

LATINO/A THEOLOGY

Topic: Diversity, Hybridity, and Commonality
 Convener: Gary Riebe-Estrella, Catholic Theological Union
 Presenter: James B. Nickoloff, College of Holy Cross
 Respondent: Carmen Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union

U.S. Latinos/as were once viewed as a cultural monolith and are still often spoken about as if we were. However, we have always identified ourselves by our country of origin and then by our “otherness” in the U.S. context. In fact, our identities actually have always been far more complex and are growing more so as Latinos/as intermarry across lines of national origin, reflect a wide spectrum of social and economic class, are more forward about our racial diversity, acknowledge the various denominational strains in our religiosities, and become more open in revealing issues of sexual orientation. Much U.S. Latino/a theology has reflected an overly simplified U.S. Latino/a identity.

In his presentation entitled “The Word Entombed Still Speaks,” James Nickoloff tackles a pivotal assumption in most discussions about identity: whether identity is founded principally on difference (the uniqueness of the self and the embrace of the other), on hybridity (the uniqueness of each mixture), or on sameness. Nickoloff argues for the foundational principle of sameness, primarily because of its liberating force for those who are considered as “other,” marginalized by social class or, in Nickoloff’s particular focus in this paper, by their homosexual or lesbian orientation.

Looking at people from the perspective of sameness (what Nickoloff calls the “homo-mind”), the marginalized claim their identity as being the same as those who oppress them and in this assertion force upon the oppressors the unwelcome truth of their shared common humanity, as found in the creation narratives of Genesis. They speak “homo-truth” in their attempt to unmask the use of power to turn difference and/or hybridity into marginalization.

Nickoloff sees the presence of this “homo-mind” in the four figures of the Johannine Books of Signs, each of whom comes to see himself/herself as fundamentally the same as, not unlike, their neighbor-antagonists, and so calls the latter to conversion. These figures, asserts Nickoloff, become disciples of Jesus only when they witness to the “homo-truth” they have discovered through him.

Carmen Nanko-Fernández engaged Nickoloff’s ideas with the metaphor of a conversation as she presented “Diversity: Difference, Hybridity and Commonality.” She attempts to lift up the value of difference as it has been celebrated as a good in the face of those who would find in difference the source of inferiority. As she looks at Latino/a theology, Nanko-Fernández sees the use of difference as the basis of Latino/a identity as a prominent *locus theologicus* in Latino/a theologians’ attempt to reveal the enormous diversity in this population whom the majority portray as monolithic and to assert the relevance of their theology for the academy as a whole and not simply for their fellow Latinos/as. At the same time, Nanko-Fernández sees

the limitations of focusing on difference in the tendency to lift up particularity to the detriment of connectedness.

Nevertheless, Nanko-Fernández appears to be more anxious over Nickoloff's option for commonality because of her suspicion that commonality slips too easily into normativity. In addition, she worries that an emphasis on sameness can add momentum to movement from solidarity to representation, too often experienced by Latinos/as of their allies *en la lucha*.

For Nanko-Fernández, Latino/a theologians' use of *mestizaje/mulatez* as the foundation for construction of Latino/a identity has proven to be inadequate in dealing with issues of globalization, pluralism, sexuality and interreligious dialogue. For Latinos/as, Nanko-Fernández suggests other expressions and constructions need to be developed to explore the complexities of hybrid identities and multiple-belonging, such as Spanglish and conversation with popular culture.

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