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**Ada María Isasi-Díaz**

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### ISASI-DÍAZ, ADA MARÍA

“Pioneer,” “mother of *mujerista* theology,” “brilliant scholar” are some of the words others have used to describe Ada María Isasi-Díaz. As self-described “Cuban activist theologian,” she is credited with creating a new theological category called *mujerista* theology, which both shares affinities with feminist and liberation theologies while also posing critiques that call for a more nuanced approach.

Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1943, one of eight children, her family fled Cuba after the civil war as political refugees and settled in Louisiana. Firmly devoted to her Catholic faith, she joined the Ursuline sisters as a novitiate and, later confessing to friends, would have escalated to pursuing the priesthood if not for the church’s ban on ordaining women. In 1967 her order sent her to Lima, Peru, where she served as a missionary for three years. Such an experience was life-transforming, opening up her eyes to formative principles that would shape her entire theological outlook. Theology was best learned and expressed not in the abstract but emanated out of ordinary daily life context (*lo cotidiano*) of persons struggling to survive. It was in the lived out experience of poor Hispanic women struggling for dignity amid oppressive conditions—whether in the form of gender discrimination, racial prejudice or economic disadvantage—that religious understandings and practices germinated. For poor Hispanic women, the Word of God had less to do with the Bible, or even Jesus, but rather with an abiding sense of God’s presence in solidarity with them in their daily struggles. Struggle (*La Lucha*) became a central theological theme in her thinking. Not surprisingly, one of her later books reflects this prime focus, aptly entitled *En La Lucha* (2004).

#### **Significant Contributions to Christianity in the United States**

The lessons learned on the mission field in Peru set in motion an increased attentiveness to the voice of grassroots Latinas in their yearning for self-determination in America. She noticed that feminist theology, while combating sexism, was seen by Hispanics as predominantly preoccupied with white, middle-class, Anglo women. She felt more affinity with liberation theologies, which targeted issues of economic oppression and classism. Yet issues of ethnic and racial prejudice remained largely unaddressed. A *cultural* theology, grounded in Christian understanding and practices that would speak meaningfully to poor Catholic Hispanic women was sorely needed. “Our struggle for liberation has to take into consideration how racism/ethnic prejudice, economic oppression, and sexism work together and reinforce each other” she wrote (Isasi-Díaz, 2004, 23). Out of such necessity *mujerista* theology was born.

To do *mujerista* theology is to embrace three concrete commitments: (1) *doing* as much thinking (reflective action) (2) from the *specific perspective* of day-to-day life, and (3) pursuing questions of ultimate meaning as a *communal process*. In her self-description, Isasi-Díaz captures the essence of *mujerista* vision:

I am a *mujerista* theologian, an activist theologian committed to the struggle for justice and peace . . . without liberation there is no justice and peace and that no one can be liberated at the expense of others or isolated from others. The struggle for liberation is the struggle to be self-determining within the context of community and in view of the common good, and to have the material conditions needed to develop into the fullness of our capacity. (Isasi-Díaz, 2004, x)

Three years into her retirement after a 21-year teaching career as professor of ethics and theology at Drew University, Ada María Isasi-Díaz died from cancer in 2012 at age 69.

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