

Resistance and reconstruction

by [J. Matthew Ashley](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology, edited by Christopher Rowland

In San Salvador in the early morning hours of November 16, 1989, soldiers of the elite, U.S.-trained and equipped Atlacatl Battalion crept onto the campus of the University of Central America and assassinated six Jesuits, including the university's philosopher-president, Ignacio Ellacuría. Instructed to leave no witnesses, they also brutally murdered two women: Elba Ramos, who cooked for the Jesuits, and her daughter, Celina. This crime, coming at the end of a decade of similar and worse atrocities, finally compelled the U.S. government to pressure the Salvadoran government and military to come to the peace table. The resultant peace is scarred by the enduring poverty that brought the war in the first place, and by the violence all too commonplace in countries where the "cold war" was fought—countries still awash in weapons.

This story encapsulates many of the complexities and ambiguities faced by any guide to liberation theology. It illustrates that the stories of liberation theology are local and often intensely personal. They are concerned with living a faith threatened by the inhuman forces released by the globalization of information, technology, economies and violence. Consequently, as Christopher Rowland states in his introduction, "one first of all does liberation theology, rather than learns about it." This raises great difficulties for those who appreciate or strive to evaluate this theology "from the outside." It also raises the question of who the subject of a work on liberation theology should be. Is it the story of intellectuals and administrators like Ellacuría, or of poor men and women like Elba and Celina Ramos, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time? Is its currency and success to be evaluated by its presence in books and on university campuses or seminaries? By the response of church leaders? Or does it turn on the faith, hope and love of those countless and often anonymous persons, like the two women, whom Ellacuría so tellingly named "the crucified peoples," "Yahweh's suffering servant today"?

Books on the subject tend to identify liberation theology with its most prominent proponents, usually academics. Yet liberation theology simply cannot be understood

without an appreciation of how these proponents struggle to hold themselves accountable first and foremost to the poor they serve. Liberation theology's development has been driven not just by the genesis and clash of concepts, the back and forth of academic argument, but by the clash of ecclesial visions and superpowers, and the simple struggle to survive.

This book's opening essay by Gustavo Gutiérrez and its central section, where it captures this complexity, are its most successful parts. A fine essay by Andrew Dawson on the birth and development of small Christian communities in Brazil emphasizes that they did not grow out of an ecclesiology derived elsewhere. Rather, they resulted from an often ad hoc process in which the spiritual and physical needs of the poor, the teachings of Vatican II, the intentions of the Brazilian hierarchy (running both for and against the emerging agenda of liberation theology), the brutal repression perpetrated by Brazilian dictators, and the work of academics all played a part.

Gerald West's essay takes up the crucial problem of how the Bible can belong to and inspire believers and theologians in an age in which scripture scholars claim that they alone understand its "true" interpretation. He details the struggle to find a methodology which respects both the expertise of the trained scripture scholar and the insights of the ordinary reader, who is laboring not just to understand the text but to en flesh it. Finally, Charles Villa-Vicencio takes up the new work of making liberation theology not just a theology of resistance but of reconstruction in places like South Africa and El Salvador, where civil war has ended but the crushing burdens of building a more humane society continue-in a new world order with less and less compassion or creative insight for the plight of the poor.

These essays present liberation theology as a theology that has come of age and that may have become less attractive to journalists because it has taken up the often unglamorous work of extending a core paradigm shift into the whole discipline. Part of this difficult work, particularly as it deals with economics, must be interdisciplinary. As Valpy Fitzgerald and Villa-Vicencio point out, liberation theologians (and liberation economists?) must move beyond general indictments of globalization and neoliberalism to the development of specific analyses and proposals for action, both in micro- and macroeconomics. It will continue to be important to appropriate more and more of the Christian tradition, as both Denys Turner and Oliver O'Donovan urge.

Unfortunately, Turner and O'Donovan's essays evince the continuing ignorance of liberation theology on the part of European and North American theologians. It takes one's breath away to read a scholar of Turner's stature write that liberation theology is "strangely silent on issues of theodicy." One of Gustavo Gutiérrez's acknowledged masterpiece is *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Turner clearly knows his Marx, and he makes a compelling case that until Christian theology recovers the insights of the apophatic tradition, with its exacting strictures on the ways we too easily talk about God, it will be justly subject to critiques like Marx's. But Gutiérrez has already explored this terrain. As early as 1982, in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, he was proposing an innovative cross-fertilization between the Exodus narrative, the experience of the poor in Latin America, and the apophaticism of John of the Cross.

O'Donovan worries that liberation theology is so trapped by its reliance on ideology critique that it cannot produce either the content or even the ground on which to make authoritative positive proposals for the future. He seems either unaware of or unwilling to grapple with Gutiérrez's consistent grounding of the authority of a Christian vision for the future not in ideology critique or economic analyses, but in praise, contemplation and eucharistic celebration.

In sum, this book both details and at certain points instantiates the embattled place that liberation theology continues to hold today. Much of the church has heeded its clear warning that Christianity cannot continue (in Jon Sobrino's words) to talk about cross and resurrection while ignoring the world's crucified peoples and their need for resurrection. Many of its central terms (like "the preferential option for the poor") have become part of the contemporary theological lexicon. This genie cannot be put back in the bottle. Yet the profundity with which liberation theologians have worked out this warning and deployed its terminology continues to be misunderstood and distrusted by too many ecclesial authorities (as Peter Hebblethwaite's essay recounts), and trivialized and ignored by too many academics.

Finally, the story of liberation theology is the story of men and women like Elba and Celina Ramos; it is about the way that hope in the resurrection is breaking out, especially now, in the lives of the world's crucified peoples. As long as this hope, nourished by the Holy Spirit, resides in the hearts of the world's poor, there will be theologians who attempt to give an account of that hope. Perhaps this book does the most that any text about liberation theology can do: it invites us to consider what it would mean to have that hope—both for the poor and for all of us.