2016

Hispanic "Teologia en Conjunto”

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Pervasive throughout postmodern theological perspectives is the contention that all theology is contextual. One's knowledge and understanding of God, the natural world, human beings and their interrelations is inescapably filtered through overlaid lenses of language, culture, history, socioeconomic status, religious traditions, and faith experience. "Teología en Conjunto" (literally, "in conjunction with," "conjoined to") expresses the conviction of a growing number of Latino theologians that this nexus of influencing contextual factors is not tangential to but rather formative of one's theology. The social, cultural or ethnic location of Latinos, consciously or unconsciously, shapes how they interpret life experiences as well as biblical history and doctrinal teaching. Endemic to this approach are three core aspects: (1) the recognition that Latino traditions and ethnicities are not homogenous but richly diverse (e.g., Cuban, Mexican American, Puerto Rican); (2) theology is best done not as an individualistic endeavor but rather from within a communal, collaborative faith context where diverse voices are acknowledged and taken seriously; and (3) an adequate theology must seek to be integrative, taking stock of individual and corporate, social and religious, physical and spiritual, academic and practical aspects.

Fundamental to Hispanic theology is the premise that a key source of theology is the actual praxis of faith. Doctrines are not best understood as abstract metaphysical assertions but as commitments forged out of lived experience within the faith community. Theology is more than merely stringing together a set of approved doctrines; it is the living expression of deep faith and fervent hopes. Latino life experience, marred historically by waves of victimization as objects of violent conquest and oppressive colonization, is viewed by Latinos as indelibly marked by continual struggle (Lucha) for survival amid brokenness and pain. Justo González refers to a "guilty innocence" of dominant cultures (i.e., Spanish conquistador ancestors pursuing their imperialist ambitions in the New World as well as American colonists snatching up occupied lands under the policy of "Manifest Destiny") in selectively forgetting unseemly episodes of oppressing native Hispanic populations (1990, 38–40). This perpetuates the myth of the present order built on a guiltless history and pure intentions in which all ethnicities, cultures, and races are operating on a level playing field in America. The toll such injustices have taken on the social, economic, and political dimensions of life for Latinos is severe: grinding poverty, inadequate health care, lack of adequate housing, blatant or covert racism, and "tracking" in the education system (catering to low expectations for Hispanic young persons by discouraging them from pursuing higher academic studies in preference to funneling them toward vocational programs instead). All of these repercussions contribute to imparting a sense of being "on the margins" of American society—oppressed, overlooked, invisible, marginalized, a "pilgrim people" often treated as second-class citizens. As Justo Gonzalez again observes, Hispanics living in the United States hover "between gratitude and anger" (Ibid., 41). They are grateful for the refuge America has offered that other countries have not. Yet at the same time Latinos also harbor anger. Having left their countries of origin for a new life in America, they nevertheless encounter rampant prejudice that hampers opportunities on numerous

fronts and leaves them feeling they are exiles in a land not truly theirs.

Significant Contributions to Christianity in the United States

Notwithstanding the sober realities of prejudice and inequity that confront Hispanics living in the United States, a strong undercurrent of hope pervades Teología en Conjunto. One expression of this is the opportunity Hispanics envision of being a "bridge people." Straddling the two worlds of Latin American heritage lived out as participants in American society, they are uniquely positioned to be a connecting point between the aspirations and struggles of people in the United States with corresponding dreams and struggles of people living in Latin America and the Third World—being "a means of communications between the rich, overaffluent, misdeveloped world of the North and the poor, exploited, misdeveloped world of the South" (Rodríguez & Martell-Otero, 1997, 17). Such sensitivity goes beyond mere empathy on the human plane. Theological categories of the Trinity, Christology, and the Holy Spirit are also invoked. The doctrine of the Trinity, far from being a mere metaphysical abstraction, is seen as an eminently practical expression of a God whose essence is mutual, sharing love—a "for others" God we are called to imitate. Likewise, the identity of Jesus as both human and divine is not viewed so much as an intellectual conundrum to be affirmed abstractly. Rather, Jesus is seen in practical terms as one who is both in solidarity with human beings as fellow sufferer and as an irrefutable sign that God is not remote from human suffering but rather truly suffers with us. The Holy Spirit enables the richly diverse communal life of believers as the Body of Christ to flourish as a diversity-amid-unity, mediates the transformation and healing of broken personhood, personalizes God's inclusive mercy toward the world, empowers people to confront the status quo forces of dehumanization, and guarantees that God's coming reign will ultimately overcome the present depersonalization of oppressed people.

A recurring theme in Hispanic experience is the concept of *mestizaje* (i.e., "the process through which two totally different peoples mix biologically and culturally so that a new people begins to emerge"—quoting Virgilio Elizondo in Rodríguez & Martell-Otero, 1997, 29). As an expression of the diversity of people and cultures in the world, it is seen as part of the goodness of God's creation. Yet in insulated, segregated societies which privilege some races and cultures above others, such a blend can be subtly or not so subtly regarded as a societal blight prompting prejudice and rejection. Viewing Jesus through the lens of a cultural, linguistic, racial mestizaje—a Jew from the lower class region of Galilee living under Roman rule whose life was marked by rejection—has enabled Hispanics to sense a kinship in solidarity with their experience of marginalization and rejection. As a liberator breaking down divisive walls and siding with those at the margins, Jesus models a new *mestizaje* of inclusion and hope, redefining the mestizo or mestiza not as an outsider, but a full participant in multicultural realities. "The goal of a new mestizaje is not a homogenization of humanity, but a unity of the human family symbolized in the table fellowship of Jesus . . . [creating] a new social space . . . a dual cultural citizenship . . . a mutual dialogue between differences" (Rodríguez & Martell-Otero, 1997, 30).

Another prominent concept is the call to "read the Bible in Spanish," an exhortation that implies more than translating the words into Spanish. More comprehensively, this involves four elements: (1) it should be read from the point of view of being exiles, as a political book dealing with issues of power and powerlessness addressing excluded members of a powerless group; (2) it should be read in community, not merely as a private message for individuals; (3) readers should attend to what "babes" (i.e., poor, simple, lower class persons) find in it; and (4) it should be read in the vocative, allowing it to address and interpret the readers as the Living Word of God for the present time.

For Hispanics, eschatological expectation fuels their hope not only for the future but also for change in the present. Justo Gonzalez' expression of the Church as "Mañana people" captures the sense of expectancy for the coming new reality of God's Reign, which is both a judgment on the present order and a summons to believe and live now in practical ways through the power of the Spirit the promised future of the new order. "It is a pilgrimage to a mañana made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, made present by the Spirit, and made certain by the power and the promise of none other than God Almighty! . . . we can live now as citizens of the coming city" (González, 1990, 166–167).

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