

HISPANIC LATIN@ THEOLOGY

- Topic: Saints of the Prescribed and of the Proscribed: A Dialogue between Asian and Latin@ Theologians
- Convener/ Moderator: Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union
- Presenters: Orlando Espín, University of San Diego
Jonathan Tan, Australian Catholic University

Saints are commonly identified as exemplars of holiness, faith companions, and intercessors between the divine and the human. Yet, this view of *los santos y las santas* completely ignores the saints of the ordinary and the underside and those they accompany. These saints, and those who hold them sacred, occupy those spaces between the prescribed and the proscribed. This session continues a trajectory of ongoing dialogues en conjunto between Asian and Latin@ theologians.

In his paper entitled “The Apotheosis of Ancestral Saints and Righteous Folk Heroes in Chinese Popular Imagination: An Exploration of Boundary Crossings, Canonization, and Deification in Chinese Popular Religion,” Jonathan Tan explored the significance of the canonization and deification of ancestral saints and righteous folk heroes in Chinese popular religion. He addressed theological implications of a fundamental human impulse to canonize folk heroes as spiritual exemplars, protectors, and healers. These righteous folk heroes are canonized and deified by popular acclamation because they fulfilled their end of the relationship, i.e., they protected their devotees, responded to their prayers and guided them through life’s many challenges. In other words, sainthood is about mutual relationships and not about ontological goodness. Tan also noted how one way imperial power seeks to gain legitimacy is by coopting local saints.

Orlando Espín presented his paper entitled “Juan Soldado, ‘Santa Muerte,’ and Other Border-Violating Saints: The Latino/a Extended Family and the ‘Communion of Saints.’” He pointed out that “popular” Latino/a saints are regarded as part of the network of extended family. Therefore there are expectations and obligations on all sides of these relationships. “Cumplir (*to fulfill one’s obligations*) is the practical, daily bond that glues all the members of the extended family loyally together.” Espín specifically looked at two popular devotions that are increasingly associated with those living in the ambiguous spaces between legality and illegality. He proposed that any serious studies of these “border-violating” saints and their supplicants “will need to engage critical studies on the social dynamics and cultural constructions of legality and illegality, and how these constructions affect identities.”

The rich conversation that followed the presentations involved both speakers as well as those in attendance at the session. Threads connecting the two perspectives were particularly noted. Intersections with respect to the shared assumptions of the role of relationships with mutual responsibilities on the part of both saint and devotee were especially striking.

The reality of the Catholic Church demographically in the U.S. and globally indicates that theologies for the present as well as the immediate and long term future are being constructed and performed with great sophistication in the practical engagements and lived experiences of concrete peoples in the complexities of increasingly interreligious and intercultural contexts. As demonstrated by this theological conversation, Asian and Latin@ understandings of holiness complicate more static western understandings of sanctity and divinity in part by situating the focus on relationality and the reciprocity relationships anticipate. This shifts theological considerations of holiness away from exemplar models to accompaniment in daily circumstances and through ordinary and extraordinary struggles. Such accompaniment is a hope of all including those who live in those ambivalent spaces between legality and illegality.

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