



Latino/a Theologizing: Shared Reflections and Experiences

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Abstract “Latino/a Theologizing: Shared Reflections and Experiences” explores theological reflections that demonstrate how HANA churches, as communities of faith, theologize their collective identity and their shared experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Latino/a perspectives on theological discourse emerge from the particularity of the Latino/a context. Latino/a theology contains a variety of theological expressions and themes in correlation to the stories, experiences, and communities that form and impact each Latino/a theologian. As a result, Latino/a communities in the U.S. context provide a locality for a reconsideration, reformulation, and re-reading of traditional theological sources and propositions. This level of interaction weaves God’s transcendent and historically situated gospel with the communal and individual stories of Latinos/as in the U.S. context. For Latino/a theology, the who, where, and how of this task are equally important. The role of the Latina community and the narratives found within it continue to be the starting place for doing theology *latinamente* (“the Latina way”). This approach of a “lived theology” raises a variety of voices that are impossible to identify as a homogenous phenomenon.

Ultimately, the Latino/a community hosts shared experiences of *teología en conjunto*, marginality, and *mestizaje* and *mulatez*, which enrich and influence Latino/a theology and its ongoing task. A brief overview of these common themes and experiences will provide points of reference for the lived theology of the Latino/a Protestant church.

TEOLOGÍA EN CONJUNTO

Latino/a theology is nurtured, re-formed, and sustained through the interaction between God, context, and members of a Latino/a community. The concept of *la comunidad* (the community) conveys multiple layers of relational, familial, and cultural ties which form a sense of identity as well as responsibility for the individual. This is more clearly seen in major celebrations such as *quinceañeras*, weddings, funerals, and any major life event or transition in a family’s story. *La comunidad* is for the individual both the source of cultural competence and the reminder of values and commitments. Thus, any God-talk in the Latino/a context is a collaborative and shared undertaking between *la comunidad* and the individual, and

vice versa. Latino/a theology names this influence of community upon theological discourse and method as the practice of *teología en conjunto*: a collaborative theology.¹

As a Costa Rican that is ethnically Peruvian, I engage this particular collaborative task in dialogue with the people, the stories, and the experiences found within specific communities that I have inhabited. I was born in San José, Costa Rica, when my parents, who are ethnically Peruvian, were completing their seminary studies. My parents, Ada and Wilfredo Canales, served as pastors, seminary professors, and missionaries for the Church of the Nazarene for over seventeen years throughout Latin America. In 1992, my parents were some of the first Latin American Nazarene missionaries to be commissioned by the denomination. What I know about Christ's love, Christian discipleship, and pastoral ministry, I have seen modeled and lived within the context of the Church of the Nazarene in Latin America. My family ties to this denomination go back over six generations of Peruvian Nazarenes. As a pastor and missionary kid, I experienced the constant elements of packing and moving throughout my childhood and adolescence. I have lived in Lima, Peru; Quito, Ecuador; San José, Costa Rica; Asunción, Paraguay; and Miami, Florida. As an adult, relocation did not cease: my undergraduate studies took place in San Diego, California, and my first pastorate was in the city of San Fernando, California.

Each of these places intricately informed, qualified, and evaluated any and all of my reflections about God, the gospel, and the church throughout my seminary studies. Each of these places provided an opportunity to meet, love, and learn from faithful disciples embodying God's liberating and transformative gospel. That formative role of *mi comunidad*, across borders and geographies, impacted my seminary and pastoral reflections about God's activity within the communities that I left but also the communities to which I arrived. As a Latino Nazarene pastor, I have encountered the intersection of vibrant theological education as well as embodied Latino/a stories of faith and faithfulness that have reframed discussions about the mission and agency of the Church.

As a result of these mutually formative discussions, I believe that *testimonios* (testimonies) of God's sustaining and transformative grace when spoken, lived, and re-told from the Latino/a reality nurture a theological memory and imagination in *lo cotidiano* (everyday life). Primary agents in this process of witnessing to God's transformative power are Latina women.² My *abuelita* (grandmother) Ester, a public teacher in Peru, paved the way for my theologizing about the meaning of perseverance in *la lucha* (the struggle) as a single mother of four. Julia, a double amputee whose funeral I recently conducted, instructed me in the disciplines of contentment and thanksgiving since every breath "*es un regalo de nuestro Dios*" (is a gift from God). Countless others could fill the pages of a communal memory book that I carry and which I bring to the task of theologizing. These women engaged a lived theological reflection that ultimately benefits the entire community. Once again, a *teología en conjunto* involves a communal work of mutually constructing from, within, and for the Latina community testimonies of God's activity along the margins of society.

MARGINALITY

As mentioned above, *teología en conjunto* emerges with a serious commitment to cooperative theological discourse and to the particularity of the Latina community—a community that hosts and witnesses to shared experiences of marginality within the U.S. context. To be marginal is to be on the periphery, away from the centers of political, economical, cultural, and ecclesial power. This common experience is nuanced according to Latinos/as' relationships within a polycentric society: Latinos/as stand both at the margins of the dominant culture and at the center of other relationships according to

¹ José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, *Teología En Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

² Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 69.

social mobility, and at other times they self-impose marginality to preserve cultural identity.³ Latino/a *evangélico/a* theology is influenced by this marginalization as it presents a unique reading of Scripture and an assessment of traditional discourses on Christology and salvation.

First, when Latinos/as *evangélicos/as* draw near to Scriptures, we lean in expecting to encounter and interact with the God of the Bible. Juan Martínez suggests that “Latino Protestants consider the Bible vocative,” as a responsive and dialogical source that begins all God-talk, addresses all matters for faith and life, and evaluates personal, familial, and communal realities.⁴ The Bible’s vocative nature is grounded within the marginal contexts that Latinos/as inhabit. Marginality ultimately brings forth a re-reading of Scripture capable of questioning the Church (both ancient and contemporary) of its commitments to the centers of power and influence; and it also assesses the dangers of silencing the margins as a practice that limits the Church’s understanding of its mission.⁵ As a result, Latino/a *evangélicos/as* recognize that when reading the Bible, this “Good Book” includes our realities of exclusion, poverty, suffering, movement, oppression, and the commoditization of people. But at the same time, the inclusion of these marginalized narratives into God’s redemptive story infuse Latino/a theology with an eschatological hope of *mañana*.

Thus, in light of a re-reading of Scriptures from the margins, Jesus’ own marginalization as a Galilean is identified. Jesus’ Galilean marginalized community connects with the Latino/a reality but it also reaffirms God’s preference to intimately interact and to be present amongst the poor and the marginalized of this world.⁶ This truly invigorates Latino/a theological reflection. The region of Galilee embodied marginalization, regardless of who was in power, since it stood in religious, political, and economical dissonance with the prominence of Jerusalem. Yet it was out of Galilee that Jesus began his ministry and where God decided to break in with the nearness of God’s Kingdom.⁷ This solidarity with the marginalized deepened as Jesus’ death and suffering took place outside the gates of Jerusalem: a decisive act in a forsaken locality. For Orlando Costas, God’s decisive act shifted the *locus theologicus* of salvation: from the centrality of the Jerusalem temple to the peripheral dumpster of carcasses.⁸ Therefore, the locality of God’s presence and activity on the margins proclaims the gospel with subversive and transformative hope, re-forming our understanding of salvation, mission, and Christian service in the power of the risen Christ.⁹

In continuity with this shift, Latina *evangélica* theologian, Loida Martell-Otero adds that the “God, who is present in Jesus, continues to save through the Holy Spirit,” concerning all aspects of daily life.¹⁰ Latina *evangélica* theologizing occurs in the midst of marginal places of powerlessness and voicelessness. Therefore, for Latina *evangélicas* God’s salvation continues to be a daily experience and reality as the Holy Spirit empowers, affirms, and notices their personhood and dignity. This dynamic and perceptive

³ Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 30–35.

⁴ Juan Francisco Martínez, *Los Protestantes: An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 100.

⁵ González, 41–55.

⁶ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 49–52. Elizondo identified Galilee as a multicultural, repeatedly conquered territory, home to “lenient” religious Jews, mixed marriages, and simple farmers with thick accents. These realities resembled the Latino/a tensions and realities lived in his experiences of the U.S.’s Southwest region.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 188–194.

¹⁰ Loida I. Martell-Otero and others, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 39.

understanding of the Spirit's presence as salvation and as recognition of the *imago Dei* in the lives of *evangélicas* "prevents an *evangélica* understanding of salvation from being solely Christocentric. It is a functionally Trinitarian event."¹¹

Given these points, Latino/a theology as a "theology of places," often marginal places, stands as a witness of God's intersecting and redeeming activity.¹² For instance, when I coached an inner city soccer team, one of the players had the idea that I should pray—both as their coach and their "priest"—for one of the guys who was mourning the death of a loved one. Together we knelt down in the middle of the soccer field in one of the most violent parks of our city, and we encountered the presence of God. God's provision dwells upon the fundraising efforts of the Barragan family, as they sell tacos to neighbors and friends for the funeral of a family member in Mexico. The liberative and transformative practices of the Kingdom of God are often found away from the "spotlight" and the centers of ecclesial activity.

MESTIZAJE AND MULATEZ

Another influential element in the development of Latino/a theology, closely related to the experience of marginalization, is the complexity of a multiracial community. Latinos/as are a *mestizo/a* and *mulato/a* people, in that Latinos/as are the offspring of multiple cultural, ethnic, and racial encounters—between the conqueror and the conquered.¹³ These encounters often emerged out of violent clashes and mixing between Spanish and Amerindian people (*mestizo*), as well as Spanish and African descendants (*mulato*). Other Latinos/as experienced the colonizing powers of the U.S. expansionistic agenda and for generations were identified as outsiders in their own land.¹⁴ Virgilio Elizondo referred to this as a double *mestizaje*, producing a reality lived in the hyphen (Mexican-American), existing between two cultures, not belonging fully to either.¹⁵ However, the acceptance of *mestizaje* and *mulatez* must be seen as a blessing, a sign of divine predilection, and the birth pangs of the new creation.¹⁶

The multiracial reality of our community influences Latino/a theology by providing a "non-innocent" reading of history and Scriptures.¹⁷ Justo Gonzales argues that the realities of *mestizaje* and *mulatez* provide a hermeneutical lens that does not avoid or read over the lament, the loss, and the suffering involved in Christian discipleship.¹⁸ This reality allows for Latinos/as to read Scripture alongside the complicated drama and failures of people, families, and ethnic groups for the sake of understanding our very own "difficult passages in the pilgrimage of obedience."¹⁹ *Mestizaje* and *mulatez* are not foreign themes to the biblical narrative since God's story moves toward the periphery through the inclusion of *mestiza* and *mulato* people for the sake of God's mission.²⁰

The role and impact of *mestizaje* and *mulatez* at the "borderlands" of the U.S. context moves from imposed constructs towards localities of mutual interaction. The traditional geo-political construct of a "border" involves the demarcation of sovereign nation-states, the exclusion of the "other," and the

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 53–55.

¹³ Martínez, 105.

¹⁴ Arturo J. Bañuelas, *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 7–27.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9–17.

¹⁶ Elizondo, 91–102.

¹⁷ Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 75–80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 77–78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ González, *Santa Biblia*, 84.

attempt at self-preservation. Yet, in the complexities of *mestizaje* and *mulatez* the reality of borderlands creates points of interaction, dialogue, and mutual enrichment between “two realities, two worldviews, and two cultures.”²¹

In fact, this mutuality and permeability of the borderlands has impacted my personal journey as an immigrant in the U.S. I have married a beautiful Hawaiian woman with Swedish and Spanish blood, and we now continue to figure out how to navigate our relational existence between two different communities. As we have children, another layer of *mestizaje* will emerge. Tensions of “living in the hyphen” will continue to arise through our family’s generations, but our hope is that the Latina church will continue to host, celebrate, and engage the multiple values, realities, traditions, and identities that our children will embrace.

After all, borderlands are fertile grounds where the Latina church can recover a sense of mission for the twenty-first century. For it is within the locality of borderlands that *testimonios* of God’s *mestizo/a* communities are told (and re-told) concerning God’s ongoing presence and activity in the world. Such dynamism between borderlands, *testimonios*, and *mestizaje* within a Latino/a context, serves as a missional-historical matrix for God’s redemptive work in the entire cosmos and the transmission of the Christian faith to both current and future generations.²²

CONCLUSION

I continue to have a sense of responsibility to those who modeled and are modeling for me the meaning of Christian service and faithful discipleship. As I continue to engage contemporary academic Latino/a theologizing, it appears that those committed to the task have focused on assessing the Latina community as a whole (and at times from afar) while assigning a secondary role to Latina faith communities and their corresponding subjects. Hence, the pages above contain a brief overview of shared themes and realities that impact the task of doing and living theology “*latinamente*.” Recognizing the multiple contexts that various Latinos/as inhabit within the United States, specific points of reference have been laid out as “launching pads” that will further the discussion concerning Latino/a theology—its discourse and its interlocutors.

In my case, to be uprooted from the Latina *evangélica* community—at the intersection of the borderlands—is to cut ties with the very companions and witnesses who instructed me in the ways of doing theology “*latinamente*.” Ultimately, every theologizing effort from my Latino *evangélico* reality serves to redirect me to my sending community as a better listener of God’s redemptive acts amongst the marginalized and the *mestizo/a*.

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²¹ Ibid., 86–87.

²² Juan Francisco Martínez Guerra and Lindy Scott, *Iglesias Peregrinas En Busca De Identidad: Cuadros Del Protestantismo Latino En Los Estados Unidos* (Buenos Aires: Kairos Ediciones, 2004), 233–248.

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