

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

In conjunction with the seminar's awareness of the divergent groups among feminist theologians we selected the topic of popular religion as a locus around which the ethnic components within feminism could give expression to their individual perspectives. In honor of the site of this year's convention in San Antonio, the seat of much Hispanic culture, the starting point for seminar discussion was the work of *mujerista* theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (Drew University).

Isasi-Diaz explained that although eighty percent of Latinas claim Roman Catholicism and pass it on to their children, popular religious practices and understandings rather than official Church doctrine and affiliation have been the vehicle for maintaining the life of faith of the Latinas. She outlined five general characteristics of the popular religiosity of Latinas: (1) It constitutes a real religious subculture of people acting in groups not as individuals. (2) Central to its ritual are aspects considered marginal by mainstream Catholicism, such as sacramentals. (3) It is syncretic, investing Catholic practices with meaning from other religious traditions (*santería*, voodoo, indigenous Indian traditions). (4) Official religious practices (mass, baptism, first communion) are neutralized in so far as they tend to be seen as a general aspect of socialization rather than a primary expression of religious belief. (5) Popular religious behaviors are transmitted as part of popular Hispanic culture and are not perceived as individual idiosyncracies.

Popular religion has been a major force in maintaining the integrity of a Hispanic culture in the U.S. Conversely it has also been responsible for the continuing evangelization of the Latino population through its capacity to nurture experience of the sacred in everyday life.

Mujerista theology supports the syncretism in popular religion, against an imperialistic approach which would "baptize" or "purify" such elements. It sees orthodox objections to syncretism as based more on issues of power rather than faith.

The first of two discussions among the fifty-three seminar participants was intended for the exploration of popular religious practices within other ethnic groups represented by those present. Ann Graff (Loyola Chicago) who moderated the discussion, began by suggesting that elements in white middle class suburban Catholicism such as marriage encounter and twelve-step programs may represent something analogous to popular religion in this particular social location. Similarities and differences emerged between Hispanic popular religious customs and those of other immigrant groups whose Catholicism is not a product of the

"double conquest"—Spanish and U.S. The question was raised whether popular religiosity is possible in a technological culture in which the popular is less and less identified with the religious, especially when considering the culture of youth and of secular society in general.

After a short break the seminar reconvened to consider what might be "criteria of truth" which could be brought to bear in evaluating popular religion. Patricia O'Connell Killen (Pacific Lutheran University) synthesized elements of the preceding discussion into principles which could serve as guides in this endeavor: (1) A more concise and elaborated understanding of lived religious practice needs to be developed on the basis of studies and "thick descriptions" of particular groups' popular religiosity. (2) Attention needs to be paid to the manner in which popular religious tradition transmits self-criticism and as well as wisdom. (3) Rhetorical strategies for critique within popular religion itself need to be developed. (4) The issues of modernization and of social location in connection with popular religion need careful attention. What does promotion of the veneration of the Virgin Mary in an upper class parish mean if it functions to replace social justice concerns?

In the second discussion segment, maintaining a distinction between surface wisdom and wisdom that is liberative within popular religiosity was seen to be essential. For Hispanics *the* social justice issue is survival as a community; popular religion is a mainstay of survival. Yet *mujeristas* cannot condone aspects of popular religion which inhibit the liberation of women; they cultivate new religious practices which emphasize the role of women and the strengths of women.

Another matter of concern was the relationship between understanding, religious feeling, symbol and sacramentality. Greeley's "sacramental imagination" was admitted as a possible bridge between a Catholicism that seems increasingly intellectual and devoid of warmth and one which is interpersonal, rich, and "embodied."

The session ended with a business meeting in which the chair was elected. The time, format, and content of the 1994 meeting were discussed.

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