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Introduction

Miguel H. Diaz

Loyola University Chicago, mdiaz13@luc.edu

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INTRODUCTION

A Preferential Option for Culture

Miguel H. Díaz

Ever since Latino/a theology emerged in the early 1970s, Latino/a theologians in the United States have been reflecting on the faith of our people, as practiced and communicated from one generation to another. At the 1995 annual meeting of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS) in New York I raised the following theological question: “What would Catholic systematics look like if it were done *latinamente*?” That question led to the publication of *From the Heart of Our People* (Orbis, 1999). That volume came about as a result of a *teología en conjunto*, a theological methodology well known within Latino/a circles in which Latino/a theologians engage one another in a communal dialogue to explore issues of faith in relationship to their ordinary and daily life experiences (*lo cotidiano*). Reflecting on the faith of Latino/a communities, Orlando O. Espín and I coined the expression “the preferential option for culture” and argued that this option characterizes Latino/a theology.

To be sure, culture does not exist in the abstract; it is a dynamic, complex, historical, and always embodied reality. Oftentimes, when we think of culture, we think of culturally situated persons and their distinct cultural and hybrid identities. As

Kathryn Tanner proposes, cultural identity is “a hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures.”¹ Human experiences related to religion, socioeconomic conditions, political affiliations, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and immigration status, to name but a few, often provide the threads that weave together our cultural identities. In our use of the expression “the preferential option for culture” in this volume we more often than not refer to concrete Latino/a persons and the web of human experiences that have shaped their humanity. It is in this way of being human, *latinamente*, in all of its dynamism, fluidity, and complexity, that Latinos/as encounter the life-giving presence of God in history.

On March 26, 2015, I invited a number of prominent voices in Latino/a theology to come to Loyola University Chicago and engage in critical conversation with His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi.² This encounter turned out to be an unprecedented moment in the development of Latino/a theologies marked by mutual respect, friendship, and an exchange of ideas with a prominent voice in the Roman Curia. Cardinal Ravasi is the president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, and widely known as a prolific writer on the Bible and biblical languages. He received international acclaim for his initiative “The Court of the Gentiles.” Through this initiative, he has engaged numerous publics in efforts to relate Christian faith with the cultural challenges of our time. This volume reflects the spirit of his groundbreaking initiative to build bridges of understanding among peoples and communities. It seeks a cultural encounter between Christian faith and the

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: An Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 57–58.

² For a summary of the conference and the presenters, see Carmen Nanko-Fernández, “Latin@ Theology and the Preferential Option for Culture,” *America* (April 10, 2015), <https://www.americamagazine.org/voices/carmen-nanko-fernandez>.

salient human experiences that map Latino/a communities in the United States.

Rooted in the faith of a people, this volume rethinks theological issues *latinamente* for the sake of contributing to the ongoing development of the Christian theological tradition. It places Latino/a theology at the service of the struggle, *la lucha*, to uphold the dignity and fundamental human rights of all the people of God, especially the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. Pursuant to this objective, this volume presents theological perspectives that disrupt, as well as envision anew, cartographies of Christian theological traditions.

As the chapters make evident, Latino/a theology is not a monolithic discipline. Grammatically speaking, theology can always be likened more to a verb than a noun. Latino/a theology certainly reflects this dynamic nature of theology with respect to its theoretical diversity and praxis-oriented methodologies. Thus, while the theological reflections that follow express theology done *latinamente*, the theologians in this volume have unleashed their theological creativity with their own distinctive situated stances, sources, and methodologies. Expressing a sense of oneness through diversity, the authors map their ideas from particular places and tap into sources that constitute the rich landscape of Hispanic Catholicism. Notwithstanding the richness of this theological cartography, the authors remain committed to doing the kind of theology that emerges *from* and speaks *to* the faith of our people.

Chapter 1 advances some claims related to cultural mediations of the word of God as experienced and interpreted from Latinx perspectives. After focusing on crossing encounters in the Gospel of Mark that are life-giving for Jesus' interlocutors, my chapter explores the *Nican Mopohua* and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe as another example of the word becoming culture. These initial reflections open the door to further consideration of how this word

continues to assume a cultural face resonant with the particularities of peoples, especially those who are marginalized.

Chapter 2 entertains the theme of crossing borders and boundaries from biblical theological perspectives. Jean-Pierre Ruiz creatively rethinks the relationship between exegesis and eisegesis, proposing a bidirectional conversation with Ruth 1:16–17 over issues of identity, connecting, and belonging. His collaborative, connected, and committed strategy of interpretation engages with the world *of* the biblical text and *beyond* the text to include Ruth's twenty-first-century immigrant and refugee *comadres*. The chapter demonstrates the value of “engaging” biblical texts in order to make a difference, hermeneutically and ethically speaking, with respect to contemporary human experiences. Surely, one cannot commend enough this kind of theological effort that seeks to make a difference in a world that Pope Francis has fittingly characterized as exhibiting the globalization of human indifference.

Chapter 3 reflects on the “preferential option for” within the context of privilege and the culture wars in the United States of America. María Teresa Dávila proposes a Latino/a cartographic turn that interrupts and decenters dominant individualistic anthropologies that too often result in violence, arguing instead for a communal anthropology capable of empowering an *option for* the poor, culture, creation. This option for others represents an epistemology and praxis that historicizes Christ's basic teaching to love our neighbors, especially those who are poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

In Chapter 4, Néstor Medina tackles the experience of *mestizaje*, historic and complex experiences of mixture (including biological, racial, and cultural), that has served as a *locus theologicus* for Latino/a theologies. Medina explores the multivalent and complex nature of *mestizaje* and demonstrates its anthropological value with respect to the acts of constituting and claiming human

identity. He argues for the theological relevance of *mestizaje*, especially with respect to relating human and divine life as it pertains to Christ and issues of human identity.

Chapter 5 concludes this volume, retrieving and turning to las *Cantigas de Santa María*, a thirteenth-century manuscript of poems of Marian devotion that includes the earliest portrayal of a bat and ball game in the Iberian Peninsula. Carmen Nanko-Fernández breaks new theological ground in her option for culture as she “plays” theologically on the margins of sport and theology. Her constructive theological interpretation of Cantiga 42 explores not only the good life that sport may foster, but more important, the interrelationship and fluidity that characterizes *lo popular* at the intersections of popular Catholicism and popular culture. “Playing” within and outside the fields that shape our daily Latin@ living (*lo cotidiano*) has ancient roots and sources too often neglected in contemporary constructive theologies.

This volume lifts up the distinct cultural experiences of Latinas/os as an act of resistance against human indifference and in defense of the human dignity of all persons. Pope Francis rightly observes that “theology must address conflicts: not only those that we experience within the Church, but also those that concern the world as a whole and those which are lived on the streets.”³ Echoing Thomas Aquinas’s central teaching that grace presupposes and builds upon nature, the pope asserts that “grace presupposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.”⁴ The authors in this volume have opted for the “streets”

³ Pope Francis, “Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina,” March 3, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, ¶115, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. On

as geographical places, past and present, where we presuppose the experience of grace and encounter with God. As Cardinal Ravasi makes clear in the prologue to this volume, because the Word has become Flesh, it is quite fitting to continue to search for this Word in human experiences and thereby speak not only of the past becoming the Word in history but also of the present and ethical challenges posed by this becoming within the particularity of diverse cultural experiences. Indeed, to do so is to take seriously the fact that God crossed over into our cultural experiences, so that we could cross over into God's world. Or simply put, the Word of God becomes flesh, so that the flesh can become Word.⁵

Aquinas, see “*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*,” *Summa Theologiae (ST)*, I, I, 8 ad 2.

⁵ See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “The Word Became Flesh and the Flesh Becomes Word: Notes toward a US Latino/a Theology of Revelation,” in *Building Bridges, Doing Justice: Constructing a Latino/a Ecumenical Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1970), 47–68.