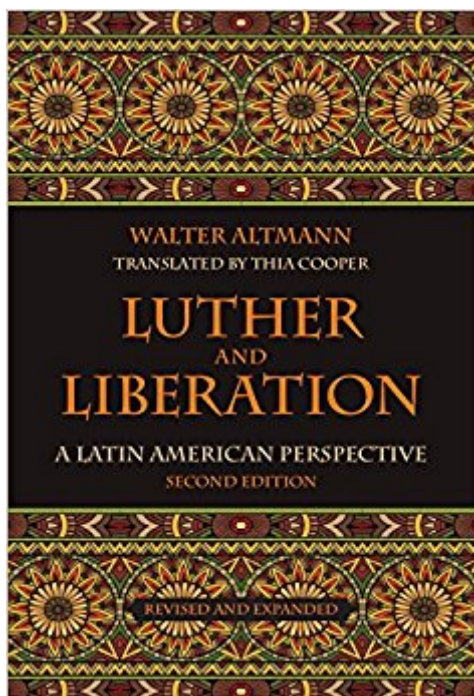


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Luther And Liberation: A Latin American Perspective



Synopsis

With the approach of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's inauguration of the Protestant Reformation and the burgeoning dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans opened under Pope Francis, this new edition of Walter Altmann's *Luther and Liberation* is timely and relevant. *Luther and Liberation* recovers the liberating and revolutionary impact of Luther's theology, read afresh from the perspective of the Latin American context. Altmann provides a much-needed reassessment of Luther's significance today through a direct engagement of Luther's historical situation with an eye keenly situated on the deeply contextual situation of the contemporary reader, giving a localized reading from the author's own experience in Latin America. The work examines with fresh vigor Luther's central theological commitments, such as his doctrine of God, Christology, justification, hermeneutics, and ecclesiology, and his forays into economics, politics, education, violence, and war. This new edition greatly expands the original text with fresh scholarship and updated sources, footnotes, and bibliography, and contains several additional new chapters on Luther's doctrine of God, theology of the sacraments, his controversial perspective on the Jews, and a new comparative account with the Latin American liberation theology tradition.

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Customer Reviews

"Jesus takes our place, so we can occupy his" (#OccupyJesus) Altmann's classic, based on lectures he delivered in Buenos Aires in 1983 commemorating the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, has now been revised and expanded in preparation for 2017 and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It could equally be sub-titled, "Reading Luther with clarity." Whereas non-liberation oriented works on Martin Luther will unfortunately serve as placeholders in introductory courses on Luther and the Reformation, the real strength of Altmann's approach is to present Luther's robust theology less flattened by European and Western perspectives. Let's hope Altmann's book becomes the standard reference work for Luther in seminary and college classes. The two longest sections of this book are devoted, first, to doing theology in a new interpretive key, and then conducting exercises on Luther's ethical positioning in light of this new interpretive key. Altmann book-ends these two long chapters with an opening chapter offering an overview of Luther's theology and work, and a concluding chapter on Luther's legacy, with a special eye toward the reception of Luther in Latin American liberation theology. Altmann earns his credibility throughout this book, with his close attention to Luther's writings, and broad awareness of Luther's historical context, coupled with a careful reading of his own Latin American context. He also earns credibility by asking excellent, poignant questions, like Is thinking about Luther a waste of time? An enormous effort has been made, beginning in the 19th century with the publication of the Weimar edition of Luther's works, then continuing with the Luther Renaissance led by Karl Holl, to know Luther well enough to answer the question, What did Luther really want? But Altmann, operating out of the hermeneutics of liberation, knows this means we need to also ask an additional question, And us, in the end, what do we want? (326). In practice, this means Altmann will need to contend with the traditional loci of Luther studies--justification by faith, evangelical freedom, the cross, vocation, Scripture, Church, sacraments, kingdoms theology. But Altmann at each locus does a two step analysis, first carefully spelling out with remarkable clarity why Luther's theology was so radical in his own day, then articulating how shifts in context means we can approach that same locus in liberation perspective now in our day. He writes, "Being Lutheran, therefore is not something that is acquired once and then preserved, but it is something that must be obtained each moment, in renewed faithfulness to the gospel. It is a permanent task. Therein lies the truly problematic aspect of the confessional fixation of Lutheranism, even in the sense of a particular church (Lutheran),

because there it is supposed to be possible to fix and thus preserve, with the person of Luther, the contingent and instrumental identity of the Lutheran cause. In any case, a process so dubious came, without doubt, to block to a large extent the 'free course of the gospel,' preparing the path for what Steck calls the 'very problematic road from Luther to Lutheranism' (336). So, for example, there has been a transition in what reform means, and the context for reform, from Luther's era to our own. Reform of the Church, in our political, social, and economic systems, is a peripheral concern. People do not hope for liberation from the Church. Instead, people look for liberation from the political, economic, and social system that discriminates, marginalizes, and deals death. Altmann hones in on what is liberative in Luther's theology: "try this grace, live by this faith, and you also will find forms of life non-compliant with poverty, as well as modes of action that open the path to a dignified life in solidarity" (92). Altmann repeatedly flips orthodox, confessional approaches to Luther that have re-asserted Lutheran theology as a tool of the hierarchy. He notes, we can "register what was revolutionary in Luther's ecclesiology; in it we find a communitarian emphasis, the liberation from institutional tutelage, the understanding of the ecclesial structure as reformable and for service, the preference for the weak, the mark of the cross, and primacy of the word of God... on the other hand, the necessary liberation from dominant political tutelage only happened in assay" (141). Playing the notes of traditional Lutheran studies--promise, protest, gospel--Altmann turns them in the direction of liberative practice, inspiring those who live by faith not to submit or be passive, but to get involved, protest, live new life. He believes involvement in this critical moment is important especially through popular organizations (think here of #blacklivesmatter), joint action groups (worker justice centers), unions, and parties organized at the grassroots. Our current system of injustices will be overcome most effectively when Christians of all kinds are encouraged to participate in these, and especially when the voice of the poor is organized to speak with its own voice, having first heard the address of God's love. This is because "the addressees par excellence of God's love are sinners, the needy, suffering people, the marginalized, the weak, the sick, in sum, 'the poor'" (35). If we want to comprehend Luther's concept of vocation for today, in light of Latin American liberation theology, we should place it in proximity to identification with the cross, understanding justification by faith as the very freedom to take up the cross. "This means: to place 'vocation' and the 'holiness' of the secular profession into a broader context, where today history is made, that is, in the context of the social organizations and movements" (349). This kind of reading of Luther, always with an eye both to what Luther wanted in his context, and what we want in ours, is the way to proceed on the path Luther started without rigidly attempting to repeat it. "It is essential for preachers to serve as the voice of God's judgment [of earthly rulers]. In this point, Luther moved

to criticize the classes of preachers who avoid this mission. He distinguished, between these, three types. First, there are the infidels and lazy ones, who through convenience and fear of reprisals prefer to omit this. In second place, there are the sycophants, who for their own interests and connivance support the political arbitrary actions [of oppressing the people]. Finally, there are the slanderers, those who prefer to criticize privately, sneakily, but do not have the courage to make it public in worship. Against all these, Luther contrasted the true preacher, who does not shirk the task of critiquing injustice and oppression, does not defend their own interests, and does not bend out of fear of the personal consequences of persecution that they may come to suffer... Truly, one must note: it is impossible to legitimately use Luther to argue for the autonomy of the political and the Church omitting itself from politics, restricting itself to the so-called spiritual realm. We conclude that this dualistic view of the so-called 'doctrine of the two kingdoms,' separating gospel and politics, church and state, cannot be legitimately attributed to Luther." (200)"It is significant that Luther himself could open cracks in the construction of the first monolithic view of his schema of authority and obedience. There remains a theological task for us: to proceed on this path and deepen these perspectives, in a sense of active solidarity, centered on achieving justice and peace. We are Christian people who live in different times and contexts, and with a new awareness of the prevailing social and political structures in the world today. It is not for us to repeat Luther's words, but in a radical critical freedom, commit ourselves to a creative reconstruction of his basic discoveries and perspectives" (302). This review forthcoming in *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry*.

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