

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68893-2 - The Cambridge Companion to: Liberation Theology: Second Edition

Edited by Christopher Rowland

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Introduction: the theology of liberation

May Day in 1983 will always remain indelibly etched on my memory. It was my first Saturday in Brazil, in the middle of a period of military dictatorship in that country, and I was taken to visit some theologians working with base ecclesial communities in São Paulo. I recall entering a large building which served as a community centre for one of the shanty towns on the periphery of this enormous city. Inside there were about forty men and women listening to a woman expound the first chapter of the book of Revelation. She was standing at a table at which were sitting two men. Her lecture was constantly interrupted by her audience sharing their experience of situations parallel with that of John on Patmos: witness, endurance, and tribulation. One man who had been active in trade unions spoke with me after the meeting describing the way in which the book of Revelation spoke to his situation: he had been imprisoned without trial, and a Church which had seemed so irrelevant and remote had become a shelter and inspiration for his life. There was an atmosphere of utter comprehension of, and accord with, John's situation, as trade union activists, catechists and human rights workers shared their experiences of persecution and harassment as a result of their work with the poor and marginalised. They found in John a kindred spirit as they sought to understand and build up their communities in the face of the contemporary beast of poverty and oppression. It was readily apparent as I listened to their eager attempts to relate Revelation to their situation that they had discovered a text which spoke to them because they had not been desensitised by an ordered and respectable life of accommodation and assimilation. The woman and one of the men at the front of the meeting were teachers at the local seminary and the other man the local Roman Catholic bishop. They had been conducting a regular training day for representatives from the hundreds of base ecclesial communities who had gathered for training in Scripture and its interpretation.

That occasion embodies so many of the features which have distinguished liberation theology. First of all, it is rooted in ordinary people's everyday

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experience of poverty. Second, it involves a use of Scripture the interpretation of which is closely related to that experience. Third, it is a theology which in many parts of the world has deep roots within the life of the Church (this is nowhere more true than in Brazil where a liberation theology perspective has permeated, and in turn been influenced by, the pastoral practice of many Roman Catholic dioceses). Fourth, it has flourished in the meetings of groups within urban or rural settings, worshipping and reflecting on Scripture and joining in common projects for human welfare in health and education. Fifth, there is a theology which is explored not just in the tutorial or seminar but engages the whole person in the midst of a life of struggle and deprivation. It is theology which, above all, often starts from the insights of those men and women who have found themselves caught up in the midst of that struggle, rather than being evolved and handed down to them by ecclesiastical or theological experts. Finally, books of the Bible (like the book of Revelation) and parts of the theological tradition, often ignored or despised, become a vehicle of hope and insight in these situations of oppression and deprivation as new hope in God's purposes are discovered.

Theology and experience: a way of doing theology from the perspective of the poor and marginalised

Theology as it has developed over the centuries can seem abstract from ordinary life as is evident in the way in which 'theological' has come to be used to describe irrelevant discussion of a topic. In contrast, liberation theology has its origins in the reality of the 'premature and unjust death of many people' as Gustavo Gutiérrez has put it. However sophisticated the books and articles from the liberation theologians may seem to be, it is their experience and that of those with whom they work that is the motor which drives their theology. The struggle for survival of millions linked with Christian social teaching prompted priests and religious to think again about their vocation. In so doing, they have learnt afresh from the poor as they have lived and worked with them. In a situation where hundreds of thousands of peasants were driven off the land their families have farmed for generations, because of international demand for economic growth to service foreign debt, and where many have drifted to the shanty towns which have sprung up on the periphery of large cities, liberation theology has flourished. So the starting place is not detached reflection on Scripture and tradition but the present life of the shanty towns and land struggles, the lack of basic amenities, the carelessness about the welfare of human persons, the death squads and the shattered lives of refugees. It is

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here in particular that its distinctiveness as compared with the theology of North American and European academies is most marked. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez:

... the question in Latin America will not be how to speak of God in a world come of age, but rather how to proclaim God as Father in a world that is inhumane. What can it mean to tell a non-person that he or she is God's child?¹

It was a similar question which was posed in the very earliest years of Christianity's presence in South America for priests like Bartolomé de las Casas who took up the cause of the oppressed indigenous people of the sub-continent. As a young priest he prepared a homily on Ecclesiasticus 34.21–7: the words 'Like one who kills before his father's eyes is a person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor' crystallised a sense of the injustice of the economic system of which he was a part and which exploited indigenous peoples. The rest of his life was devoted to obtaining rights for indigenous peoples from the Spanish crown.²

Liberation theology is being worked out in shanty towns, land struggles, oppressed and humiliated groups, as well as areas of urban deprivation in the Northern hemisphere, wherever the rebuilding of shattered lives takes place. The point is well made by Jon Sobrino who has for years worked in war-torn Central America. He suggests that the agenda of European theology has been more interested in thinking about and explaining the truth of faith, whereas for liberation theologians faith runs parallel to real life and is in dialectical relationship with it. Thereby the meaning of faith and doctrine is illuminated at the same time as the world's wretched condition is confronted and alleviated. Commitment to the poor becomes the context of reflection, and so practical discipleship becomes the dynamic within which theological understanding takes place. Understanding of God and the world is a gift of grace and means an altered perspective in a life of service to those who are the least of Christ's brothers and sisters.³

Liberation theology: a means of ethical and intellectual orientation

When Carlos Mesters, a liberation theologian from Brazil, writes of 'interpreting life by means of the Bible', he encapsulates this way of doing theology. Liberation theology is not the accumulation of, or learning about, a distinctive body of distinctive information, though the perspective may well produce an approach to parts of the spectrum of the Christian tradition which are either ignored or denied. Liberation theology is above all a new way of *doing* theology rather than being itself a new theology. It

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is new in the sense that it contrasts with much of the theology that has emerged in the last two centuries, centred, as it so often is, in university or seminary, with the priority placed on intellectual discourse detached from life and, increasingly, the practice of prayer and charity. In many respects, liberation theology harks back to the theological method of an earlier age, when worship, service to humanity and theological reflection were more closely integrated and when the conduct of the Christian life was an indispensable context for theological reflection. What has been rediscovered, in particular, is the commitment to the poor and marginalised as a determining moment for theology rather than the agenda of detachment and reflection within the academy. Such a discovery may involve a disorientation of life, a conversion indeed. The commitment to, and solidarity with, the poor and vulnerable are the necessary environment for stimulating the intellectual activity which enables liberation theology to begin. The key thing is that one first of all *does* liberation theology rather than learns about it. Or, to put it another way, one can only learn about it by embarking on it. To ask the question, 'What is liberation theology?' and think that one can answer without commitment and the understanding which emerges from it is to miss out on the central ingredient of liberation theology. This experience cannot adequately be communicated except by committing oneself and taking the first step along the road of solidarity and action. Therein lies the root of understanding.

Liberation theology is a way, a discipline, an exercise which has to be lived rather than acquired as a body of information. It has its parallels in the classic texts of Western Christian spirituality. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, for example, seems at first sight to be a rag-bag of Christian platitudes. To read them without putting the advice into practice for oneself, however, fails to do justice to the fact that it is only when one actually *uses* them that the significance and function of the Exercises becomes apparent.⁴ What one is offered in them is a means of intellectual and ethical re-orientation. Similarly, engagement with the texts of liberation theology offers an understanding of God from within a commitment to the poor and marginalised and a means of thinking afresh about reality or the ways in which we articulate it to one another. Therein lies their peculiar power. It is not so much their fascinating ideas (many may be paralleled in other areas of contemporary intellectual enquiry) or the originality of the information they convey (there are many text books about the Third World which give a fuller picture of life in the various countries in which the liberation theologians are writing). Rather, it is the process of wrestling with texts like these which explicitly start from a situation of oppression and vulnerability and in that situation discovering

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God that makes liberation theology peculiarly powerful. Because of the deep-rooted connection of this theology with particular contexts and experiences, liberation theology presents peculiar problems for those who seek to write *about* it. A proper understanding of it demands something more than an intellectual appreciation alone. Understanding involves more than the exercise of the mind and includes the move from a previous position of detachment, to be open to that transformation of perspective which comes, either at the margins, or in social estrangement. Thereby one may be enabled to 'see the Kingdom of God'.⁵

Liberation theology and the Church

Liberation theology has emerged within the wider context of Catholic social teaching and, in particular, the significant development of Roman Catholic theology based on the Second Vatican Council, and the encyclicals associated with it. The decisions taken by the Latin American bishops at their epoch-making meeting at Medellín, affirmed at Puebla, with the explicit commitment to take a 'preferential option for the poor'⁶ and reaffirmed at the most recent conference of Latin American bishops at Santo Domingo,⁷ have offered a foundation for those Christians committed to the betterment of the poor enabling them to see their task as an integral part of the Church's vocation to evangelisation. Working within the parameters of international and national episcopal decisions, exponents of the theology of liberation respond to the 'reality' which confronts millions: poverty, appalling living conditions, malnutrition, inadequate health care, contrasting with the affluence not only of the 'North', but, even more glaring still, the wealth and affluence of the wealthy elites of Latin American cities.

In the Roman Catholic Church the power of diocesan bishops is such that those attempting to get the grassroots movement off the ground where there is no episcopal support have found the going very tough indeed, even though the social conditions of large numbers of people may be every bit as bad as in other dioceses where the theology has taken root. Equally, in those dioceses where the diocesan bishop is supportive, that power can be used to push a diocese in a progressive direction far more quickly than would be possible in the Protestant churches.⁸ The particular circumstances of the Church in Brazil have offered a context for the development of liberation theology which has been unique in Latin America (though there has been a trend to less progressive positions by the Brazilian Bishops' Conference in recent years and the mushrooming of Protestant churches⁹). While it may be possible to detect an apparent similarity of concern and

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expression in theology which has a liberationist perspective, we need to take care that we avoid assuming that community of interest necessarily means that we can easily distil the different perspectives and emphases, whether of Latin American theologians¹⁰ linked with liberation theology, or, of theologians in Asia, Africa and those representing minority groups in the 'North'. While it is usual to speak of Latin America as the starting-place of liberation theology, in fact there have been different emphases in the different countries, as related movements have emerged in other parts of the world.

The base ecclesial communities

Liberation theology as it has developed has become rooted in the Basic Christian Communities or base ecclesial communities (the CEBs). The base communities are a significant component of the contemporary political as well as ecclesiastical scene, particularly in Brazil, where it is difficult to drive a wedge between the so-called 'popular church' with more tenuous links to bishops and priests and mainstream Catholicism. Certainly there are tensions, particularly in those dioceses where there is less sympathy towards the CEBs. But Brazilian Catholicism, for example, is characterised by a widespread acceptance of the CEBs and their central role in being the church in contemporary Brazil, a fact which is evident from the episcopal support of the regular CEBs' assembly. An ecclesial agenda is being set for the interpretative enterprise which is firmly based in the struggles of millions for recognition and justice.

A constant refrain of all the different approaches which are grouped together under liberation theology is that the perspective of the poor and the marginalised offers another story, an alternative to that told by the wielders of economic power whose story becomes the 'normal' account. Its encouragement of the study of popular religion, whether Christian, Indian or Afro-American, is part of its project to enable the story of the 'little people' to be heard. In addition, it has championed the recovery of the religion of those within the Christian tradition who resisted the practice of conquest and despoliation, like Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio Valdivieso, whose ministry takes its part alongside those whom the conquerors would prefer to forget. It is part of the task suggested in Walter Benjamin's words: 'In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.'¹¹

Oppressed persons have become the particular means whereby the divine perspective on human existence is offered. They are the 'little ones' who

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are vouchsafed a peculiar insight into the identity of the divine wisdom: 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have kept these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babes' (Matt. 11.25). The oppressed call into question assumptions about the character of human relationships, both local and international, in a suffering and unjust world.¹² What some liberation theologians are claiming is that the vantage point of the poor is particularly, and especially, the vantage point of the crucified God and can act as a criterion for theological reflection, biblical exegesis, and the life of the Church. The poor are the means whereby the Church can learn to discern the truth, direction and content of its mission, and they can assure the Church of being the place where the Lord is to be found.¹³

The Bible and liberation theology

Among grassroots groups the Bible has become a catalyst for the exploration of pressing contemporary issues relevant to the community and offers a language so that the voice of the voiceless may be heard. The biblical tradition becomes a catalyst for new thought and action related to the circumstances of everyday commitments. In the CEBs there is an immediacy in the way in which the text is used because resonances are found with the experience set out in the stories of biblical characters which seems remote from the world of most people in the more affluent Europe and North America. The Bible offers a means by which the present difficulties can be shown to be surmountable in the life of faith and community commitment. To enable the poor to read the Bible has involved a programme of education about the contents of the biblical material, so that it can be a resource for thousands who are illiterate. In such programmes full recognition is taken of the value of the experience of life.¹⁴ It can be a form of Bible study which goes straight to the text with no concern to ask questions about its original historical context.¹⁵ Such a reading of the text can serve to encourage faith and confidence in the individual's relationship with his/her Lord. The community setting means an avoidance of a narrowly individualist 'religious' reading. The approach to Bible reading in the CEBs has many similarities with Protestant forms of Bible study which are increasingly prevalent in Latin America. Indeed, one should not ignore the enormous inroads into Latin American Catholicism of evangelical Christianity with its similar 'direct' way of reading the Bible, though with less overt political content to the interpretation.

As we have seen, the experience of poverty and oppression (often termed 'life' or 'reality') is as important a text as the text of Scripture itself. It

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represents another text to be studied alongside that contained between the covers of the Bible. God's word is to be found in the dialectic between the literary memory of the people of God and the continuing story to be discerned in the contemporary world, particularly among those people with whom God has chosen to be identified. This twofold aspect is well brought out by Carlos Mesters:

... the emphasis is not placed on the text's meaning in itself but rather on the meaning the text has for the people reading it. At the start the people tend to draw any and every sort of meaning, however well or ill founded, from the text ... the common people are also eliminating the alleged 'neutrality' of scholarly exegesis ... the common people are putting the Bible in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be. They are putting it in second place. Life takes first place! In so doing, the people are showing us the enormous importance of the Bible, and at the same time, its relative value – relative to life.¹⁶

This biblical study may seem to be an example of the dangerous reading into the text of the readers' own prejudices. But Karl Barth reminds us of the inevitability that some kind of reading into the text is always at work in any biblical interpretation as we seek to make sense of the meaning of the words, when he writes 'Why should parallels drawn from the ancient world be of more value for our understanding of the epistle than the situation in which we ourselves actually are and to which we can therefore bear witness?'¹⁷ This neatly encapsulates the way of reading Scripture in the CEBs and represents the difference between so much mainstream contemporary biblical exegesis and a liberationist approach.

Responses to liberation theology

In the course of the development of Latin American theology which has followed in the footsteps of Gutiérrez's pioneering study of the early 1970s, there has been a development and response to criticisms that have been made. There has been a greater appreciation of gender and race alongside poverty as factors which need to be taken into account in any liberation theology. Also the Roman Catholic representatives of the liberationist perspective have been in dialogue with wider catholic theology and consider their work as in continuity, and in dialogue, with the Magisterium (teaching office) of the Church (often to the frustration of some of their Protestant colleagues). Of course, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has had significant differences of opinion over the years with certain Latin American

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theologians (not to mention also with some Brazilian cardinals and the Brazilian Bishops' Conference). Nevertheless many of the theological expositions, particularly as liberation theology has developed, have been consciously moulded within the Magisterium and its application within the successive conferences of the Latin American bishops and their regional conferences' decisions (in Latin America at Medellín and Puebla, reaffirmed substantially at Santo Domingo). It is this which, along with the experience of pastoral work and the peculiar insight and contribution of the poor, forms their response to questions about poverty.

The contributions of liberation theologians form a small part of a long debate within Christianity, both modern and ancient, about appropriate attitudes and responses to the poor and vulnerable and the Church's relations with the political powers. Liberation theology has emerged, in Roman Catholic circles at least, as applications of the Magisterium's emphasis on the preferential option for the poor, the insight vouchsafed to the poor 'to highlight aspects of the Word of God, the richness of which had not yet been fully grasped' (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith's Instruction 70), and the important contribution of the CEBs. Liberation theologians see themselves engaged in mediation between the poor and the Magisterium together with the appropriate 'secular' wisdom which contributes to theological reflection (*Gaudium et Spes* 62), though with a clear commitment to the poor rather than being neutral theological brokers.¹⁸

Assessment of liberation theology in the Roman Catholic Church has not been entirely negative. In contrast with the tone of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Libertatis Nuntius*, in a recent survey of biblical hermeneutics members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission¹⁹ include a more positive assessment of liberation theology. Among the criticisms of the Commission are the concentration on narrative and prophetic texts in liberation theology, which highlight situations of oppression and which inspire a praxis leading to social change. While admitting that exegesis cannot be neutral, they discern a danger that those engaged in liberation theology might be too one-sided, and find themselves engaged in social and political action which is not the main task of the exegete. The use of Marxist analysis of social reality as a frame of reference for reading the Bible is questioned, as is its emphasis on a hope for God's reign on earth 'to the detriment', as they put it, 'of the more transcendent dimensions of scriptural eschatology'.²⁰ Liberationist and feminist interpretations are both given the label 'contextual approaches' (as if interpretative approaches like the historical-critical method are not contextual, though, clearly, members of the Commission regard the historical method as having a privileged position in biblical hermeneutics).

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The response to liberation theology in the academies of Europe has been mixed. On the one hand there is evidence of the considerable influence of the importance of experience and context in theological reflection in seminary training, but mainstream biblical exegesis and dogmatics have been largely unaffected by a liberationist perspective. Although there is an admiration of 'Southern' theologians on the part of 'Northern' colleagues, there has been a certain wariness about liberation theology in the 'North'. Liberation theology's overt commitment and practical involvement can make it an obvious target for criticism from those who favour a more detached and dispassionate form of theological reflection. Liberation theologians seem to some to bypass the careful questioning and necessary provisionality of much of our interpretation. Liberation theologians insist that all theology is inevitably contextual and conditioned by the environment and activity in which the theologians are themselves engaged, even if they would want to assert the existence of a universal demand to opt for the poor. 'Northern' theologians have been somewhat coy about their own interpretative interests, social and economic as well as ideological, however. The overtly committed reading from liberation theologians at least has the merit of being more clear about where they are approaching the text from and posing a challenge to those of us who are more ideologically complacent. The apparent absence of partiality in 'Northern' academic readings should not lead us to suppose that there may be no interest at stake. All of us involved in mainstream academic theology need to examine our consciences and ask ourselves how far our theology breathes a spirit of detachment and objectivity. There will often be struggles in the academy but they will often be individualised and detached from the growing gap between rich and poor throughout the world. We in the 'North' need to learn to be part of a community of interpretation and action in a Church committed to the poor where the concerns of the academy contribute to the challenge to the priorities of an increasingly individualistic age lacking global concern. There is nothing new in what is expected of both the Church and theology. Frequently despite itself, the Christian Church has for two thousand years managed to keep alive an antidote to that unfettered individualism which seeks to fragment and destroy.

Critics often find the liberationist agenda inapplicable to the complex democracies of the 'the North', or, while accepting the challenge that liberation theologians pose, indicate that there are other issues which 'Northern' theologians find pressing in their context.²¹ Others find the theological approach too simplistic or too much infected with a philosophy alien to Christianity. The emphasis on the experience of the everyday world and its injustices as an essential part of the knowledge of God is a recurrent theme