Introduction

I discovered the discipline of theology through the writings of liberation theologians. Some would call this a backward approach, yet it is the one that my education coincidentally and thankfully bestowed on me. I studied the hermeneutics of suspicion—that is, the examination of texts with a critical eye—and the need to listen to the voices that emerge from the underside of history before learning about the normative theological canons, and it is through this lens that I came to explore the discipline as a whole. Although I have never claimed to be a liberation theologian, my research and teaching have been distinctly shaped by the theological concerns placed in the foreground by authors from all over the globe who are collectively identified as liberation theologians. These scholars emphasize that the reflected faith experience of the oppressed, whether that oppression is based on race, class, ethnocultural prejudice, sex, or sexual identity, must be the starting point of theology.

It is therefore with great intellectual concern and personal sadness that I have witnessed the increasing marginalization of liberation theology in particular and theology as a whole. Commentaries about the failure, irrelevance, and even death of liberation theologies abound. In a similar vein, the role of theology within the university is increasingly contested. This development is most often highlighted by the rigid and, I would argue, false delineation between theology and religious studies.
The increasing irrelevance of theology to the academy as a whole and of liberation theologies to the theological academy is regrettable but not entirely surprising. Much of what is stated about liberation theologies today is true: they have failed to affect the dominant U.S. academy’s understanding of the theological task; the poor are indeed poorer today than when the prophetic explosion of liberation theology occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s; liberation theology has isolated itself from the broader U.S. religious studies academy. However, these challenges do not necessarily mean the demise of liberation theologies. Instead, they are invitations for them to grow. This book does not discuss the fact that liberation theologies written in the 1970s no longer have an impact on the contemporary church, world, and academy. Instead, it focuses on the present moment, arguing for the need to radically reconceptualize the theological task in order to answer the fundamental questions liberation theologians posed to us decades ago. Part of the recent problem for liberation theologies has been their reception in the United States. Other challenges include the construction of the Americas in isolation, instead of embracing a hemispheric approach to the Americas, as well as the rigid categories of identity that liberation theologians often espouse in their writings. Yet another difficulty is the failure of many liberation theologians to write in a manner that reflects a connection to everyday Christians. Linked to this problem is the changing face of Christianity itself throughout the Americas, which is quite different from the Christianity often depicted in the pages of liberation theologies.

This book offers a critical introduction to scholarship on religion in the Americas by assessing the study of marginalized communities and the success of liberation theologies in context. To truly understand religion today, one needs to look to marginalized communities, those with which liberation theologies tend to be concerned, not just mainstream populations. Although eulogies for liberation theology have been published since the 1990s, theologians continue to write with a liberationist hermeneutic; meanwhile, on a parallel track, scholars in the United States
from the fields of religious studies, anthropology, history, and sociology have begun to create an extensive corpus on the very populations that are the focus of liberation theologians. By drawing on a combination of historical and ethnographic sources, this book offers a new approach for theology, one that reflects direct grounding in the communities it claims to represent. This book argues that in order to remain relevant and useful theology needs to take into account how religion is actually experienced and to change the way it approaches its subject matter to contend with religion on the ground.

Defining Liberation Theology

The current religious landscape of the Americas contests common assertions made by liberation theologians that the religion of the oppressed is somehow liberationist and inherently ecclesial and Christian. The growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity throughout the Americas, with their more conservative and apolitical theology, challenges the depiction of a highly politicized and socially progressive Christianity often found within liberationist texts. In a similar vein, liberation theologies tend to ignore the complexity of the American religious landscape, marginalizing indigenous and African religious traditions throughout the hemisphere. This book questions whether liberation theology remains a useful category for academic discourse in religious studies, particularly in light of the field’s commitment to justice broadly conceived. Whether scholars of religion should be advocates for the marginalized or infuse justice into their academic discourse is a hotly debated subject among scholars.

To fully understand, research, and teach religion in the Americas in general and that of the marginalized in particular, it is necessary to employ an interdisciplinary approach. Yet a chasm has slowly developed between those scholars who study religion from a theological perspective and those who approach the study of religion with a more interdisciplinary methodology. A core argument of this book is that this chasm needs
to be bridged. It questions whether liberation theology alone can be an effective tool to describe the faith and religious life of marginalized communities and if it can empower them in their daily and societal struggles. It challenges theologians to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach and to engage with a variety of scholars who are working in the field of religious studies.

The focus of this volume is on liberation theologies within the complex interdisciplinary field of religious studies in the United States. This framing of liberation theology against the wider backdrop of the study of religion sets this introductory text apart from other overviews in the field, which often contextualize liberation theologies either in light of each other or solely in light of the ecclesial and social movements that inform them. Instead, this text contextualizes these theologies within the academic study of religion, offering a more comprehensive overview of the academic landscape from which these theologies emerge. Following this introduction, the book turns to case studies of the three liberation theologies—black theology, Latino/a theology, and Latin American theology—critically introducing them through an interdisciplinary overview of their dominant themes. This book introduces and furthers the conversation between theology and religious studies on religion in the Americas with an emphasis on marginalized populations.

Perhaps no other liberation theology has been more thoroughly dismissed and eulogized than the subject of Chapter One, Latin American liberation theology. Latin American theologians have generally made the error of interpreting their communities’ religious rituals exclusively as liberationist in light of their sociopolitical context, yet they rarely examine the actual theology of these rituals, which is often far more theologically conservative. Moreover, Latin American theologians who claim a liberationist legacy must come to terms with the explosion of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Catholicism in the region. These Christian movements shy away from political engagement and structural critique. The growth of these movements counters the progressive
Christianity often depicted by liberation theologians. In addition, Latin American liberation theologians often do not reflect connections with actual lived communities in their scholarship. Their approach is in stark contrast to that of the numerous anthropologists and historians who have produced a body of literature grounded in Latin American religious communities. These scholars offer an alternative picture of religion in Latin America.

Chapter Two examines black liberation theology. The study of African American religion in the Americas has been marked by intentionally distinctive and parallel academic tracks. The field was born in the late 1960s through the writings of black liberation theologians who drew primarily from the Protestant Black Church tradition in the United States and from slave religion. This groundbreaking work was later debated and contested by second- and third-wave black theologians, who challenged the emphasis and scope of their predecessors. This critique and expansion of black theological discourse was followed by a parallel study of African American religion that appropriated an intentionally nontheological methodology. The work being done by religious studies scholars resonates far more with the lived religious experiences of African Americans. Many scholars who work in the field of African American religion have actively distanced themselves from their theological counterparts. This separation implies a critique of the theological lens as too narrow for studying African American religion in the United States and calls for a more interdisciplinary and interreligious approach.

Chapter Three turns to the writings of Latino/a theologians. Within the study of Latino/a religion one finds a theological discourse that does not often claim a liberationist hermeneutic but that allies itself closely with other liberationists and remains heavily grounded in the theo-ecclesial milieu. On a different path are those scholars who approach Latino/a religion from a historical and anthropological perspective. They do not explicitly distance themselves from their theologian colleagues; in many ways these two groups simply operate as if the other does not exist. Yet
Latino/a theology is heavily entrenched in Euro-American theology and thus often has little concrete connection to Latino/a religious communities. Too often what makes Latino/a theology Latino/a is its authorship. This mode of legitimation contrasts starkly with that of Latino/a scholars of religion whose research focus, not birthright, grounds the *latinidad* of their scholarship.

Following this overview of liberation theologies, Chapter Four turns in a more constructive direction by focusing on African diaspora religion as a starting point for pursuing an inclusive understanding of religion in the Americas. Scholars of African diaspora religion adopt an interdisciplinary methodology that places religion within the cross-section of race, ethnicity, and identity. In addition, the study of African diaspora religion throughout the Americas challenges the rigid lines drawn among black, Latino/a, and Latin American identities within liberation theologies. It also undermines the assumption that the religion of the marginalized in the Americas is exclusively Christian. African diaspora religions are a uniting presence among the three communities these theologies focus on in their research.

The Conclusion focuses on the study of religion in the Americas broadly conceived. Informed by the dialogue partners explored throughout this text this collaborative methodology presents a hemispheric approach that is most appropriate for discussing lived religious movements. Although not dismissive of liberation theologies, this approach is critical of their past and offers some challenges to their future as well as suggestions for preventing their untimely demise. It is clear that the liberation theologies of tomorrow cannot look like and may not be named in the same way as the liberation theologies of today.

In the spirit of liberation theology’s emphasis on context, I must say a word about myself. As a Cuban American my scholarship has been shaped by the manner in which I have witnessed, participated in, and experienced religion among Cuban and Cuban American communities. My emphasis on African diaspora religions is a clear example of this approach, for this book could have been easily written with a focus on
indigenous religious traditions. My focus on African diaspora religions is also based on their presence within the communities these three liberation theologies discuss in their corpus. In a similar vein, my desire to reconnect theology to the broader field of religious studies emerges from my own location as a trained theologian teaching in a department of religious studies at a secular university.

Theology versus Religious Studies

The tenuous relationship between theology and religious studies has consistently marked debates within the academy surrounding the contemporary study of religion. Traditionally, and I would argue incorrectly, theology has been caricatured as fideistic claims about God that emerge from within a religious tradition. Given their association with particular religious traditions, the objectivity of theologians has been consistently questioned. This challenge is further amplified by many theologians’ connections to their churches. Theology is associated with ecclesial advocacy and in the contemporary context has often been reduced to an apologetics within an academy that has grown increasingly disinterested in theology’s truth claims. Religious studies, however, is associated with the detached and, therefore, objective and more scientific study of religion. It is seen as the more “academic” approach to religion, with more affinity to and relevance within the broader secular academy.

Religious studies emerges as distinct from theology as an outsider versus insider discipline. Yet religious studies is a discipline with no discipline; it is interdisciplinary, and although its interdisciplinary nature is a source of great creativity for the field, it also makes religious studies appear to lack cohesion. In addition, this is a field, unlike most others, whose scholars’ academic credibility is based on our ability to distance ourselves from that which we study. Religious studies emerged by distinguishing itself from the predominance of theology and the Protestant influences that accompany it in the U.S. academy.
Protestant denominations’ participation in the establishment of universities throughout the United States and in the often moralizing and ministerial role played by theological departments in those universities created a Protestant legacy. Separation from this legacy and the subsequent need to find broader academic credibility within the university signaled the first moment of what would come to be known as religious studies. The incorporation of the study of religion into the humanities within the university in the 1940s was based on its rupture from its Protestant legacy and its commitment to a more scientific approach. Coupled with the estrangement from Protestantism is the separation of scholars who claim to be theologians from those who embrace different methodological approaches to religion. Yet this Protestant legacy continues to haunt religious studies because of the field’s inability to provide a legitimate argument for its role in the academy in light of the modern disdain for the authority of religious institutions and the role of the supernatural in human life. The interdisciplinary nature of religious studies leads to departments in which colleagues have little in common: a religious studies department can be full of scholars who approach diverse religious traditions using disparate approaches. Couple this diversity with an inferiority complex that has resulted from claims that the religious studies academy is unscientific and one finds a distinctive position grounded in a sense that the subject matter of religion is somehow less serious than other subjects of study.

The distancing of religious studies from theology has also had an impact on the public voice of theologians. Theology has the double burden in the United States of working within a country in which religion is often considered a private affair and in which academic suspicions surrounding the nature of theology abound. Scholars who claim to work in religious studies tend to avoid theologians because their research contextualizes the study of religion within an interdisciplinary framework that engages the social, political, and cultural context of religion. Conversely, theology is often reduced to ecclesial concerns or hot-topic moral issues. The marginalization of theology emerges
in part from the stances of theologians themselves: “In the academy, theology has mostly pursued its task apart from public scrutiny and in the company of theologians who apparently don’t mind being cut off from interdisciplinary questioning. Theologians often produce work for religious readers with little regard for its intelligibility for nonreligious audiences and sociopolitical relevance in public life.”

Although theology in the United States exists in a milieu in which religion is privatized, theologians themselves contribute to their own isolation. Theologians often engage in incestuous debates that have little relevance, and make little sense, outside of a small circle of academics. Who are theologians writing to and for? They are no longer writing for churches. And yet their academic community is limited. Are they writing only for themselves as a small group?

The relationship between theology and religious studies remains a hotly contested issue. Although many have pleaded for the ultimate separation or unification of the two, academics remain ambivalent about their relationship. In her 1999 American Academy of Religion (AAR) presidential address Margaret Miles argued for the demise of the distinction between theology and religious studies. “It is time, I believe, finally to lay to rest the debate over fundamental differences between ‘theological studies’ and the ‘study of religion.’” Miles continued, “Theological studies, thought of as exploring a religious tradition from within, must also bring critical questions to the tradition studied. And the study of religion, often described as taking an ‘objective’ or disengaged perspective, cannot be studied or taught without understanding the power and beauty, in particular historical situations, of the tradition or the author we study. Nor can religious studies avoid theology—the committed worldviews, beliefs, and practices of believers—by focusing on religious phénomé

One should not polarize theology as subjective and religious studies as objective. Such distinctions are naïve and false. Theologians should always be critical of the tradition that they are studying, even if they are within it; scholars of religion who approach their subject matter without confronting the committed worldviews of those they study
weaken their work. The study of religion cannot fall into the extremes of being either descriptive or confessional.

The conversation did not end with Miles’s address, for two years later, in her own AAR presidential address, Rebecca Chopp noted, “Nearly every presidential speech of the last twenty years, for instance, has addressed the trenchant boundary between theological studies and religious studies as a founding conflict. What I mean by ‘founding fratricidal conflict’ is the social organization of the study of religion, produced and reproduced by theology and religious studies and by the attempts to overcome this split.”7 The academy is founded on this inescapable conflict, which will continue to define who we are as scholars of religion unless we imagine a new interdisciplinary space of engaged partnership. Chopp presents interdisciplinary conversations as the bridge that will heal the historic divide between theological and religious studies.

This denigration of theology as advocacy discourse for churches is of special relevance for liberation theologies. These theologies have always presented themselves as embodying a new method for doing theology. They have done so in part through the subject matter of their work, often broadly understood as being focused on those from the underside of history. Yet liberation theologians also argue that they embrace a new approach to theology, an interdisciplinary one that engages the broader academy more than theologies of the past have. This methodology is based on emphases on concrete social action within liberation theologies and the study of oppressed peoples and the conditions (social, historical, cultural, and political) that lead to their suffering. Liberation theologies offer a step in the right direction, though not to the extent called for by Chopp.

This interdisciplinary broadening of the theological task would seemingly be welcomed by the religious studies academy, yet it is accompanied by theocentric claims that are fundamental to liberation theologies and alien to religious studies scholars. Core to liberation theologies is an understanding of the Christian God as not neutral; as summarized
by North American feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, “When people are ground down, this violates the way God wants the world to be. In response, the living God makes a dramatic decision: to side with oppressed peoples in their struggle for life." Ultimately, the methodological shifts embraced by liberation theologians are still theological, based on their interpretation of the sacred. Liberation theologians interpret the suffering Christ in solidarity with, and some would even say as embodying, all suffering peoples. The resurrection contains within it the hope of liberation through Jesus’s salvific death and resurrection. Liberation theology’s emphasis on the marginalized is rooted in the nature of the sacred. What could be interpreted as a methodological shift that could open up theology via liberation theology’s interdisciplinary approach becomes lost in theological claims justifying that methodology, thus ending the conversation before it even begins.

Linked to this marginalization is the role of advocacy both in liberation theologies in particular and in theology and in some cases religious studies in general. Both Chopp and Miles, in their presidential addresses, as well as a plethora of other liberation theologians and scholars of religion, define the study of religion as engaged scholarship. For Miles, part of the connection between the study of religion and theology is social engagement. Chopp echoes Miles, connecting the significance of engaged scholarship to broader civic engagement, connecting education to the formation of citizenship in the United States. Although this understanding of the scholar as advocate is fundamental to liberation theologies, it has not gained widespread acceptance among scholars of religion as a whole, in part because of the notion of the theologian as an advocate for the church. In fact, for some the engagement of the scholar, whether to a particular segment of the population or church or in a broader civic manner, is a point of debate within the academy.

Ultimately the question posed by those who argue for an intellectual moral imperative is, Are scholars of religion required to do engaged scholarship? In an op-ed for the New York Times Stanley Fish advises
academics to do their job, namely to remain ivory tower academics. Taking on the Marxist impulse that informs many liberation theologians, Fish argues, “Marx famously said that our job is not to interpret the world, but to change it. In the academy, however, it is exactly the reverse: our job is not to change the world, but to interpret it.” Fish contends that because the task of the academic is challenging enough, academics do their job best when they are focused on the academy. Social change should not be the goal of academic life.

An entirely contrasting approach is embraced by African American public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson, who argues for the fundamental commitment of the intellectual. An academic is different from an intellectual. For Dyson, an academic is someone who does his or her job, but to be an intellectual is a vocation. An intellectual is someone who is broad based and interdisciplinary in his or her scholarship, refusing to be “disciplined” by the categories of academic subjects. Dyson argues that the intellectual plays a role in relieving suffering and has an obligation to be committed to the common good. Some may argue that Dyson’s description of the intellectual—a description that many liberation theologians, scholars of religion, and Chopp and Miles would embrace—downplays the scientific objectivity of the academy. Yet Dyson reminds us that knowledge is not neutral. The connection of power and knowledge is of great concern for Dyson: it sets the stage for the role of advocacy for intellectuals, a claim Fish would contest. Liberation theologians also argue passionately for engaged scholarship, yet they seem to do so unaware of these broader debates within the academy. They do not recognize how engaged scholarship may weaken the academic credibility of their work in some circles.

Presidential addresses such as those of Miles and Chopp have led some to claim that organizations such as the AAR are not welcoming places for the scientific study of religion because of their rejection of objective or neutral scholarship. They have historically defined the task of religious studies as engaged scholarship, marginalizing any sort of disinterested approach as ideological in its own right. According to these
critics, religious studies scholars are not as objective as they claim to be, for they have overwhelmingly accepted the subjectivity of their scholarship, and this subjectivity threatens the academic credibility of the field of religion. “A study of religion directed toward spiritual liberation of the individual or of the human race as a whole, toward the moral welfare of the human race, or toward an ulterior end than that of knowledge itself, should not find a role in the university; for if allowed in, its sectarian concerns will only contaminate the quest for a scientific knowledge of religions and eventually undermine the very institution from which it originally sought legitimation.” While I disagree with this sentiment, it is important to recognize this critique of engaged scholarship. Of concern is not only the methodology of religious studies but, when theology is thrown into the mix, the question of authority. Who defines the agenda of theology: the academy or the church?

The question of authority is a fundamental one for the future of liberation theology in the Americas. The three theologies explored in this book have made distinctive claims about the authoritative voices in their scholarship and the nature of religious authority within their communities. Latin American liberation theology has drawn primarily from the voices of marginalized Christian communities and an understanding of the Christian church as the church of the poor. This claim has led to clashes with the institutional hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Black liberation theology roots its claims in the Black Church, a broadly constructed and, some would argue, false category that represents black Christianity as a whole in the United States. Latino/a theologians tend to take the popular Christian practices of Christian Latino/a faith communities as their starting point. They define these practices as popular based on their relationship with institutional Catholicism. In all these theologies there is a dynamic between institutional religious authority and the religious authority of everyday Christians. The question becomes, therefore, whether this dynamic somehow weakens the academic nature of these theological voices.
Although claims surrounding the weakened academic credibility of theology because of ecclesial authority are somewhat simplistic in their understanding of theology, there is something distinctive about the study of religion in relationship to other academic disciplines. Religious studies is marked by the polarities of praxis and critical reflection. Within this space of imagination is the engaged scholar, who may in the study of religion have a moral imperative to justice that shapes his or her scholarship. The polarity of religious practice can become the rub, for it can be construed as weakening critical analysis. Can a believer be truly critical of his or her religion in the same manner as an outsider? Can an outsider truly understand a religious worldview she or he does not believe? These are not easy questions, and they go to the root of the struggles liberation theologies confront today. They are also at the root of debates within the field of religion. Theologians are not the only ones who want to maintain their academic credibility and simultaneously acknowledge the subjective dimension of their scholarship.

Lived Religion

Within the study of U.S. religion scholars who are loosely grouped by their emphasis on lived religion are interesting conversation partners for liberation theologians. Scholars who embrace the lived-religion approach use social history as a methodology for American religious history. “The name for this approach is ‘lived religion,’ a shorthand phrase that has long been current in the French tradition of the sociology of religion (la religion vécue) but is relatively novel in the American context. . . . The phrase is rooted less in sociology than in cultural and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion and American religious history that have come to the fore in recent years.” Central to this methodology is the notion that the study of American religion can be enhanced through interdisciplinary studies. These scholars distance themselves from the term popular religion, often used to describe the religion of the “people,” a category used by Latin American and
Latino/a liberation theologians. The “people” of popular religion usually refers to the poor and marginalized. The manner in which popular religion plays a role in liberation from marginalization is a contested topic among Latino/a and Latin American theologians. The emphasis on lived versus popular religion is grounded in part on the assumption that the category of popular religion creates an oppositional relationship between official and popular religious practices. The lived-religion approach embraces the significance of daily life situated within broader institutional and social networks. Fundamental to the understanding of lived religion is the individual nature of everyday religious practices that occur within an intersubjective social framework. The lived-religion approach attempts to balance contextualized religious practices in light of institutional and historical movements.

Sociohistorian Robert Orsi, a leading voice in the study of lived religion, presents this methodology as having broad implications for the study of religion as a whole. Orsi advocates for the reconfiguration of the study of religion through an awareness of the possibilities and limitations of culture; an awareness of the role of the body in particular cultures; and an awareness of the structures of social experience and the tensions that can disrupt these structures. He defines the approach as a “materialist phenomenology of religion,” where “scholars of ‘lived religion’ seek a more dynamic integration of religion and experience.” This approach allows for the improvisational nature of religion to thrive. It argues that the opposition of elite and popular is an oversimplification, for religion is experienced within the exchange between religious authorities and communities of faith. This emphasis on everyday, material religion is sympathetic to many of the concerns highlighted by liberation theologians.

Scholars of lived religion are already engaged in dialogue with liberation theologies. For example, Sarah McFarland Taylor, author of *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, embraces a lived-religion methodology informed by a feminist hermeneutic. She embraces the feminist call for a “view from below,” at the grassroots level, versus the perspective of the
hierarchical, institutional elite. McFarland Taylor strives for a reciprocal, horizontal relationship, with the researcher acquiring “spectator knowledge” through active participation as part of the research process.²⁰ The objects of study cease to be others. Her approach is dominated by the desire to study “religion on the ground,” which examines how individuals in their daily lives practice their beliefs. McFarland Taylor emphasizes that this methodology is particularly significant for the study of women in religion.²¹ Her book is an ethnographic study of green sisters (environmentally active catholic nuns) supplemented by written materials using “interlocking sources” in order to uncover when “patterns emerged across multiple sources.”²² McFarland Taylor’s scholarship brings together a number of significant intersections that liberation theologians also address: institutional and everyday religious practices, the function of power, and, perhaps most important, the role of the academic in the study of religion.

The lived-religion approach, however, is not without its own methodological constraints, particularly in regard to voice: “The confessional mode, too, introduces epistemological and moral problems. It claims authority just as it pretends to undercut it. It does so by implying that the author has privileged information about his or her own motives and location, persuading the reader that the writer has come clean.” This mode does not necessarily lead to the erasure of the autobiographical voice, yet it has its limitations.²³ Liberation theologians’ strident emphasis on the significance of context, culture, and social location often reduces their contributions to parochial voices lost in the larger framework of religious and theological discourse. This book resists the either-or dualisms surrounding religious practices and discourses that plague the contemporary academy. A hybrid language must not reify the dualism of religious studies and theology, of insider and outsider, but must recognize instead that the divide between the two is a false construction.

Some connections already exist, such as the emphasis on material, everyday religion that is found in the work of some contemporary social
historians and liberation theologians. Fundamental for these scholars are the significance of everyday religion and the contributions of everyday individuals to academic discourse. The privileging of nonexperts is not a dismissal of academic discourse and institutional authority. However, the study of everyday religion creates a space for the privileged and nonprivileged, the private and the public. This emphasis on the nonprivileged and nonexpert echoes the centrality of grassroots, everyday individuals at the heart of liberation theologies. It appears that some scholars of lived religion have a starting point similar to that of liberation theologians, although they have an entirely different approach and academic commitment.

Is lived religion therefore the middle ground between theology and religious studies? Ultimately no. The lived-religion approach is not the exclusive remedy for the ambiguous relationship between theology and religious studies. The lived-religion approach often leaves scholars wanting more. Although it acknowledges the significance of social historians’ descriptions of religious experiences and devotions, the desire to pose critical questions and impose critical analyses on these devotions remains a strong impulse in the academic study of religion. Lived religion, though broadening the field of religious studies, still remains embedded within it, hesitant to reflect on the theology implied by the religious practices scholars study. Collaborations with theologians could fill this void. Although many of the critiques of liberation theologies, for example the lack of concrete connection to everyday religious practices, could be answered by adopting a more empirical and materialist approach, doing so must never be at the expense of the significance of theology. It is not that liberation theologians should stop being theologians; rather, they need to radically reconceive the theological task and broaden their academic audience. A collaborative approach would strengthen and challenge both methodologies.

A dialogue between scholars of lived religion and theologians would be a fruitful space in which to explore some of the broader debates surrounding subjectivity and engagement within the field of religion.
Does an ethnographic study of a marginalized community that sets out the concerns and struggles of this community qualify as engaged scholarship? Is it the same type of engaged scholarship as a theologian’s claim that God is on the side of the oppressed? Does the mere act of highlighting oppression make a scholar engaged? Similarly, the issue of authorship within the study of religion is a pressing question that continues to haunt the field. Scholars of lived religion force us to (rightfully) entertain the notion that all academic research is ultimately autobiographical. There can be no objective study of religion or study of any subject for that matter. The author as interpreter is always present in the text.

For liberation theologians the question of authorship is repeatedly raised. Given that liberation theologies have consistently claimed that they represent the theological insights of marginalized peoples, assessment of their efficacy and their impact is complex. One cannot reduce the presence of theologians to the presence of the people they claim to represent. The presence of liberationist voices within the academy should not be the criteria for determining whether marginalized peoples have intellectual insights for the study of religion, and the sales of books by liberation theologians should not determine whether we can define contemporary religion in the Americas without taking seriously the majority of peoples in this hemisphere. And yet too often the whims of the academy define the agenda.

Liberation Theology: Does Marginalization = Death?

The marginalization and sometimes discrediting of liberation theologies is often equated with their death. Yet academic eulogies for liberation theology, particularly Latin American liberation theology, are often based on contemporary political and economic factors rather than theological standing. The collapse of socialism symbolized by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as a global
hegemonic capitalist superpower has contributed greatly to the perceived demise of liberation theology, particularly in Latin America. Yet this perceived failure does not warrant the smothering of liberationist concerns.  

One of the elements that contributes to the marginalization of liberation theologies is their reduction to contextual or advocacy theologies. Cast as contextual theologies, they become special-interest theologies that are relevant only to specific groups. Yet Euro-American liberation theologian Jeorg Rieger reminds us that, given their emphasis on oppression, liberation theologies are distinct from contextual theologies. “There is still too little awareness that context may not be what is closest to home, but that what needs attending is ‘what hurts’ and what lies below the surface. One of the great advantages of the various liberation theologies over contextual theology is that they are trying to deal with context as that which hurts.” Often understood as advocacy theologies, they are seen as catering exclusively to the interests of specific groups. Liberation theologies are perceived as ministering mainly to the interest of specific groups of different ethnic, gender, or class origins, allowing what is considered authentic or normative theology to continue untouched by the challenges raised by liberation theologians. Liberation theologies become projects on the margins, read only when the needs of a particular group are the focus. They are not seen as affecting dominant theology as a whole.  

In addition to external critiques of liberation theologies, significant internal analyses have been pushing liberation theologians to critically engage their own discourse for decades. The late Latin American liberation theologian Marcela Althaus-Reid is critical of the notion of the popular theologian, the academic who has a close relationship with and often translates the world of the poor to the academy. Within liberation theology the popular theologian is constructed as a “mirror” of the poor, a reflection of the faith of the poor. Academic theologians become the voice of the voiceless, infantilizing the very communities they are attempting to empower through their theological commitments. The
popular theologian becomes a hybrid academic/representative of the poor who filters the horrors of marginalization in a sanitized manner to the U.S. academy.

The caricature of the popular theologian becomes a conceptual construct that results in the co-optation and consequent powerlessness of liberation theologies in the face of dominant Western discourse. Popular theologians are usually priests or ministers living with and working with the poor whose faith, suffering, and simplicity are acclaimed. Such theologians become infantilized for their humility and dedication to the poor while their intellectual claims to the discourse of theology remain unheard. Their value to the dominant academy is not intellectual; it is voyeuristic.

Althaus-Reid’s critique of the popular theologian is coupled with her insight into the manner in which liberation theologies become “theme parks” that Western theologians can visit while not having to alter the nature and structure of their theology. As theme-park theologies, she contends, liberation theologies become a commodity for Western capitalism. “The centerpiece of theological thinking is constituted by systematic Western theology, and it is done even in opposition. The theme parks, in the case of Liberation Theology, are divided into subthemes, such as ‘Marxist Theology’, ‘Evangelical Theology’, ‘Indigenous Theology’, or ‘Feminist Theology’—and all of them with a central unifying theme ending with ‘and the poor’.” As theme parks, they can be visited at one’s leisure; one is never forced to take them seriously. They do not affect the center, the dominant discourse of theology. A huge challenge to liberation theologies as a whole in the United States is that liberals claim that they accept liberation theology without embracing the liberationist method. Liberation theology has failed to transform the nature and method of theology as a whole.

Another internal critique within liberation theology argues that it has lost its vitality in the contemporary academy. The next generation of liberation theologians is challenged. “The question for the next generation is whether we should move beyond the discourse of liberation
or refine rhetoric, goals, and methods of the movement to reflect current issues.” Ultimately underlying this critique is the question of whether one can “do” liberation theology but call it something different. Liberation theologians often homogenize the lived experiences of oppressed peoples with broad sweeping claims about them. They also claim that a shared experience of oppression is enough to unite marginalized peoples. All minorities are classified as those seeking liberation; differences among them are effaced. By highlighting the experience of oppressed communities, liberation theologians have reduced these communities to the experience of oppression. This diminution has created an ahistorical notion of oppression entirely disconnected from concrete communities. This idea not only has severed the relationship between the theologian and lived religious communities but also has erased the distinctiveness and diversity of the manner in which oppression manifests itself.

In order to respond to their critics, and more important, to be true to their intellectual commitments, liberation theologians need to reconnect with lived religious communities. The future of liberation theology lies in this relationship. Disconnected from concrete communities, its center has moved to the academy. If liberation theologians choose to embrace an understanding of theology that is merely academic, then they break radically with their foremothers and forefathers. Today one finds a lack of deep connection between the writings of most liberation theologians and concrete faith communities. If that connection is there, it is not apparent from reading these authors’ works.

Liberation theologies must deal with the question of accountability and theological ownership. How ought liberation theologians write about religious communities and expressions with which they do not agree or that they do not like or find liberatory? Whose experience will be the subject of theology? “Experience” here does not mean personal experience, but taking the concreteness of everyday life seriously. Is one of the issues liberation theologies’ failure to connect their theological
commitments to the ecclesial traditions from which they emerge? Liberation theologians have also not sufficiently addressed the assumed normativity of Christianity in their writings. Many aspects of concrete, lived Christianity become abstractly accepted within broader theological currents.34

The questions posed throughout this text are ones that need to be asked of theology as a discipline and of the study of religion as a whole. We are living in a moment when the significance of religion in shaping world events is more prominent than ever, and yet the study of religion remains a marginalized and inconsequential field. Scholars of religion must become advocates for their discipline or it will fade away into irrelevance. However, the multidimensional nature of religion makes this project extremely complex. For the theologian, the question of authority and voice becomes central. Theologians have a significant contribution to make, yet they often become lost in internal debates on the nature of theology. Theologians need to find a way to communicate to nontheologians. At the same time, religious studies scholars should shake off their inferiority complex regarding their place in the humanities and develop a stronger sense of their role in the academy, a vision that must include theology as one avenue for studying religion. Liberation theologians in particular must be honest about the nature of their claims and recognize that their “revolutionary” incorporation of the social sciences has been in fact a very narrow appropriation of certain perspectives within the social sciences.

Ultimately the starting point of liberation theology is not ethics or social theory; it is a theological vision of the sacred embodied in concrete faith communities. Liberation theology must remain deeply connected to social movements for it to survive. At its core, liberation theology can never be exclusively academic. A final question I will pursue throughout this text, one that goes to the heart of the challenge of liberation theologians, is, Is the challenge of liberation theology methodological or theocentric? Or is it epistemological? In other words, what are the roots of the radical transformation liberation theologians propose for the
discipline of theology as whole? The answer to these questions will have implications not only for the future of liberation theologies but also for their ability to dissolve the divide between theology and religious studies, as well as that between the Americas.