sup>

In Barad's terms, creation and matter *matters*. Meaning is not added to the matter in later phases of evolution by the development of the human brain but intrinsically present in the matter from its origins. World history is the history of complex configurations of matter and meaning and their intra-action. Creation is meaning-full regardless of the presence or absence of human minds.<sup>24</sup> Such an explicit epistemological stance of a deeper meaning intrinsically woven into the Universe is one of the agential realist epistemological features which makes it apt for theological reflection.

## **Phenomenon**

For Barad, the phenomenon is the object of analysis understood as a unity of three elements: (i) what is observed (the so-called "object" in Cartesian terms), (ii) of the observer (the so-called "subject" in Cartesian terms), and (iii) the "conditions which define the possible types of predictions."<sup>25</sup> If we apply this line of reasoning to theology, the phenomenon would include God, the whole created world, and humans, all engaged in endless mutual intra-action.

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<sup>23</sup> See Deane W Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 48.

<sup>24</sup> See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 142-3.

<sup>25</sup> See *Ibid.*, 127.

The apparatus, that is, the way we approach the observed (theological) reality, is the methodology used to understand phenomena and express them through theological concepts and claims. Again, the word “methodology” must be understood in a Baradian sense as well. It means that in agential realism methodology is not a set of linguistic and intellectual tools only applied to ‘object’ which is something completely other than the observer, that is, theologian. For Barad, the theologian, the observed reality, and the process of observation are mutually interconnected in an unprecedented way.

In a theological context, an agential realist approach to the phenomenon (i.e., theological concept, like God, grace, sin, justice, sacrament, etc.) means that the core meaning of the concept is indeterminable. We cannot grasp it fully with our dualistic mindset. The outcome of theological reflection performed through agential realist epistemology is by default indeterminable. It is this and that, this and that often being completely oppositional concepts. This ambiguity does not represent a lack of scientific rigour, on the contrary, it is ambiguity which makes the result truthful because, says Barad, the reality at its core is ambiguous.<sup>26</sup>

What Barad says is not so radically new. In Christian theology such ambiguities exist from the very beginning and are foundational to the whole system, for example, the dual nature of Christ, being fully God and fully man at the same time.<sup>27</sup> In physics, such ambiguities are foundational for almost a hundred years since quantum physics was established as a discipline.<sup>28</sup> What Barad brings is new, more elaborate, and more integrative linguistic and logical tools which fill the gaps of the dualistic Cartesian epistemologies pervading all academic disciplines, theology

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>27</sup> See Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> See Jeffrey M. Schwartz et al. “Quantum Physics in Neuroscience and Psychology: A Neurophysical Model of Mind-brain Interaction,” *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences* 360 (2005): 1309-27.

included.<sup>29</sup> For the case of clarity, and with the risk to be accused of superficiality, many complex theological themes, such as the dual nature of Christ, are only grazed in this paper as a way of example, in order to indicate the spheres where agential realism might be applied, with its newly developed logical and linguistic features.

Therefore, in agential realist terms, the outcome of the theological reflection on the concept of God, or justice, or sin, does change depending on who observes, what is observed, and how. Several equally valid outcomes are possible, even when these contradict one another. God, grace, sin, or justice are not independent concepts existing in advance but created, and continuously co-created in a mutual interplay between the observer (in our case the theologian) and any given phenomenon such as God, Angels, Spirit, grace, or sin.<sup>30</sup>

In Barad's words, "referentiality must be reconceptualised. The referent is not an observation-independent object but a phenomenon."<sup>31</sup> It means that the referent is not God, grace, sin, or justice, as observation-independent objects given as such, but a phenomenon of which they take part. What cannot be emphasized enough is that the phenomenon never exists in its pure abstract state but is always entangled with the whole Universe which exercises power on the phenomenon. Of these manifestations of power, the most powerful impact on the observed phenomenon, being it a subatomic particle or a theological concept, claims agential realism, has the observer and the lenses they use. This leads to the Baradian term onto-ethico-epistemology, in which the observer (theologian) is responsible to be awakened to the lens type they use— what they see (God, or justice, or sin, to use again some of liberation theology's prominent themes) will change as their position of observation change. And many – but not all – of these positions will be epistemologically valid. Different, sometimes in sharp contrast with each other, but valid.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Barlev et al. "The Embodied God: Core Intuitions About Person Physicality Coexist and Interfere with Acquired Christian Beliefs About God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus," *Cognitive Science* 43(2019): E12784-N/a.

<sup>30</sup> Compare with Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

## Non-representationalism

Barad defines agential realism as “a non-representationalist form of realism that is based on an ontology that does not take for granted the existence of “words” and “things” and an epistemology that does not subscribe to a notion of truth based on their correct correspondence.”<sup>32</sup> Representationalism is based on the belief that there is an “ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing.”<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to such belief, agential realism holds that thought and reality, i.e., words and things, mutually constitute each other in an ongoing historical process. There are no fixed boundaries, everything continuously changes. The key to knowledge is the clarification of this process, through a performative understanding. According to Barad, “Performative approaches call into question representationalism’s claim that there are representations, on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation, on the other, and focus inquiry on the practices or performances of representing, as well as the productive effects of those practices and the conditions for their efficacy.”<sup>34</sup>

This approach allows for a revisiting of some knowledge-making practices in theology. For example, does God exist as a well-defined entity somewhere in the transcendent realm and our theological discourse give a more or less accurate representation of what/who God is, or what/who we call God is created through the interaction of our human understanding and God’s self-revealing through history, while God-self remains an inaccessible mystery? Another question could be: is the incarnation an event that happened once, or is it an ongoing process of God’s interaction with the world? If the second is the case, what is the nature of this interaction? What is the role of matter? According to Barad, the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>33</sup> See Ibid., 46.

<sup>34</sup> See Ibid., 49; also, Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, ed., *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.)

matter has been relegated to oblivion in a contemporary philosophical discourse that gives unjustified primacy to language. The question could be posed: What is the situation in theological scholarship in this regard?

Barad rejects representationalism, but she still stays on realist grounds. However, following Ian Hacking, she makes a distinction between two kinds of realism. Ian Hacking subscribes to a form of realism that is directed towards entities (ontological realism), while he rejects realism of theories (epistemological realism). In other words, intervening in the world through epistemological practices gives credibility to realism, while representing the world through theories remains on shallow grounds.<sup>35</sup>

Niels Bohr, a starting point of Barad's agential realism, firmly holds that "theorizing must be understood as an embodied practice, rather than a spectator sport of matching linguistic representations to pre-existing things."<sup>36</sup> In other words, "Ideas that make a difference in the world don't fly about free of the weightiness of their material instantiation. To theorize is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. Theorizing is material practice."<sup>37</sup> This approach has been embraced by liberation theologians, who consider practice as a constituent part of their theologizing, following the path of 'theology in making.'<sup>38</sup>

According to non-representationalist epistemology, there are no predefined objects with sharp boundaries that exist somewhere awaiting humans to give names to them. So, what/who God really is, and what/who we say that God is, matches only very

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<sup>35</sup> See Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263.

<sup>36</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> More on theology in making see in Reimund Bieringer, "Looking Over Paul's Shoulder: 2 Corinthians Evidence for Paul's Theology in Making," (Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Boston, 21-25<sup>th</sup> November 2008).

roughly, in a way similar to that of apophatic theology.<sup>39</sup> According to an agential realist onto-ethico-epistemological framework, human's definition of God has been partly revealed and partly co-created through time, by human and non-human discursive practices, in the ongoing world creation. This process continues, it is not frozen in time. God, the world, and theology are dynamic realities. What matters in every moment is not our attempt to give a final correct definition but our responsive participation.

### **Diffraction as an epistemological tool**

The diffractive methodology emphasises relationality. As Barad says, "what often appears as separate entities and separate sets of concerns with sharp edges, does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all."<sup>40</sup> Applied to theology, a perspective of diffraction entails that transcendence and immanence are not absolutely exterior to each other, as it could appear in Cartesian-influenced cultures. There is no sharp gap between God and creation, as Jesus' incarnation shows. In the eyes of a child, there is a reflex of the so-called transcendence. On open seas and mountain peaks, so-called transcendence is palpable. It is about "exteriority within," as Haraway calls such a phenomenon, or 'transcendence within immanence.'<sup>41</sup>

Apparently separate entities, such as God and humans, theology and social sciences, ethics and economics, health and agriculture, etc., do not entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all. A distinction is possible, sometimes even necessary, but not in the form of binary oppositions. What counts is the understanding of the diffractive methodology as "a critical practice for making a difference in the world. It is a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom. It is a critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of

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<sup>39</sup> See Kirik Wegter-McNelly, "Religious Hypotheses and the Apophatic, Relational, Theology of Catherine Keller," *Zygon* 51(2016): 758-64.

<sup>40</sup> See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295-337.

reflecting from afar. The physical phenomenon of diffraction makes manifest the extraordinary liveliness of the world."<sup>42</sup>

### Ethical Implications of Agential Realism

Deep in creation, according to Barad, there is an ethical substance. It is not something given in addition in the later phases of evolution. Rather, it is interwoven in the smallest units of everything that exists. Ethics sprouts from matter itself. For Barad, matter is not passive and inanimate, but dynamic; it relies on relations.<sup>43</sup> In other words, ethics is related to response-ability, that is, the ability to respond, to interact, to communicate with each other, to accept, to respect, to be together, to grow together, to exist together in time, and space.

Responsible ethics means to configure time and space together, to configure the future. Ethics is not something given to the human race in the later stages of their development. Instead, ethics precedes humanity, it goes back to the first moment of creation and even before. For Barad ethics existed before creation, before the Big Bang, as the Big Bang was already a manifestation of response-ability. In Christian terms, we would say that creation was a response to God's desire for the universe to be.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, Barad opts for "An appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being – since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again."<sup>45</sup>

It is important to note that Barad's agential realism opposes any form of relativism. The fact that everything changes, and that each definition and each claim can be different tomorrow, does not mean that it can be different in whatever way. It can be

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<sup>42</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 90-1.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth De Freitas, "Karen Barad's Quantum Ontology and Posthuman Ethics: Rethinking the Concept of Relationality," *Qualitative Inquiry* 23 (2017): 741-8.

<sup>44</sup> See more on the relation between ethics and creation in Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.



different only within a certain ‘cloud of possibilities.’<sup>46</sup> Applied to the methodology of liberation theology: there is a core meaning in each thing and concept. This core is indeterminate. Its indeterminacy, however, does not allow for absolute arbitrariness. The task of liberation theology is to participate in the midst of the crowd as “the column of cloud going before the terrified multitude,”<sup>47</sup> showing to individuals and societies how to be response-able. The task of liberation theology is to increase the ability to respond to the Other, either human or non-human. Barad emphasizes that “we are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped.”<sup>48</sup> Agential realism opens up many possibilities, but not all possibilities. It is not a carefree attitude. On the contrary, it emphasises personal and social responsibility.

### **Crucial Role of Theological Response-ability**

Theological reflection is not innocent. It influences the real life of the people and the flow of historical events. From the beginning of human history, great civilizations regularly formed around religious concepts. For example, the history of Europe from the 4<sup>th</sup> century on (and even before) has been strongly influenced by theological concepts in its, let us use Barad in term once more, spacetime-mattering. However, theological concepts do not come from nothing but are a cause and an effect at the same time of an iterative reconfiguration of European spacetime-mattering, as a part of ongoing dynamism of becoming. As the dynamism of becoming is not finished but continues, the reconfiguration of theological concepts inevitably continues as well.

Our actions leave marks on the fiber of the world. Therefore, we are responsible, called to act respecting the Other, as

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<sup>46</sup> See Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 390.

through the Other we, as subjects and agents, are constituted and reconstituted. In Barad's terms,

A delicate tissue of ethicality runs through the marrow of being. There is no getting away from ethics – mattering is an integral part of the ontology of the world in its dynamic presenting. Not even a moment exists on its own. 'This' and 'that,' 'here' and 'now,' don't preexist what happens but come alive with each meaning. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade with each moment. If we hold on to the belief that the world is made of individual entities, it is hard to see how even our best, most well-intentioned calculations for right action can avoid tearing holes in the delicate tissue structure of entanglements that the lifeblood of the world runs through. Intra-acting responsibly as part of the world means taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world's vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us flourish. Meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all being and becoming. We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming.<sup>49</sup>

Barad emphasises the dynamic nature of the world and pleads for a responsible and comprehensive approach to it. There are no fixed ethical rules, prefabricated for use. However, there is no arbitrariness, either. Each moment requires a responsible answer, according to certain criteria. These criteria are not fixed but can be recognized within ourselves and the communities of which we are part. The point is in constant attention to single cuts we perform daily, as they influence global outcomes. When it comes to pastoral practice, the importance of single cuts is ever more

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 396.

important, as it is about people and their attempts to frame their struggles in a meaningful way.

### **Epistemological Implications of Agential Realism**

When the hermeneutical mediation, in terms of liberation theology, is approached from the agential realism perspective, the question arises: what about the Cartesian distinction between the object of observation (in this case sacred texts with their narratives, commandments, rules, notions, inspirations, and recommendations) and the “agencies of observation,” i.e., hermeneutics? What is of special interest in the context of liberation theology is the relationship between sacred text and actual context: are they separable entities that are somehow connected through reading and applying, or are they intrinsically entangled realities without predefined boundaries?

To put it in another way, do we, as theologians, reflect upon the meaning of the sacred text understood as an external entity, given from the past (absolutely) and from above (either absolutely or at least partially, through the divine inspiration of the holy author), or are we immersed in the multitude of diffractions of world events where we as theologians co-create the meaning of the text in the on-going process of world iterative becoming? The answer to this question shapes the future of the sacred texts and the way they have been used: as the relics of the past, or in the active intra-action with the present orientated towards the future.

Let us take Barad and Boff and read them diffractively, that is, reflecting each other as in a mirror. Diffractive reading is one of the agential realist features which tries to move on from the classic textual analysis.<sup>50</sup> There where Boff relies on dialectics as a primary epistemological tool, Barad talks about ‘apparatuses’ as a cover term for a set of knowledge-making practices. According to Barad, “apparatuses are specific material reconfigurations of the world that do not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigure

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<sup>50</sup> See Karin Murriss and Vivienne Bozalek, "Diffracting Diffractive Readings of Texts as Methodology: Some Propositions," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 51(2019): 1504-17.

spacetime-matter as part of ongoing dynamism of becoming.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, apparatuses are part of the phenomena previously discussed. In the theological realm, phenomena are constituent of entities such as God, incarnation, grace, sin, justice, forgiveness, brotherhood, or eternity.

These realities do not completely preexist our definition of them. They exist, but not as clearly defined objects. Their final constitution, and even more the way they will interact with humans and non-humans, emerge through the ongoing historical intra-action with other concepts and apparatuses that are simultaneously active. Through apparatuses, phenomena are analysed, constituted, observed, modified, and applied. Apparatuses neither precede phenomena nor come after the complete constitution of phenomena.<sup>52</sup>

For example, the concept of justice as it is used in theology did not exist in human knowledge before the theological apparatus had been introduced, i.e. before the first people reflected on the issues of what we call ‘justice’ now. Therefore, before the concept (and the term as designator) was coined, there was already a reflection, a rudimental apparatus. Apparatus and concept grow together; they are co-constitutive in a simultaneous interplay. “Apparatuses are themselves phenomena, constituted and dynamically reconstituted as part of the ongoing intra-activity of the world.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the boundaries of the concepts are not fixed once and for ever. It is very probable that in the future the concept of God’s justice will be formulated with different boundaries, with some elements included and others excluded.

### **RELATION BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Within the methodological framework of agential realism, both theology and sociology can be understood as apparatuses that serve to help human understanding. However, they are not pure

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<sup>51</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 142.

<sup>52</sup> More on apparatuses see in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 146.

and innocent instruments of observations, but their existence and use participate in the continuing creation of the world. They are not neutral but play a constitutive role in the way in which “God is present among humans.” They do not only ‘neutrally’ interpret God and society but co-create the mode in which ‘God is present among its people.’<sup>54</sup> Theology and sociology are not only an epistemological enterprise but an ontological one as well.

Let’s take an example of the apparatus called ‘pastoral theology.’ It is not a passive instrument of observation and of transmission of certain procedures of how things should be done. Pastoral theology is much more. The application of social and theological concepts such as marriage, divorce, hijab, sin, forgiveness, etc., influences life on deeper levels of existence, shapes human bodies and leaves traces. It is about ontological changes, in the long run.

Theology is a productive part of phenomena, as well as sociology and all other disciplines, from agriculture to nanotechnologies. It is not only about knowing and applying certain knowledge, in the case of a theology of what is believed to be revealed. Revelation becomes incarnated, in the ontological sense of the term, through the way it is interpreted. Epistemology influences ontology, and vice versa. Neither ontology nor epistemology has fixed boundaries. However, it does not mean that there are no boundaries at all, that everything is the same. On the contrary, there are differences, and difference matters. There are ontological limits of various configurations. Moreover, the process continues to flourish only if participants are response-able to each other. For this reason, ethics is in the centre of new materialist thought: everything changes, boundaries are fluid, but the ethics, the response-ability, is the glue that keeps together the world-in-becoming.

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<sup>54</sup> See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 12-35.

## HERMENEUTICS, REVELATION, AND THE ROLE OF THEOLOGIANS

The theology which sprouts from an agential realism methodology is orientated towards the future. Its normativity is not in the past, but in the future. In other words, it is based on revelatory texts where revelation is understood in the sense of God's Self-communication, orientated toward the future. Regarding the hermeneutical approach called 'normativity of the future', Reimund Bieringer says,

God does not set forth a static doctrine or unchanging decisions; rather revelation is a process in which Christ and through Christ God's desire to save humans is shared with us. The purpose of revelation is a salvation which is characterized as communion with God. God addresses human beings as friends, lives among them, and invites them into communion with Godself. Revelation is thus not just information or instruction which demands obedience, but rather an event in which God shares Godself and changes human beings by making them sharers of the divine nature.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, a part of the new historical project is the re-articulation of the theological language and the active re-entanglement of theology and the rest of creation: not only declaratively, but above all methodologically. If not, theologians run the risk to be non-response-able: things happen, creation develops, entanglements are in continuous re-configuration, while theologians, instead of participating and positively influencing the flow of world events, remain in petrified categories of entanglements that do not exist anymore. Liberation theology was,

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Vision and Normativity of the Future," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, eds. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 47-90.

and according to Petrella should continue to be, an attempt to make a step forward, to emphasise the agential dimension of theology.

### **METHODOLOGY FOR CHANGING TIMES**

Said in the agential realist terms, the task of a new historical project of liberation theology is to create a methodology able to follow and to participate in the ongoing onto-epistemic re-configuration of the world and society. The historical project needs to become part of the world events, where a single change influences a whole bulk of other changes and vice versa, forming a cloud of causes, effects, and new configurations. Its task is to promote and facilitate the participation of the marginalized, for the benefit of all. Its task is to highlight the moments where God makes its presence palpable in the world, the moments of participated incarnation. The new historical situation creates and re-creates possibilities of new forms of participation of the poor on all levels, from the deserts of Africa to the suburbs of Los Angeles.

Here Barad's agential realism, based on onto-ethico-epistemology, is apt to be a vehicle of theological participation. Agential realist ontology fosters incarnational aspects of liberation theology: God who is present among his people. In the ever-changing dynamics of the world ontology and epistemology, one parameter remains constant and necessary: the ability of various participants to respond, response-ability. Responsibility is a relational, dialogical feature. Without response-ability the cloud of possibilities becomes disordered, chaotic, and dark. In such a non-responsive environment, single elements exist for themselves, without the ability to respond.

### **CLOUDS OF PARTICIPATION WITHIN CLOUDS OF POSSIBILITIES**

The new historical project is about an increased ability of participation of the poor and an increased awareness of those in the power of the urgency of co-operation for the common future. The new historical project, in this view, does not need a new full-

fledged theory, but a better understanding of how the basic concepts of the Christian theology function in the cloud of possibilities of the posthuman age. In other words, a new historical project has to offer a methodology capable to grasp the complexity of our times, indicating a way of action, and then acting through participation.

The difference with respect to the classical see-judge-act method is that in an agential realist account these three phases are more intertwined, both methodologically and operationally. Observing, judging, and acting are present as always. But there is a greater awareness of their interconnectedness: often they follow each other instantaneously, or overlap, or appear even simultaneously. Sometimes they follow one path on the local level while following another path with a different configuration on the global level. Or vice versa. The point is: the methodology of a new historical project should be able to dynamically handle all these levels, to have an accurate vision of what is going on, a capacity to intra-act. Locally, nationally, and globally. Not to know all, but to know better.

As Keller says, “we hope here not for complete knowledge, but for an *incomplete ignorance*.”<sup>56</sup> And, above all, theologians are called to be aware that “more is at stake than ‘the results’; intra-actions reconfigure both what will be and what will be possible – they change the very possibility for change and the nature of change.”<sup>57</sup> Barad considers ethics not as a “right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part.”<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the new historical project of liberation theology can be considered as the “third theological path”: it does not follow the path of negative theology, as it actively learns and participates and holds that a lot can be said and learned through positive knowledge-making practices. However, it is not on the path of positive theology either, as it deliberately renounces final claims

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<sup>56</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 391.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.



about God and the world. The new historical project looks for its place in the cloud of possibilities, i.e., the task of liberation theologians is to participate in the ongoing configurations and reconfigurations of the world-in-becoming.

The new historical project is the vehicle of hope, joy, and solidarity; it is about a God who walks among its people. The new historical project embraces creation in its totality, in its ups and downs; it renounces both the utopia of the past and the utopia of the future. It renounces laments of the “good old times when everyone was pious,” but at the same time, it renounces the idea that theology can change the world decisively.<sup>59</sup>

### CONCLUSION

This paper argued that the methodology of agential realism adds to the capacity of liberation theology to manage the complexity of issues at the intersection of theological theory and pastoral practice. Binary oppositions are resolved by differentiations that distinguish but do not exclude; the dynamism of agential realism is an empowering mechanism and is highly applicable in pastoral settings; agential realism’s ethical concerns, based on responsibility, contribute to balanced views on relations between rich and poor, promoting gradual change rather than augmenting conflicts; and the principle of diffraction is a useful tool in relating eschatological and earthly issues. As agential realism has not been yet explored as a theological tool, many questions are still to be answered. The new aspects that have been touched on here, present potential ways for further research on the applicability of agential realism within both systematic and pastoral theology.

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<sup>59</sup> See Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).