Liberation theology is widely referred to in discussions of politics and religion but not always adequately understood. The new edition of this Companion brings the story of the movement’s continuing importance and impact up to date. Additional essays, which complement those in the original edition, expand upon the issues by dealing with gender and sexuality and the important matter of epistemology. In the light of a more conservative ethos in Roman Catholicism, and in theology generally, liberation theology is often said to have been an intellectual movement tied to a particular period of ecumenical and political theology. These essays indicate its continuing importance in different contexts and enable readers to locate its distinctive intellectual ethos within the evolving contextual and cultural concerns of theology and religious studies. This book will be of interest to students of theology as well as to sociologists, political theorists and historians.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Second Edition
EDITED BY
CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND
Dean Ireland’s Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture,
University of Oxford

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BASTIAAN WIELENGA has been teaching Biblical Theology as well as Social Analysis at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, South India, since 1975. Earlier, he was a research scholar in the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore, and co-worker in the Ecumenical Centre, Hendrik Kraemer House, Berlin. He has published in the fields of Christian–Marxist dialogue, politics and theology. His It’s a Long Road to Freedom (Mandurai, Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, 1998) discusses perspectives of biblical theology; Introduction to Marxism (Bangalore, Centre for Social Action, 1991) presents a pluralist approach to Marxist theory; and Towards Understanding Indian Society, 3rd Edition (Mandurai, Centre for Social Analysis, 2002), co-authored with Gabrielle Dietrich, relates social analysis to social movements and alternative development perspectives.
I recall a reviewer of an earlier book I wrote on liberation theology commenting that the book was now redundant, given the collapse of communism. That assessment reflects a widespread assumption that liberation theology is simply Marxism with a Christian gloss and that, with the dramatically changed situation since the fall of the Eastern bloc, the theology which was inspired by it was likewise to be consigned to the dustbin of history. There is a problem with this view. First of all, it assumes that, without Marxism, liberation theology would not have any rationale. This view is widespread (as also is the assumption that liberation theology is linked with the use of violence for political ends). What such views fail to recognise, however, is that liberation theology has never been greatly indebted to Marxism, even if in certain important respects (such as its epistemology and commitment to human history as the arena for the fulfilment of the divine purposes), it has some parallels to it. But those parallels are less indicative of indebtedness than of the recovery in liberation theology of components of the Christian way of life which more mainstream theology has lost sight of. Nevertheless, there is one sense in which the reviewer might have had a point. If liberation theology had stayed as it was in the period before 1990, such criticism would be justified. It has not, and a new generation of liberation theologians has continued with the essential features of the liberation theology method, albeit in changed circumstances. Those changed circumstances also include a more hostile environment in the Roman Catholic Church. One can get a flavour of this when one recalls that the present pope, then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, not only was an important part of the investigation and critique of liberation theology in the 1990s but also wrote some rather harsh things about it, comparing it to the illusory fanaticism reflected in the violent preparations for the Kingdom of God in the War Scroll from Qumran.¹

The bulk of the book remains the same as the first edition. What we have in the new chapters by Marcella Althaus-Reid, Zoë Bennett and Ivan Petrella is evidence of the continuing history of liberation theology and examples of the contours of
that new generation. Liberation theology has pervaded much contextual theology. Thus, action/reflection models of engagement are commonplace. Zoë Bennett, writing from a background in contemporary practical theology, demonstrates the extent of this influence and contrasts what is central to liberation theology with this kind of ‘pastoral cycle’ method. At the same time, she fills a gap in the earlier edition by exploring what is perhaps the most important component of liberation theology: the basis of its epistemology in practice. She does this by reference to one of the most important texts of the earlier generation of liberation theology – Clodovis Boff’s *Theology and Praxis* – indicates its strengths and weaknesses and points to the indispensability of the discussions raised by this question for the wider theological debate. Ivan Petrella and Marcella Althaus-Reid are representative of a new wave of liberation theologians. Their respective contributions demonstrate the extent of the continuity with the original inspiration, though both indicate the ways in which some recent liberationist discussion has lost touch with that original vision. They also point out the ways in which the original advocates of liberation theology ignored central issues in human experience, linked with sexuality and gender, which continue to be key areas of human need and oppression. Ivan Petrella indicates what is central to liberation theology: commitment to projects for social change within history. When liberation theology loses its commitment to engagement in historical projects, to bringing life where there is death, it has lost its soul.

All three writers demonstrate the ways in which, despite all the attempts by ecclesiastical officialdom to disinfect Christian culture of what they deem to be the virus of the politicised theology of liberation theology, at the grassroots level this way of understanding God is alive and well. Those who have been drawn to liberation theology practise this approach not so much because of its intellectual sophistication, as if it were one option in the academic market, but because liberation theology enables one to put one’s finger on the pulse of a world of suffering and death, personal tragedy and injustice. As a result the discernment of Christ in the persons of the needy and vulnerable, and service to them, is then the motor of theological insight. So, theological understanding comes through commitment and action. It is a form of contextual theology, therefore, in which experience and circumstances have a prime importance as the first step in seeking to be a disciple of Jesus.

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND

NOTES

Liberation theology has been one of the most significant movements in Christian theology in the last thirty years. For a decade or more liberation theology dominated the intellectual horizon of theologians in universities and seminaries throughout the world. Recent evidence of a declining profile cannot mask the enormous influence this approach to theology has had on the contemporary Church. It emerged in Latin America, though there have been parallel developments in other parts of the world, in which experiences of oppression, vulnerability or marginalisation have led to a sustained reflection on the Christian tradition. The Third World setting in situations of abject poverty and human need has given the theology a particular urgency and distinctive outline. The concern with human well-being and an understanding of the Church’s mission which includes practical measures for human betterment have embraced theologians as co-workers in practical expressions of Christian commitment. The agenda is distinctive in its emphasis on the dialogue between Christian tradition, social theory and the insight of the poor and marginalised into their situation, leading to action for change. Liberation theology is not only of interest to theologians but also to all those studying the role of religion in contemporary society. The emphasis on the political dimensions of the Church’s mission within situations of extreme poverty has made it the most compelling example of political theology in the late twentieth century. Liberation theology has a certain novelty value in the popular imagination. Many of its practitioners, however, have been quick to point out how deep are its roots in Christianity’s emphasis on the life of prayer and commitment to neighbour as the necessary contexts for understanding God.

The initial dynamism may have been in Latin America, but there have emerged parallel movements in Africa, Asia and also Europe and North America. Not all of these are called liberation theology. Contextual theology is a term now widely used to designate theological reflection which explicitly explores the dialogue between social context and Scripture and
It is not an ideal term, however, as it suggests that there exists a form of theology in which context plays no determining role, a notion that many, including liberation theologians themselves, would want to challenge. The greatest examples of Christian theology down the centuries (Augustine’s City of God is a case in point) have all arisen from, and been directed to, specific historical and social contexts. There are enough common threads linking theologians in Asia, Latin America and South Africa to justify a common perspective, not least organisations like the Ecumenical Alliance of Third World Theologians which have enabled dialogue and common interests to emerge as the result of a series of influential conferences with a common sense of direction and purpose.

The chapters of this Companion offer a survey of examples of theology in different parts of the world which may be labelled liberation theology. The chapters have been written by contributors, some of whom live and work in the countries whose theology they write about. The first part enables readers to have some understanding of the main features of contemporary liberation theology in Latin America, Asia and Africa and the related feminist theology. In Part II specific issues which arise in the emergence of liberation theology are explored in chapters on the emergence of the base ecclesial communities, so important for the growth of liberation theology in Latin America, and the distinctive ways in which Scripture is studied. One new issue to have arisen since Gustavo Gutiérrez’s pioneering A Theology of Liberation was published thirty years ago has been the emergence of a situation in which theologians of protest have found themselves engaged in reconstruction and reconciliation. That new situation is reflected in a chapter which examines the case of South Africa. In Part III writers turn to analysis of aspects of liberation theology and specific criticisms made of it. This starts with a posthumously published essay by Peter Hebblethwaite on the emerging critique of liberation theology from the Vatican. I am particularly grateful to Peter’s widow, Margaret Hebblethwaite, for all her help in providing me with material which Peter left in a fragmentary state at his death. The extent of the indebtedness to Marxism has also been a subject of controversy from liberation theology’s very earliest days, as also has the extent of the influence of a particular economic theory. Finally, its distinctive standpoint on political theology is contrasted with other traditions of political theology.

This volume should enable the student beginning a course in liberation theology to have some idea of the contours of the varied aspects of this tradition. In the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s recent document (ed. J. L. Houlden, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, London, 1995) liberationist and feminist interpretations are both given the label ‘contextual approaches’. 
significant movement and will permit someone who wants a panoramic view of the various forms of liberation theology to get some sense of the overall situation. As editor I am aware of the many other matters which could legitimately have been included in a volume of this kind: the relationship of liberation theology and evangelisation, Catholic and Protestant; the evidence of an indigenous liberationist tradition in Europe and North America; the story of Christianity in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, and an analysis of the way in which liberation theology has revolutionised much Christian pedagogy in the Northern Hemisphere even when it seems to remain peripheral to the life of most of the Christian churches.

I am grateful to colleagues at the Centro Missionário de Evangelização e Educação Popular in Valença, Bahia, Brazil for giving me permission to take photographs of their popular education material during my visit to them in 1990, an example of which forms the illustration on the front of this book. My daughter, Rebekah, has helped with proof-reading and the preparation of an index. I am grateful to her for her help and her continuing interest in, and support for, the subject of this book.
GLOSSARY

apophatic theology: that which is beyond expression in language. It involves a denial that human language can ever properly be affirmed of God. It contrasts with cataphatic theology/cataphaticism.

caste: a hereditary group which maintained social distance from members of other castes.

catechesis/catechetical: teaching or instruction, a way of describing the preparatory teaching given to a candidate for baptism in the Christian Church.

chiliasm: the expectation of a 1000-year reign of God on earth based on Revelation 20, but which has come to be linked with any this-worldly expectation of God’s eschatological reign.

christology: teaching about the person of Jesus Christ.

Dalit: the name chosen for itself by the outcaste group in India; it means ‘crushed’ or ‘oppressed’.

dialectical: concerning the understanding of or reconciliation of contradictions, e.g., in theology between God and humanity and different social and economic phenomena. It is a word used both in political philosophy influenced by Hegel and Marx, where it is used of the progressive resolution of contradictions in history, and also in the theology of Karl Barth, which contrasted human ways of knowing and the revelation of God.

encyclical: in modern Roman Catholicism refers to a circular document sent to the church by the Pope.

epistemology: concerned with the theory of knowledge and how humans know anything about themselves, the external world, and God.

eschatology: the hope for the future, both for the individual and the world. There has been a divide in Christian theology between a this-worldly hope and an other-worldly hope.
GLOSSARY

exegesis: the practice of interpretation and exposition, specifically of the Bible.

fetishism: according to Marx, the bestowal in a capitalist society on material objects of certain characteristics, such that they appear to possess these naturally.

Feuerbachian: referring to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), who demanded that theology be understood as a projection on to the transcendent of ideas concerning humanity and society.

fideism: a doctrine which places emphasis on the need for faith and rejects the ability of the human mind to understand God, with the consequent denial of the possibility of the need for rational justification.

hermeneutics: the task of reflecting on how we go about doing our interpretation of texts, life and culture.

hermeneutics of suspicion: interpretation linked with what Paul Ricoeur has called the masters of suspicion, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Its major characteristic is suspicion of the validity of received narratives and explanations with a demand to probe to get at the underlying truth behind appearances.

immanentism: in contrast with transcendence in theology this doctrine stresses God's nearness and involvement in history, including ordinary events and situations.

neo-liberal: a way of characterising the free-market economic theory which has been influential in global economics in the last decades of the twentieth century.

orthopraxy: right way of behaving, contrasted with orthodoxy, right belief, which is held to be less interested in the practical demands of faith.

praxis or practice: action, a term often used in liberation theology to describe the actions and commitments which provide the context for theological reflection.

proletariat: the working class which in Marxist theory would be the agent of the defeat of capitalism.

Promethean: referring to Prometheus, the figure in Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and taught humankind divine wisdom, for which he was imprisoned for having aspired to divinity.

soteriology: the doctrine of God’s saving work, especially through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

typology: the relation of different persons and narratives (usually in the Old and New Testaments), so that the character of one is informed by the character of the other (so the sacrifice of Isaac informs the understanding of the death of Jesus).
ABBREVIATIONS

CCA Christian Conference of Asia
CDF Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The major institution of the Roman Catholic Church responsible for the church’s faith and morals
CEB/BCC Basic Ecclesial Community or Basic Christian Community
CELAM The Latin American (Roman Catholic) Bishops’ Conference
CIIR The Catholic Institute for International Relations
CISRS Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
CLAR The Latin American Conference of Religious
CSR Centre for Social Research
EATWOT Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
ECLA Economic Commission for Latin America
EFECW European Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women
ESWTR European Society for Women in Theological Research
GATT The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GS Gaudium et Spes. The major document of the Second Vatican Council dealing with relations between the Church and the World
IMF The International Monetary Fund
ISB Institute for the Study of the Bible
MNC Multi-National Corporation. Also called Trans-National Corporation
NGO Non-Governmental Organisation. A term used to describe organisations like charities or intermediate groups engaged in development work in the Third World
OECD The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ST Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas
URM Urban-Rural Mission
WCC The World Council of Churches
WSCF World Student Christian Fellowship