

U.S. HISPANIC AND LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGIES: CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS

Roberto Piña of the Mexican American Cultural Center moderated this workshop. Yolanda Tarango and Timothy Matovina animated the discussion with opening presentations. The workshop's purpose was to increase our understanding of U.S. Hispanic theologies by distinguishing them from the theologies of liberation current in Latin America.

Yolanda Tarango stated that U.S. Hispanics/Latinos employ various terms to name themselves. She then summarized some basic elements of Latin American theologies and shared characteristics of U.S. Hispanic theologies. Contrasting the two, she noted three principal differences. U.S. Hispanic theologians base their reflection on the experience of their people in the United States, including their own experience as U.S. Latinos. Their Latin American counterparts, on the other hand, frequently attempt to articulate their theological reflection from the perspective of the poor. Thus U.S. Hispanic theologians begin by reflecting on their own experience within their communities, while Latin American theologians primarily seek to identify with the poor and articulate their perspective.

A major theme that U.S. Hispanic theologians develop in their works is the survival of their people as a people. The identity and existence of U.S. Latino communities is threatened by the forces of assimilation, as well as ethnic and racial prejudice. While the poor of Latin America are daily faced with the question of survival in a most dramatic way, the survival issue in U.S. Latino communities and theologies is more focused on counteracting the influence of assimilatory pressures and prejudice in U.S. life.

Another distinctive element of U.S. Hispanic theologies is that they are border theologies. Hispanic theologians who live in the United States but retain language and cultural ties to Latin America can serve as a bridge between the South and North. This further distinguishes them from their fellow theologians in Latin America.

Timothy Matovina compared works of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgilio Elizondo, the first major writers in their respective areas of Latin American liberation and Mexican American theologies. The fundamental difference between Gutiérrez and Elizondo is the context which each describes as the reality of their people. For Gutiérrez, this context is primarily the poverty of the masses amidst the wealth of the few. Elizondo, on the other hand, describes the history of Mexican Americans as a history of double conquest. The first conquest was the

Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples of what is now Mexico and the Southwest United States; the second conquest was the U.S. conquest of what is now the Southwest. This latter conquest continues to have an impact in the pressures put on Mexican Americans to assimilate, to abandon the Mexican way for the American way. Thus the context of Elizondo's theology is primarily his people's situation of ethnic or racial oppression, evidenced in efforts to suppress their customs, language, and even their Mexican Catholic practices and heritage. While Gutiérrez treats racial and ethnic concerns in his work and Elizondo the issue of social class, the emphasis on classism is more central in Gutiérrez, while the focus on racism or ethnic prejudice is more pronounced in Elizondo.

Other differences between these two thinkers reflect their analyses of their distinct contexts. Elizondo treats popular religiosity more extensively than Gutiérrez, for example, claiming that Mexican American faith expressions buttress resistance to the forces of assimilation which assail these communities in the United States. He also explores the significance of Jesus as a Galilean, a borderland outcast who suffered some of the same rejections that Mexican Americans face. Gutiérrez concentrates on other elements of the message and life of Jesus, such as his relationship with political figures and his preaching of the Kingdom. These concerns reflect his attempt to address the situation of massive poverty in Latin America. Yet another difference between the two is that Elizondo's works, especially *The Future Is Mestizo*, tend to be more autobiographical. This is because he writes as a Mexican American who has experienced racial and ethnic prejudice living in the United States. Gutiérrez, on the other hand, does not attempt to write so much from his own experience, but from the privileged hermeneutical perspective of the poor.

The discussion which followed included various topics, particularly popular religiosity and the elements of ethnicity, class, and gender in the U.S. and Latin American contexts. U.S. Hispanic theologians recognize that their frequent treatment of ethnicity must be complemented by greater attention to class and gender issues. They also acknowledge the need to study all the faith expressions of their people, not just those which are considered "legitimately" Catholic. Study of the practices related to *curanderismo* and *santería*, for example, can provide valuable insights into U.S. Latino faith communities, and the challenge which these communities present to theology and the larger Church.

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