

HISPANIC/LATINO/A THEOLOGY

Topic: Sources for Latino/a Theologies: Dialogues
with the Practices of Afro-Iberian Popular Religions
Convener: Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union
Presenters: Orlando O. Espín, University of San Diego
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The emergence of U.S. Latina/o theologies over the last three decades has been characterized by a deliberate attention to interdisciplinary conversations, bringing theologians together in careful and critical conversation with social scientists, literary theorists, and others with converging interest in the history and present reality of Latinos/as, whose religious experiences bear the marks of the long and complex history of the Iberian colonial project. In a process often described as *teología de conjunto*, theologians and others involved in the academic study of religion are increasingly turning deliberately to ecumenical and interfaith investigations that move beyond problematic categories such as “syncretism” and “acculturation,” to begin to articulate productive intercultural theologies. This session focused particular attention on religious practices that reflect the complex Ibero-African legacy of Latina/o religion. This cross-contextual investigation sheds new light on the complexity and the rich textures of popular religion.

Raúl Gómez Ruiz, in his paper entitled “The Mozarabs of Toledo: An Example of African Influence on Iberian Culture by Way of Islam,” retrieved the complicated story of a community whose identity is linked over centuries to a liturgical heritage rooted in the Islamic presence in Spain. According to Gómez Ruiz, Mozarabs have continued to survive through a long history of conquest, conflict (cultural, religious, social, ecclesial), alienation and limited resources. Mozarabs emerge as a subaltern community that persists amidst centuries of domination and marginalization. Under Islamic rule, Mozarabs were the descendants of Hispano-Roman and Visigothic Christians who held onto their Catholic faith yet through interaction and intermarriage became “Arabicized” and “Islamicized.” While the Reconquista afforded Mozarabic Christians opportunities for economic and political advancement, the development of the Mozarabic liturgy was checked with the eventual imposition of the Roman rite.

For Gómez Ruiz, reclaiming the story of the Mozarabs and appreciating the significance of their living liturgical heritage provides a point of African and Iberian intersection that predates the colonial encounter in the Americas and whose possible influence in the Americas remains underexplored.

Orlando Espín, in his paper entitled “We Are What We Are: Africanness as Source for Latino/a Theology,” sought to retrieve Africanness as a constitutive aspect of *latinidad*. Espín recognized that to reclaim this often neglected source of Latino/a identity, Hispanic theologians must also grapple with complicity in the sinful legacies of slavery, racism and the dangerous ideology of a “colorless identity.”

Engaging Africanness also invites Latino/a theologians to confront and critique the notion “that U.S. Latino/a identity is rooted exclusively in Christianity.” Sustained reflection on African religions as lived in the Americas remains an area of popular religion that requires attention especially as the Yoruba-influenced Lukumí-Candomblé is now the largest non-Christian religion in the United States, having expanded beyond its Cuban and Brazilian spheres. For Espín, among the African inheritances is a degree of religious inclusiveness, what Cuban scholars have compared to “religious *ajiacó*,” a stew that includes a variety of disparate ingredients that remain distinct yet contribute to flavoring the whole. Characteristic of the religious practices of some Latinos/as, it is expressed as an “uncanny success at managing the theological dissonances” that accompany participation in more than one religious tradition at the same time.

The richness of these presentations and the conversation that followed contributes to the ongoing process of theologizing *de conjunto* on the complexity of US Latino/a identities. By retrieving often overlooked inheritances that are part of the lived experiences of *nuestras comunidades*, Gómez Ruiz and Espín demonstrate that Latino/a theological reflection has much to offer the development of intercultural and interreligious theologies and scholarship.

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