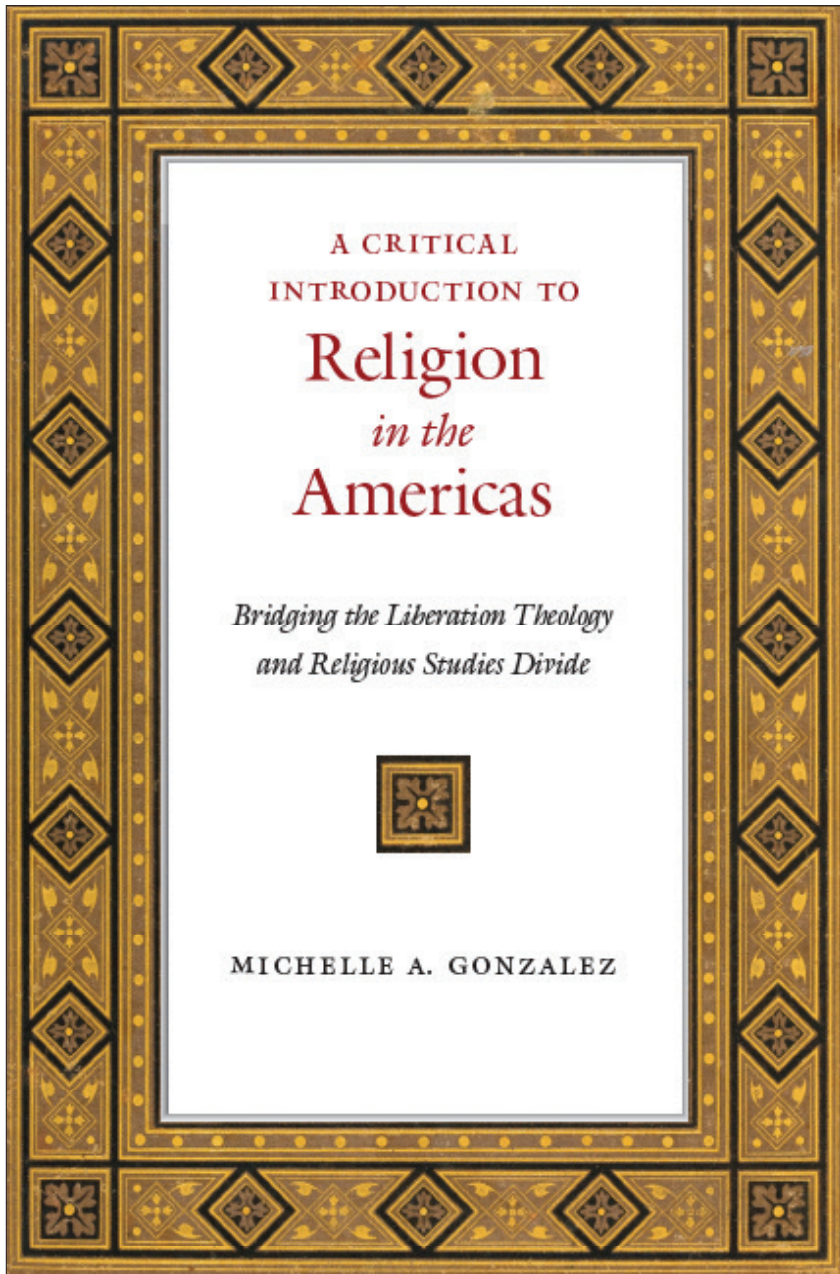


A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION IN THE AMERICAS

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



A Critical Introduction to Religion in the Americas argues that we cannot understand religion in the Americas without understanding its marginalized communities. Despite frequently voiced doubts among religious studies scholars, it makes the case that theology, and particularly liberation theology, is still useful, but it must be reframed to attend to the ways in which religion is actually experienced on the ground. That is, a liberation theology that assumes a need to work on behalf of the poor can seem out of touch with a population experiencing huge Pentecostal and Charismatic growth, where the focus is not on inequality or social action but on individual relationships with the divine.

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PAPER

SUMMARY

By drawing on a combination of historical and ethnographic sources, this volume provides a basic introduction to the study of religion and theology in the Latino/a, Black, and Latin American contexts, and then shows how theology can be reframed to better speak to the concerns of both religious studies and the real people the theologians' work is meant to represent. Informed by the dialogue partners explored throughout the text, this volume presents a hemispheric approach to discussing lived religious movements. While not dismissive of liberation theologies, this approach is critical of their past and offers 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 the liberation theologies of today.

The introduction sets the stage for the major themes discussed in the book, which include:

- Defining Liberation Theology within the contemporary academy
- Examining the development of the field of religious studies and its relationship with theology
- Introducing the lived religion approach to the study of religion
- Discussing the impact of claims that liberation theology is marginalized and irrelevant in the current academy.

SUMMARY

Academic liberation theology, admittedly, has become increasingly detached from the everyday lives of ecclesial Christians. In addition, the explosion of Pentecostalism in Central and South America and the Caribbean offers an alternative ecclesial model contrary to the Church of the poor celebrated by liberation theologians that emphasizes political and social engagement. Nonetheless, the notion that the era of liberation theology is past and its effectiveness undermined is untrue. Such critiques emerge from a detached academy that is disconnected from the lives of grassroots communities within the Latin American Church. This chapter is threefold in structure. It begins with an overview of Latin American liberation theology, examining the ecclesial and academic milieus that led to its establishment. Second, it turns to critiques of Latin American liberation theology. Unlike the other two theological discourses studied in this volume, Latin American liberation theology has been attacked both academically and ecclesially with a fervor that is striking. The chapter concludes with the areas of tension among Latin American liberation theologians that are opportunities for the future growth of this discourse. Proclamations of the death of liberation theologies in general are unfortunate as they lead to a disregard for oppressed peoples and to their increasing marginalization in the contemporary context. Just because for some Latin American liberation theology has “failed” to transform the nature of the theological task – though it has in fact radically transformed theological discourse – does not mean that we can forget the concrete lives and struggles of those who are at the center of this theological movement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How did the ecclesial and academic climates of the 1960s shape the birth and growth of Latin American liberation theologies?
2. What are some of the major critiques of Latin American liberation theology?
3. What role has popular religion played within Latin American liberation theology?
4. Define the poor and their role in Latin American liberation theology.
5. Do religious pluralism and Christian pluralism pose distinctive challenges to liberation theologies today?
6. Ultimately, are liberation theologians in Latin America saying something about the method of theology or the nature of God or both?

SUMMARY

Black liberation theologians argue that, for centuries, religion has been used to legitimize discrimination in the United States. In their early years, black liberation theologians argued that the African American response to this was a refusal to accept this interpretation of Christianity. Slaves transformed the religion imposed upon them into a liberative Christianity. The religion of the slave master became the religion of the slaves, where the Exodus account of the Hebrew liberation from Egyptian slavery became paradigmatic for black liberation theologians' theistic claims about the nature of God. Black theologians have historically grounded such claims through studies of the spirituals, slave narratives, and slave religion. They understand the collectivity of black Protestant churches, categorized by scholars as the Black Church, as embodying this liberationist impulse. In recent years this depiction of black Christianity has been nuanced. Scholars of African American religion have challenged these simplistic claims about the historical religion of slaves and the more recent history of the Black Church.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How do we define black religion? Should it be defined exclusively as African-American religion?
2. Does the inclusion of non-Christian religions challenge the construction of black religion within black liberation theologies?
3. How does the intended audience of black theology impact its methodology and tone?
4. What is the difference between black theology and African American religious studies?
5. How do future directions in black theology respond to some of the challenges explored in this chapter?

SUMMARY

Whether or not Latino/a theologians describe themselves as liberation theologians, and therefore their collective body of work as liberationist, is a matter of debate. This is a fundamental question this chapter will explore, for it raises the broader issue of what defines theology as liberationist. Is it the self-proclamation by the author, or is it the theological and social commitments found in his or her work? Or is it the theological conversation partners that the author engages? These are core questions that challenge the very nature of liberation theology and how these scholars understand “allies” or coalitional partners. This chapter focuses on several questions regarding the nature, scope, and audience of Latino/a theology. While Latino/a theologians embody significant diversity in their approaches, they nonetheless write about the existence of a collective Latino/a theology based on their shared emphasis on the Christian religious experiences of Latino/a peoples in the United States. Similarly, this understanding is based on a sense of shared scholarship. While Latino/a theologians have a shared sense of collective identity, the role of liberation theology in their writings is contested.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Is Latino/a Theology a Liberation theology? Can a theologian be considered a liberationist based on her or his subject of study?
2. How does Latino/a theology's public shape its methodology and character?
3. Who are the subjects of Latino/a theology and how do they influence its voice?
4. How can Latino/a theology's methodology expand through engaging ethnographic studies as a conversation partner?
5. Will the future of Latino/a theology remain tied to its author or its subject matter?

SUMMARY

The study of African Diaspora religions has methodological and theological implications. Attention to African Diaspora religions decenters the overwhelming predominance of Christianity in liberationist discourses. The serious consideration of African Diaspora religions, as well as other non-Christian religions in the Americas, demonstrates that liberation theologians need to widen their religious scope in order to fully understand and write about the religion of the marginalized communities they claim to represent. The methodologies employed to study African Diaspora religions broaden liberation theologians' conversation partners. At the same time, the study of African Diaspora religion would benefit from an engagement with theology, something that rarely occurs in the field. This is a dialogue that would mutually enrich both fields of study. It would force scholars of distinctive religious traditions to confront the presuppositions contained in the theological worldviews of the religions they study. This dialogue also opens the door for a more porous understanding of religious identity throughout the Americas.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are the implications of decentering Christianity within the study of religion in the Americas?
2. How do ethnography, anthropology, and the arts shape the study of African Diaspora religions?
3. Where do we find intersections between Christianity and African traditional religions?
4. How could a theological voice contribute to the study of African Diaspora religions?
5. Are there liberationist elements to African Diaspora religions?

SUMMARY

This concluding chapter explores the ongoing, often tense relationship between religious studies and theology in light of the future of the study of religion. By addressing one path in that dialogue, between liberation theologies and religious studies, a greater path can hopefully be opened to transform the manner in which the U.S. academy explores the study of religion in the Americas, with particular attention to the marginalized and disenfranchised. The first section of this chapter examines current inroads of dialogue between liberation theologians and scholars of religion in other fields. In the second, the emphasis turns to the manner in which these dialogues challenge the theological and identity constructions in liberation theologies. This section is informed by the previous chapter's discussion of African Diaspora religions in light of liberation theologies in the Americas. The third and final section offers a constructive proposal for reconceptualizing how the U.S. academy approaches the study of religion in the Americas.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are some particular themes or religious expressions that could be a starting point for dialogue between theology and religious studies?
2. How does the study of marginalized communities challenge constructions of national identity and religious identity?
3. What would it mean to take a hemispheric approach to the study of religion?

SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

1. Trace the history of grassroots religious movements in Latin America and how they eventually informed academic liberation theology.
2. Study the impact of religion on the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.
3. Investigate the manner in which African Diaspora religion, such as Vodou and Santería, are depicted in the media and on the internet.
4. Research a Latino/a popular devotion, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe or Santa Muerte, and its impact on Latino/a popular religion.
5. Explore Charismatic Catholicism and Pentecostalism and the manner in which they challenge liberationist constructions of Christian identity in the Americas.