

# **P E R S P E C T I V A S**

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## PERSPECTIVAS: OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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In 1998 The Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI) initiated the publication of *Perspectivas: Occasional Papers* to support its efforts in highlighting Latino scholarship in theology and religion and to provide a resource that will stimulate further dialogue and research. The scant number of journals dedicated to featuring the contributions of Latino scholars in theology and religion makes the creation of *Perspectivas* a welcome presence.

Past and present publications feature the work of HTI mentors, awardees and HTI Regional Conference speakers. The present publication is the sixth in the series.

*Perspectivas* is sent to seminaries throughout the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, Theology Departments in Universities and other institutions. We continue to be happy to accommodate requests from faculty and/or students for additional copies and or copies of back issues when available.

We trust you will find the present articles engaging and insightful. We welcome comments and responses to any of the articles.

Joanne Rodríguez  
Director, HTI



## FROM THE EDITOR

“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit...Thus you will know them by their fruits.” Matthew 7:18, 20.

**H**ispanic/Latino theology in North America is growing, maturing and bearing good fruit. This issue of *Perspectivas* features the work of two exceptional awardees and their respondents. Through their contribution to Latino/Hispanic theology, they demonstrate both the quality and originality of new voices that are being cultivated by the doctoral program of the Hispanic Theological Initiative.

Miguel H. Díaz is the recipient of the HTI book award given to an outstanding publication in the field of Hispanic/Latino theology. His article—*Turning to a Context: Latino/a Anthropology and Its Communal Vision of Reality*—is the text of his presentation given at Princeton Theological Seminary in July 2002, and the one to which the distinguished Dr. Daniel Migliore, Princeton Theological Seminary’s Charles Hodge Professor of Systematic Theology for over 40 years, responded to. Díaz brings the Hispanic/Latino contribution to theological anthropology into dialogue with the writings of Karl Rahner. His purpose is to “deepen an understanding of U.S. Hispanic Catholic visions of what it means to be human, and to demonstrate how these visions uniquely fit within the Catholic tradition, even while particularizing and developing parts of this tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Miguel Díaz’s book titled *On Being Human: US Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* has been published by Orbis Books.

Efraín Agosto presented *Paul vs. Empire: A Postcolonial and Latino Reading of Philippians* at a regional meeting organized by HTI awardees this year, and his respondent, Hjamil Martínez, is a 2002-2003 Dissertation Awardee studying U.S. Religious History at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. After a comparison and evaluation of post-modern and post-colonial approaches to biblical interpretation, Agosto reads Paul's letter to the Philippians from a post-colonial perspective. He then shifts his attention (in true post-modern fashion) to himself as the reading subject—a child of colonialism, a member of a population marginalized by US colonial policy in Puerto Rico.

*Perspectivas* is a communal production, and we would like to express a very special word of thanks to Ulrike Guthrie for her thorough and thoughtful editing of the papers presented in this issue. This issue also includes the winner of the HTI Dissertation Series Award, as well as the announcement of HTI's Dissertation Series Collection housed at Princeton Theological Seminary's Speer Library. "In our traditional Hispanic way of expressing hospitality, we say, *mi casa es tu casa*! Come into our home, sit at our table, hear our story, and share your story..."<sup>2</sup> We invite our readers to come in, taste and see the fruit of our labor.

<sup>1</sup> Miguel H. Díaz, *On Being Human: US Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2001, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Miguel H. Díaz, *On Being Human: US Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*, 140.



# **“Turning to a Context: Latino/a Anthropology and Its Communal Vision of Reality”**

Miguel H. Díaz

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**Lecture given at Princeton Theological Seminary  
for the PTS/HTI Lectureship, Summer 2002**

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Dr. Díaz received his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame and is a former assistant professor at the University of Dayton. He is currently Academic Dean and assistant professor of Systematic Theology at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary (Boynton Beach, FL). His publications include: *From the Heart of Our People Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology* (co-edited with Orlando Espín—Orbis Books, 1999) and *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Orbis's Faith and Culture Series, 2001), a book for which he was awarded the HTI Book Prize for 2002. Dr. Díaz is a 1998-1999 HTI Dissertation Year awardee.

## **INTRODUCTION: THE INCARNATION, THE COMMUNAL VISION OF REALITY, AND U.S. HISPANIC CONTEXTS**

**I**n the prologue of the Gospel of John we read: “The Word became flesh” (John 1.14). This affirmation has been characterized as the key to understanding the “grammar” of Christian theological anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Familiarity with this grammar entails the predication of the human from the divine, recognizing God as subject and the human, or more specifically, the humanity of

Christ as the predicate of God's self-expression. As predicate, the human becomes the contextual qualifier of the divine subject, namely, the Word of God. This contextual or human qualification of God results from the extravagant act of divine sharing realized in history. Such a sharing suggests a "for-otherness" — a communal identity that ought to define and challenge all forms of being human.<sup>3</sup>

This communal human identity is always and everywhere realized within particular and historical locations. An exploration of a particular communal identity that reflects and refracts central anthropological concerns of the greater Christian tradition is the subject of this article. As David Maldonado underscores, in the Judeo-Christian tradition to be human essentially means to be "in relationship, not isolation" with others.<sup>4</sup> But in the context of Latino/a theology, this vision calls for particular refraction. In other words, as he goes on to point out, "the examination of what it means to be human calls for an examination of what it means to be Hispanic."<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I will provide some reflections upon what it means to be "*Latinamente*" or "Hispanically" human.<sup>6</sup> First, I will discuss the theological turn to context in Catholic theology. This turn reflects an incarnational and communal understanding of faith that resonates well with the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Second, I will explore U.S. Hispanic perspectives that in various ways refract the Christian communal understanding of what it means to be human. Third, to link specific U.S. Hispanic anthropological concerns with those of the broader Christian tradition, and more specifically, the Catholic tradition, I will engage in a brief discussion of Karl Rahner's theological anthropology. Rahner is widely regarded as the leading Catholic voice of the twentieth century. Finally, I will draw upon U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology to provide some basic reflections on what it means to be human in the increased context of globalization and the fragility of inter-national relations.



*I. The turn to context and the emergence of Latino/a theologies*

The modern turn to the subject and historical consciousness has deeply affected the doing of Catholic theology. Without abandoning its traditional theocentric orientation, contemporary Catholic thought has turned increasingly to the human as the starting point of theological reflection. In key Catholic thinkers like Karl Rahner, "Feuerbach's axiom, 'theology is anthropology,' is given a counter-interpretation and undergoes an inversion."<sup>7</sup> The human reality, properly understood within a Christo-centric orientation, becomes in contemporary Catholic thought the horizon from which to discern and name the mystery of God. Within Catholic theology, modernity's turn to the subject and to historical consciousness, specially as this turn is critically appropriated in the writings of nineteenth century Catholic theologians of the *nouvelle théologie*, anticipates and prepares the way for the twentieth century's turn to contextualized subjects and their concrete histories.<sup>8</sup>

The Second Vatican Council, itself a child of Catholic critical conversations with modernity, invites the theological turn to context. This turn seeks "to be faithful both to the contemporary experience of the gospel and to the tradition of Christian life that has been received."<sup>9</sup> An oft-cited passage from the Council expresses well this integration between faith and historical experiences:

At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting these signs in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men [sic] ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.<sup>10</sup>

This citation demonstrates clearly an openness to encounter the



“Word” within the words of humanity. The Council’s integration of the human and the divine—faith and history—can be read as an implicit endorsement of the social, cultural, gender, political, and racial experiences of being human, and how these experiences impact the reception and interpretation of theological ideas.

Prompted by the awareness of the historical location of human subjects and their reflections, numerous contextual projects, which include, Latin American liberation, Feminist, Native American, Black, and Asian perspectives have focused on various social, cultural, gender, racial, and political coordinates as loci for theological reflections. Within this growing effort to reflect the faith of specific peoples, U.S. Latino/a Catholic theology emerged in the early 1970s largely as a result of the pioneering work of Virgilio Elizondo. Elizondo’s groundbreaking reflections on the role of Latino/a popular Catholicism initiated a process of reflections that have taken very seriously, among other things, the cultural, social, and religious location of U.S. Hispanics.

The turn to the Latino/a context, reflected in Elizondo’s writings, is not restricted to Catholic circles. For instance, the work of Orlando Costas in the 70s and 80s exemplifies within Protestant Latino/a circles the effort to correlate faith and culture. In his Christo-centric reading of the Gospels, Costas often underscores the need to communicate the good news from a socio-cultural perspective, namely, from the experience of the marginalized and the most vulnerable of society.<sup>11</sup> Similar to Elizondo, Costas prepares the way for other Protestant theologians to provide a number of reflections rooted on Latino/a contextual concerns.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Latino Catholic and Protestant theologians have (and in some instances collaboratively) qualified, shaped, and conditioned the inherited Christian tradition from within their specific historical communal experiences (*mestizaje*, poverty, vanquishment, marginalization and the like).<sup>13</sup>



## *II. On being "latinamente" human*

Christian explorations on what it means to be human have drawn their inspiration from a variety of sources. Among these, Genesis 1-3, Christology, Trinitarian theology, ethics, and ecclesiology can be noted. In contemporary times, a number of theologians have attempted to provide a more coherent or systematic approach to this reflection in the discipline that has come to be known as theological anthropology.<sup>14</sup> The turn to context, however, invites us to consider that theological anthropology cannot be concerned with an abstract and socially un-situated humanity. Rather, as a number of theologians have underscored, theological reflections on the human reality must respond to the manifold experiences and perspectives that emerge from within the catholicity of the Church.

Within the last twenty-five years U.S. Hispanic theology has joined the manifold Christian voices that propose their own contextual understanding of what it means to be human. Just as in the past Christian theologians have drawn from a variety of sources (biblical, Christological, trinitarian, ethical, and ecclesiological) in their theological reflections on the human, so have U.S. Hispanic theologians drawn on similar sources in their understanding of what is "Hispanically" human. What makes U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology different than classic approaches is how traditional sources have been qualified, shaped, and conditioned by the U.S. Hispanic context.<sup>15</sup>

Take, for instance, Christology, the most basic source in Christian theological anthropology. In U.S. Hispanic Catholic approaches, the Galilean identity of Jesus has provided the central perspective for constructing what it means to be human. Elizondo's socio-cultural reading of the Gospels re-envision the logic of the universality of divine election and bestowal of grace in Christ in light of the preferential location of the marginalized of society. Seeking to forgo what he sees as a docetist danger to confess the Christ but forget his concrete humanity, Elizondo's reflec-



tions offer an important incarnational perspective. This perspective revolves around mapping the “where” and the “who” of the activity of grace mediated through Christ. Indeed, “Elizondo’s awareness of ‘what Galilee was and what it meant to be a Galilean so as to discover the places with similar identity and role in today’s world provides the transition from the Jesus of history and the anthropological implications of his being and acting to the historical Jesus of faith and the anthropological implications for ‘our’ ways of being and acting.”<sup>16</sup>

The Galilean identity of Jesus provides a socio-cultural location for a U.S. Hispanic correlation of human and divine realities. Elizondo’s Christology affirms the mediation of grace in socio-cultural terms, suggesting the specific, communal and embodied ways that the human encounters the divine. Elizondo’s reflections also suggest that while God’s gift of self prophetically challenges experiences and systems of dehumanization (Elizondo’s Jerusalem principle), this gift emerges from “within” the concrete human condition of the marginalized (The Galilean principle). Thus, God becomes one with the marginalized in order to lovingly challenge and effect change. For Elizondo, such a change implies necessarily the creation of a *mestizo* community.

According to Elizondo, *mestizaje* represents an ecclesial hope of what is already here and yet to come. *Mestizaje* is an Hispanic vision of the reign of God rooted in Jesus’ inclusive socio-cultural identity and inter-relationships. For Elizondo, Jesus is par excellence a *mestizo*, a human who bears in his Galilean bodily reality the markings of a both/and identity. The Galilean identity of Jesus, argues Elizondo, is a symbol of the crossroads of peoples, cultures, and religious traditions that shaped the humanity of Jesus. In assuming this identity, God reveals a preferential way of relating to and empowering the human reality. Through Christ, argues Elizondo, God does not just accomplish things *for* and *on behalf* of the marginalized but walks with the marginalized in “the most intimate way by being born one of them, learning from



them, going to their homes, and eating with them."<sup>17</sup>

To be human in the image of Christ is to walk with another, especially the marginalized and suffering of the world. The oft-cited Spanish aphorism "*dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres*" expresses well a vision of the human built upon the accompaniment of the other as the *sine qua non* of personhood.<sup>18</sup> In this vision, it is not the dollar amount (*dimé cuanto tienes*), nor status in society (*dime quién eres*) that determines who you are. As the aphorism suggests, to be human is to be actively engaged in the community-building activity of relating to and participating in the reality of another.

In the writings of U.S. Hispanic theologians, no one has done more to develop this anthropological perspective than Roberto S. Goizueta. His work builds upon Elizondo's foundational notion of the socio-cultural location of the self implied in Jesus' relationships. Goizueta carries forward Elizondo's work by bringing into creative conversation classic and contemporary Latin American notions of the self. Thus,

Echoing classical arguments within the Christian tradition, Goizueta maintains that "Each person (precisely *as person*) is defined and constituted by his or her relationships, both personal and impersonal, natural and supernatural, material and spiritual." Echoing Latin-American liberation theologies, he argues that "relationship is not something that "happens to" someone, something one 'experiences' in a passive way, or something one 'possesses': it is something one *does*, the most basic form of human action since through relationship, we discover and live out our identity as intrinsically relational beings."<sup>19</sup>

Goizueta brings the classic and liberationist perspectives into critical synthesis in his central contribution to Latino/a anthropology, namely, the notion of accompaniment. In his reflections, this



notion stems mainly from the popular U.S. Hispanic communal celebrations of accompanying Jesus during the liturgical feast of the Triduum.

To be human, argues Goizueta, "is to be in relationship with others, and to be in relationship with others is to be '*acompañando*.'"<sup>20</sup> To be human is to accompany Jesus in the "wrong places" and "with the wrong persons."<sup>21</sup> As an intrinsic relational activity of the self, accompaniment implies embodiment, directionality, and historical activity. Goizueta underscores that implicit in this act are "ethical political questions that seek to establish the 'which,' 'how,' and 'who' of the direction of this accompaniment."<sup>22</sup> As such, the accompaniment of others always and everywhere entails an aesthetic praxis. This praxis presupposes concrete social, cultural, gender, racial, and political mediation. Within these human experiences, Goizueta suggests, one encounters the love of God and neighbor, and the birthplace of the self.

The socio-cultural encounter with God, self, and neighbor is a constant theme in Latino/a anthropology. Though social location is essential to being human, the human finds its ultimate reference in the life of God. Latino/a theological anthropology reflects this concern in its various efforts to reflect upon the experience and language of grace. Conscious of social location and mindful of humanity's theological referent, Latino/a theologians like Orlando O. Espín, have underscored how the experience of grace, if it is to be authentically human, must be an experience of God-for-us. In other words, God's being "for us," necessarily means, as we have seen above in discussing the Galilean identity of Jesus, that God offers God's very gift of self—grace—within specific human contexts. In the case of Latinos/as this means that grace is experienced *latinamente*.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, nowhere do Latinos/as, Catholic and Protestant alike, experience God's offer of grace more than in their popular word and ritual centered religiosity. From *coritos* to *villancicos* and from the home altar to the street altar the "religious" celebrations of



Latinos/as effect a union between the human and the divine that bridges everyday and ordinary familial and social realities with the life of the triune God. Characterized as "the socialized experience of the divine,"<sup>24</sup> popular faith expressions often provide, precisely because they are "popular" (widely practiced by vanquished and suffering communities), a participation in God's ongoing solidarity with and lifting of the *anawim* of society.

This preferential, though not exclusive, identification of God with the poor and marginalized is a central theme in Catholic Marian traditions, and specifically in Latino/a Marian devotions. The stories and rituals that surround popular devotions like Our Lady of Charity and Our Lady of Guadalupe witness in socio-cultural sensitive ways the evangelical concern for the poor and disenfranchised. These central "Marian" symbols, and the protagonists like Juan Moreno and Juan Diego that comprise these devotions, offer devotees sacramental loci for understanding what it means to be human and how the human historically, bodily, and concretely responds to and encounters God's offer of grace. In so doing, these devotions affirm the specific human identity of U.S. Hispanic communities and serve as key preservers of cultural memory.

The struggle for self-preservation and self-determination lies at the heart of Latino/a anthropology. In the writings of Ada María Isasi-Díaz, this struggle or *lucha* has acquired a culturally specific and gender sensitive ethical imperative. Critiquing and qualifying Latino/a reflections on U.S. Hispanic *mestizaje*, Isasi-Díaz' reflections propose an understanding of this communal reality not so much as a given socio-cultural experience, but rather, as an intentional and inclusive praxis that must be chosen in overcoming classism, prejudice, and sexism. Rejecting a dualistic understanding between what is human (*la lucha*) and what is divine (God's offer of grace), Isasi-Díaz highlights how the human struggle, which in itself is a response to grace, contributes to an historical unfolding of the reality of the "kin-dom."



In the process to struggle for the in-breaking of the "kin-dom" Latino/a anthropology offers a particular socio-cultural contribution to the traditional understanding of the love of God and neighbor. Rather than conceive charity as mere doing of good for an individualized other, Isasi-Díaz re-conceives charity as communal solidarity, a praxis that entails socio-political commitment with persons who make up the underside of history. Within the familial and social locations of U.S. Hispanics, such solidarity entails first and foremost, the accompaniment of ordinary Latina women and children who are more often than not the primary victims of marginalization and oppression.

In their integral and historically driven vision of what is human, Latina/o theologians have been quick to point out how marginalization of Latinos/as is a systemic problem that involves the prophetic re-envisioning of what is publically and privately human. For instance, Maria Pilar Aquino, in her efforts to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of *lo cotidiano* persuasively argues how "daily life permeates the public as well as the private spheres." To paraphrase another Latino theologian, the relationship between public and private places exemplifies how the boardroom and bedroom imply one another.<sup>25</sup>

Modeled upon a "dialogical" way of relating the human and the divine, Aquino seeks to re-envision the relationship between public and private places and the persons who abide within them in egalitarian ways. At the personal level, this dialogical modeling of reality implies, among other things, egalitarian relationships between men and women and the denunciation of *machismo*. At the social level, the model implies the rejection of anthropologies that set forth competitive individuals or homogenized systems as foundations for generating what is human. At the theological level, the dialogical modeling of reality implies the rejection of dualistic approaches to sacred and profane history. The dialogical modeling of reality, ultimately rooted in God's self-communication and relationship to humanity, invites us to con-



ceive the human as a participation in and reflection of the life of God.

"Every view of what it means to be human implies a certain understanding of what is divine, and every understanding of what is divine issues in a particular view of what it means to be human."<sup>26</sup> Nowhere is the relation between the human and the divine, and the anthropological presuppositions of this relationship more evident than in those Latino/a reflections that implicitly or explicitly point to the ways in which the human ought to reflect the trinitarian mystery of God.

Influenced by the *mestizo/mulatto* identity of Latinos/as, and highly mindful of the cosmological and religious ethos of Latino/a cultures, García-Rivera proposes a notion of personhood founded upon what he terms the capacity to establish fellowship across "asymmetric differences." "True human differences," argues García-Rivera, "are not variations along a vertical scale of value but elements of a horizontal fellowship of sacramental grace."<sup>27</sup> For García-Rivera, this fellowship includes not only human creatures, but also all other creatures of God's creation. In his inclusive understanding of creaturely fellowship, García-Rivera overcomes the danger of anthropocentrism. In so doing, García-Rivera's theology articulates the integral anthropology that characterizes the popular religious imagination of U.S. Hispanics. The story of Guadalupe, which traces Juan Diego's journey from the death-like condition of an imposed human objectification to the grace-filled affirmation of his personhood, and which symbolically represents that journey with the presence of the blossoming of roses in December, this story reminds us that being creaturely human and all other forms of creaturely being in the world often imply one another.<sup>28</sup>

To fail to effect relationship with the other based on mutuality and interdependence is to sin. Within the U.S. context, this lack of communion often manifests itself in the various forms of prejudices that U.S. Hispanics experience. These prejudices show their



face in the exclusion of Latinos/as from full ecclesial and social participation. Building upon Rahner's classic axiom that the "economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity" (and vice versa), Sixto J. García argues for the socio-political manifestation of God's trinitarian life.<sup>29</sup> This life, maintains García, requires a perichoretic (a dynamic loving dialogue) structuring of relationships. Failure to enact this structure defaces the image of God in society, which precipitates, among other things, economic injustice, rejection of immigrants, sexism, religious intolerance, materialism, racism, and xenophobia.

*III. A contextual re-reading of Latino/a anthropology: Karl Rahner's theology of grace, his Christo-centric vision of humanity, and the socio-political implications of his thought*

This brief discussion of Latino/a anthropology has shown that within this particular contextual vision, being human entails: 1) being like the Galilean Christ; 2) an ethical and communal accompaniment of others that is mindful of socio-cultural experiences; 3) an openness to receive God's offer of grace, especially through "popular" religious expressions; 4) the struggle for self-preservation, self-determination, and the building of the "kingdom;" 5) an integral, inclusive, and ordinary "dialogical" model of relationships between men and women and the public and private spaces they inhabit; and 6) a trinitarian or communal vision of reality that seeks fellowship and mutuality with all God's creatures and for all persons within the social order. Within the broader context of contemporary theologies, these themes appropriate, critique, and develop central insights in Catholic theological anthropology. More specifically, they resonate well with the Rahnerian vision of what it means to be human, which has been widely embraced in Catholic circles after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas Latino/ theology responds to suffering and marginalized persons, Rahner responds to the European contexts of social



secularization and theological extrinsicism.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Rahner's theology underscores the God-given openness of the human to "hear" the word of grace. In his effort to refute a post-enlightenment society pervasively set on exiling God from ordinary worldly activity, and a theological tradition that ironically precipitated and contributed to this problem by affirming a twofold finality and separation with respect to what is human (nature) and what is divine (grace), Rahner proposes his concept of the supernatural existential. Building upon the work of the theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* (a key Catholic theological movement of the 1840s), Rahner argues that being human entails a divine invitation that constitutes persons "always and everywhere" in the offer of grace. By making the offer of grace a permanent and existential constituent of what it means to be human, Rahner's theology overcomes a number of dualistic anthropological implications.

Among other things, Rahner's theology, which distinguishes but never separates the human from the divine, paves the way for Catholic theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez to see in ordinary human activities like the struggle for the liberation of oppressed subjects the salvific hand of God. Moreover, Rahner's way of seeing the human as an "inner" moment of the life of grace also carries methodological implications with respect to what constitutes as *theological* reflection. The implication of Rahner's rejection of the neo-scholastic notion of pure nature (which at best represented a mere negative orientation to the divine) is that there is no human reality or reflective activity that escapes the trinitarian life of grace. Indeed, properly understood, the supernatural existential makes clear that all human reality and endeavors can be co-extensive with God's universal will to save.

Rahner's affirmation that realization in grace also implies realization of our natural capacities reflects one of the most central teachings of Catholic theology, namely, the Thomistic understanding that grace does not destroy or surpass, but perfects what is



human. In Rahner's thought this teaching finds particular expression in his Christo-oriented vision of humanity. For Rahner, "Christology is the beginning and end of anthropology. And this anthropology when most thoroughly realized in Christology, is eternally theology."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Rahner understands the humanity of Christ as the source and destiny of all human contexts. As a result of this Christo-centric orientation, Rahner wisely acknowledges all ways of being human as potentially symbolic of the God-human/spirit-body relationship that reaches its climatic moment in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

The incarnational vision of Rahner's anthropology spills over into his notion of person as spirit-in-the world. For Rahner, the human person is a unity of spirit-body whose correlative is communal existence in the world. This embodied and communal understanding of what it means to be human anticipates what in the late Rahner turns out to be a theological "filling-in" of his earlier thought with respect to socio-political consciousness and the catholicity of the Church. Not only do these writings challenge the Church to abandon its Euro-centricism and become a global church, but these writings also begin to even speak the language commonly associated today with political and liberation theologians. For instance, in a 1980 lecture entitled "*Wer ist dein Bruder?*," Rahner makes the love of the personal other the means to the encounter with the life of grace. But Rahner readily recognizes that in contemporary times such love has acquired new social and political responsibilities. The "Christian love of neighbor and communion" Rahner argues, "acquire a field of responsibility for the social structures required for life worth human living...."<sup>34</sup>

Numerous implications can be drawn from Rahner's theological anthropology. In what follows, I will limit myself to making two observations. First, from the perspective of Latino/a theologians, Rahner's theology of the "always and everywhere" offer of grace and its Christo-centric understanding of humanity under-



scores the validity, indeed the necessity, to affirm the grace-filled character of particular and ordinary experiences of Latino/as and their popular encounters with the life of grace. Latino/a theology, however, undoubtedly offers a qualified Galilean reading of the activity of grace that privileges the marginalized humanity of Jesus as the paradigm for understanding what it means to be and act in a human way. For Latinos/as, realization in grace necessarily implies participation in the life of the marginalized and crucified other. In so doing, Latino/a theology provides a contextualized reading of the "always and everywhere" offer of grace, and presents an alternative vision to what some critics have judged to be an overly positive Rahnerian anthropology.

Second, Rahner's embodied and communal notion of the self and his openness to the socio-political mediation of the love of God and neighbor (in itself a radical development of the scholastic notion of charity),<sup>35</sup> find much affinity with the Latino/a aesthetic that underscores "community as the birthplace of the self" and the Latino/a praxis that evokes inclusive and integral solidarity with the other as the most authentic expression of Christian charity. The Latino/a turn to the contextualized subject, however, seems more capable than Rahner's turn to the subject (especially as developed in his earlier writings) of speaking to those social conditions that impact the realization of the human.

#### *IV. Reading the signs of the time: Some final thoughts on Latino/a anthropology in light of globalization and the fragility of international relations.*

In his foreword to my book, Robert Schreiter questions how in light of the present reality of globalization, the human family will gauge identity as difference and identity as a commonly shared humanity. He goes on to point out how continuing conflict within nations "jeopardizes the possibility of people living as neighbors after overt conflict has come to an end."<sup>36</sup> "In a time when difference is rightly such an important category," Schreiter



observes, "the negotiation of difference and commonality, of catholicity and of unity becomes an area of anthropology that needs careful and extended exploration."<sup>37</sup>

In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11th, and the present fragility of relations at the inter-national and intra-national levels, Schreiter's prophetic observations have taken on special meaning. Now more than ever, the struggle to negotiate human differences and to birth an authentic catholicity has become an urgent task. The human family, and more specifically, those members of this family who live within privileged nations must learn to listen to and cherish particularity and otherness, and in a special way, commit themselves to justice, peace, and the struggle to build inclusive communities. In the spirit of the oft-cited aphorism of Latinos/as, each particular community of the human family is invited to proclaim: "*mi casa es tu casa*."

While the Latino/a vision of what it means to be human remains an "unfinished" project in our particular community's faith search for understanding, the anthropological insights explored above can contribute to the efforts currently underway to seek reconciliation among all members of the human family. First, in our *mestizo/mulatto* vision of what is human, Latino/a anthropology offers the broader human community the opportunity to envision commonality as a function of affirming the inter-relationship of human differences. The memory of this particular human vision, which emerged from our ancestors' social, religious, racial, and cultural interrelations, reminds us to remain keenly critical of attempts to homogenize communities. Indeed, from the pain-filled and grace-filled moments of our *mestizaje/mulatez* we have learned the tragic as well as the redemptive face of fostering catholicity within the human family.

Second, in our insistence upon the accompaniment of and solidarity with the marginalized other as the sacramental means to the encounter with grace, and in our communal (trinitarian) vision of society, Latino/a anthropology invites all at this time to



listen to the voices of the poor and marginalized and to strive to make historically present the face of God. The divine face will reveal itself in our midst when we seek to co-create a world of oneness-in-diversity rooted in acts of hospitality to alienated neighbors, and the embrace of interdependence at personal, communal, and national contexts. Above all, this aesthetic praxis must consider, as Latino/a anthropology rightly considers, the religious, social, cultural, racial, economic, gender, and political factors that mediate the love of God and neighbor.

Finally, as the anthropological category of religious identity becomes central in the attempts to address human conflicts, Latino/a anthropology offers the wisdom of popular faith expressions that often comprise the conversation, reconciliation, and communion of distinct religious traditions (e.g., traditions associated with *Guadalupe* and *La Caridad del Cobre*). The Gospel and its good news of the Word becoming flesh invites us to respect all human ways of relating to what is divine, and to see the Christ not as a suppression or destruction of what is particular and religious in the human, but rather as a gentle and peace-filled invitation to the fullness of this particularity.

The challenge of our times is indeed, as Rahner once commented, to become a mystic or cease being Christian at all. To be mystical does not entail an escape from the present concerns of the world in order to focus on "religious" matters. Rather, to be mystical today, as it has always been, means to be attentive and responsive to the revelation and presence of God in our midst. Confident in the God who lives with us as a communion of persons, we Latinas/os offer our communal vision of reality—a vision defined by sharing and being-for and with-the-other—as a constructive model for the reconciliation of human differences and the earthly in-breaking of God's "kin-dom."



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 212-27.
- <sup>2</sup> See Justo González who proposes the anthropological notion of a "for-otherness," in his *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 128-29. On the notion of human and divine sharing see Teresa Chavez Saucedo, "Love in the Crossroads: Stepping Stones to a Doctrine of God in Hispanic/Latino Theology," in *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology*, ed. José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 26-28 and Eliseo Pérez Alvarez, "In Memory of Me: Hispanic/Latino Christology Beyond Borders," in *Teología en Conjunto*, 34.
- <sup>3</sup> David Maldonado, "Doing Theology and the Anthropological Questions" in *Teología en Conjunto*, 100.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> I borrow the expressions "Latinamente" and "Hispanically" primarily from the writings of Orlando Espín. For instance, see Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Orbis Books, 1997), 158 and Espín, "Grace and Humanness: A Hispanic Perspective," in *We are a People!: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 154.
- <sup>6</sup> Cited in Miguel H. Díaz, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 1.
- <sup>7</sup> For an excellent historical and theological overview of this period see Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), esp. 257-267.
- <sup>8</sup> Cited in Eduardo C. Fernández, *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972-1998)* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 2000), 99. For an insightful discussion of the emergence of contextual theology in the Church see the entire chapter, pp. 95-130.
- <sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.
- <sup>10</sup> For instance, see Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982).
- <sup>11</sup> On the influence of Costas upon the work of other Protestant Latino theologians (Eldin Villafañe, Harold Recinos, and Samuel Solivan) see *La Cosecha*, 77-87.
- <sup>12</sup> See Sixto García, "Sources and Loci of Hispanic Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 1/1(1993): 22-43. On collaborative Catholic-Protestant U.S Hispanic efforts see, for instance, the contribution of Justo González in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 217-229.
- <sup>13</sup> See Luis F. Ladaria, *Introducción a la antropología teológica* (Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1996), 9-42.
- <sup>14</sup> See *On Being Human*, 20-21.
- <sup>15</sup> *On Being Human*, 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 56.
- <sup>17</sup> See my chapter in *From the Heart of Our People*, "Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres," 153-171.
- <sup>18</sup> *On Being Human*, 33.
- <sup>19</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of*

*Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 205.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>21</sup> See *On Being Human*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>23</sup> Espín, "An Exploration into the Reality of Grace and Sin," in *From the Heart of our People*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> See *On Being Human*, 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Called to Freedom: Liberation Theology and the Future of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 78.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in *On Being Human*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> See Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 101-111.

<sup>28</sup> For similar arguments drawn from a Protestant perspective see Saucedo, "Love in the Crossroads," *op. cit.*, 22-32.

<sup>29</sup> For a list and discussion of specific reasons to engage the thought of Karl Rahner in Latino/a thought see *On Being Human*, 79-86.

<sup>30</sup> On secularism and extrinsicism, see *On Being Human*, 88-89.

<sup>31</sup> *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 225.

<sup>32</sup> On Rahner's theology of symbol see, *On Being Human*, 92-93.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in *On Being Human*, 104.

<sup>34</sup> See *On Being Human*, 101-110.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., ix.

\* Ibid.



## Response to Miguel H. Díaz

Daniel L. Migliore

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(This paper was first presented as a response to a lecture by Miguel Díaz which summarized his award-winning book, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*.)

I share several affinities with Miguel Díaz. Like Díaz, I am a systematic theologian who works at the task of interpreting Christian faith in its wholeness and with as much clarity and intelligibility as can be achieved. Also like Díaz, I am Christocentric and trinitarian in my theological orientation. Moreover, I share his strong interest in contextual theologies having, for many years, encouraged responsible contextual theological work in my teaching at Princeton Seminary. I, therefore, take special delight in reading and hearing someone who performs this task so well. I am also like Díaz in having a great theological mentor whose first name is Karl. Whereas in Díaz's case the mentor is Karl Rahner, in mine it is Karl Barth.

Díaz has given us *a work of mature contextual theology*. It is ripe, full-bodied, fully-developed, and life-nourishing. The mature quality of Díaz's work is evident in many ways. There is, for

instance, no mistaking the fact that he speaks out of and to a particular social, cultural, and religious context. His intent is to describe what it means to be human "Hispanically," to be human "latinamente." However, Díaz's turn to a particular context to define human being does not result in a turn to provinciality and narrowness. On the contrary, it leads to a genuinely universal and inclusive vision of our human being addressed by the grace of God "everywhere and always" although supremely in Jesus Christ.

Likewise, when Díaz calls us to recognize God's partiality to the poor, he does not promote a manichean-like division of the world into the perfectly innocent and the hopelessly wicked. Yes, he speaks of a solidarity with those who are unjustly excluded and he summons the church to struggle for justice and for recognition of the dignity of the marginalized. But he does this without any spirit of bitterness or revenge. The maturity of Díaz's work is also evident in his call to the church to honor the embodied character of human life. As interpreted by Díaz, human embodiment, far from being divorced from the longing of the human spirit for fullness of life in communion with God and all of God's creatures, is the medium through which that longing is fulfilled. All this is what I have in mind in referring to Díaz's contextual theology as holistic and mature. He avoids the many dualisms and dichotomies that characterize not only some traditional expressions of Christian faith but also some critiques of these traditional expressions of faith that tend to fracture the world into the local and the ecumenical, the particular and the universal, the victims and the perpetrators. Díaz invites us to attend to the particular Hispanic way of being human and its concrete encounter with God's grace. He does this, however, with the expectation that this will lead not to a constriction of Christian faith and theology but precisely to a discovery of the inexhaustible depth and breadth of that grace.

Second, when Díaz "turns to context," the result is not only a



mature contextual theology that avoids a dichotomizing of reality, it is also a *contextual theology open to and inviting of conversation with the genuinely other*. One of the familiar but distressing features of much theological work is that it manages to converse only with itself or with like-minded theologians. Often theologians from the same tradition or the same school quote each other freely and give the appearance of a robust dialogue when in fact it is simply a complex monologue. Feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologians are now frequently reminding male bastions of theology of how important it is to dialogue with people long ignored or silenced.

The work of Miguel Díaz is genuinely dialogical, genuinely conversational. It builds a conversation about what it means to be human and specifically what it means to be human "latinamente" among no less than seven Hispanic theologians. These theologians have genuinely different emphases, they come out of different Hispanic contexts, and they include both men and women.

But beyond this inclusion of many Hispanic voices, the conversational character of Díaz's contextual theology is evident in the major goal of his work, which is to strike up a conversation and to build a bridge between Hispanic theological anthropology and the theological anthropology of the greatest of twentieth-century Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner. He states the thesis of his work as follows:

"U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology can be systematically, philosophically, and theologically enriched by engaging in an explicit conversation with Karl Rahner, and Karl Rahner's theological anthropology can be deepened, developed, and critiqued from the perspective of U.S. Hispanic visions."

Rahner's European context and U.S. Hispanic theology's context are, of course, different in important ways, and yet Díaz manages to bring them into mutually enriching conversation. Díaz



thus gives us a model of contextual theology in conversation with what is genuinely other, theology that is willing to listen to, learn from, contribute to, and perhaps also help correct and thus enrich the conversational other.

Third, Díaz's contextual theology is *a theology of inclusive community* that yields a vision of new community—the people of God, the body of Christ, the *koinonia* of the Spirit—as the purpose and goal of God's work of salvation. Díaz shows that Rahner's magisterial theological work is developed in response to the modern philosophical "turn to the subject." While appreciating Rahner's achievement, Díaz pushes beyond it by calling theology to a turn, or we might say, a conversion, to the other and not simply to the abstract other but to the socially, culturally, and religiously embodied other. We are not isolated individuals. Human beings are members of a community, shaped by the web of relationships and practices that constitute that community. God's activity in the world is directed not merely to the salvation of individual souls but to the formation of human life in community, community that is not suffocatingly homogeneous but includes and celebrates difference. Here Díaz draws from the rich Hispanic history and experience of *mestizaje* or mixture of ethnic and racial histories as a symbol and vision of the nature and mission of the people of God in the world of globalization and precarious international relations. Díaz's call to recognize that our true humanity can be realized only in the delicate interplay of difference and commonality I find to be an absolutely accurate description of the theological and missiological task of the church in our post 9/11 world.

But now in the spirit of conversation that Díaz so ably represents I raise two questions. Both have to do with the emphasis on particularity, not in order to dispute this emphasis, but to ask whether it must not be insisted upon with respect to our appropriation of the biblical tradition as well as with respect to the context in which we do our theology. I have the uncanny sense that



in raising this question I am putting Karl Barth in conversation with Karl Rahner, or more broadly, I am raising the sort of question that a Protestant or evangelical Hispanic Christian would likely raise in a friendly conversation with his or her Roman Catholic Hispanic brothers and sisters.

The first question then is: Do we not have to attend closely to the particularity of biblical witness in its depiction of human life in its opposition to and transformation by the grace of God? Díaz sees a certain development in Rahner's theological anthropology. Rahner moves from a rather individual-centered anthropology in his earlier writings to a more communally, politically, and culturally dense understanding of human life. His later work also seems to open the possibility of embracing a grace/sin model for theological anthropology instead of holding to an exclusive nature/grace model. I suspect that these moves in Rahner's thinking reflect in no small part a movement from a predominantly metaphysical to a more biblical conceptuality in theological anthropology. My question about the place of the biblical witness in the construction of a theological anthropology must not be understood as a simplistic demonizing of all metaphysical and ontological reflection in theology. That would be folly. Instead, I am asking whether a theological conversation about what it means to be truly human must not in a certain way privilege the biblical witness. Must it not attend to the particularities of the biblical witness at least as much as it does to the particular insights gained from many other sources of reflection on the meaning of being human? It is my impression that among the Catholic Hispanic theologians discussed by Díaz, Virgilio Elizondo with his depiction of the Galilean identity of Jesus seems to be most aware of the importance of this question. In any case, I suspect this matter of biblical particularity is a topic that would likely be part of any conversation within the wider Hispanic community that would include both Roman Catholic and Protestant or evangelical Christians.



My second question is closely related to the first. It has to do with Díaz's fascinating discussion of the importance of Marian symbols and practices in popular Hispanic Catholicism. I find Díaz's careful treatment of popular Marian piety and its contextual mediation of the concrete presence of God's grace among the poor very illuminating. I am grateful for Díaz's sensitive and nuanced interpretation of this aspect of Roman Catholic theology and spirituality.

But once again the matter of the particularity of the New Testament witness must be raised. Must not our appreciation of the "sacramental" dimensions of Marian practices be kept in conversation with the New Testament Marian witness that is so uniformly and relentlessly a witness to Jesus Christ and the liberating work of God through him? Must we not carefully distinguish between the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist in Christian life, with its unambiguous centering on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and all church practices or "sacramentals," always referring these "sacramentals" to the sacrament where the once for all presence of God in Jesus Christ is witnessed and celebrated? May not Marian devotions sometimes go astray? May we not become overly sentimental about them and evaluate them in an unambiguously rosy light? May they not also need to be, even if not dismissed or eliminated, perhaps liberated, as all Christian life and practice needs to be liberated and reformed, again and again? And if so, where will the power for such liberation and reformation come from if not the scriptural witness where Mary and the prophets and apostles testify to the justice-bringing and liberating activity of Jesus Christ and his gospel? Having asked that question, I must immediately go on to say I am intrigued by Díaz's suggestion that the real focus in an interpretation of Marian piety, as for example in the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, must be pneumatology, that is, an understanding of the real presence and transforming activity of the Holy Spirit who, in different times and places, bears new and concrete wit-

ness to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Let me conclude my comments, however, not with these questions for further conversation, but with a repeated expression of admiration and gratitude to Díaz for his fine work. I applaud his Hispanic contextual theology for its maturity, its conversational spirit, and its call to inclusive community as concrete anticipation of the reign of God. As a fitting expression of Dean Díaz's plea for attention to the aesthetic his book cover includes art by the designer William Roger Clark. It portrays a circle consisting of Mary and the disciples at prayer. At least to my viewing, the disciples are old and young; some have beards and some don't; some are raising their right hands and some their left. The disciples of the risen Jesus Christ form a *mestizaje* circle, the body of Christ, facing out to the world and looking upward to the Spirit that is descending upon them in the form of a dove from the heavenly Father symbolized by the shining sun. Here is a marvelous portrayal of God's new community gathered into the triune community of Father, Son, and Spirit. That is a lovely expression of contextual theology *latinamente*, a fitting representation indeed of Díaz's Latino/a anthropology and its communal vision of reality.



# **Paul vs. Empire: A Postcolonial and Latino Reading of Philippians**

Efrain Agosto

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**I**ntroduction: Postmodern and Postcolonial Theory and Biblical Interpretation.<sup>1</sup> This essay reflects on the use of post-modern and, especially, postcolonial theory in biblical studies addressed specifically through a case study of Paul's Letter to Philippians.

## **Postmodernism and the Bible**

Postmodern theory defies definition. Its own proponents argue

that the very nature of postmodernism resists the idea of stasis and definitiveness. "Postmodern thought is not one thing. Indeed, most postmodern thinkers would argue that it cannot and should not be just one thing; most varieties of postmodernism strike out against the very notions of identity and unity in one way or another."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the "textures of postmodernism," include its strong critique of modernity's preoccupation with progress over against the past, reason determined by scientific study, and the distribution of truth seeking in isolated, self-regulating "spheres" or disciplines.<sup>3</sup>

Biblical critics who have adapted postmodern theory in their work critique trends in modern biblical criticism in the last two centuries that argue for (1) progressively "better" biblical interpretative methods rather than the so-called "outmoded" methodologies of the past; (2) prescribed "scientific" approaches to the study of the Bible; and (3) especially the need for "specialization" and thus isolation in the field, even from theological reasoning because it "deforms" objective "historical" investigation.<sup>4</sup>

Postmodern thought critically questions the absolute realms of modernity, that is, "experience, atemporal truth, [and] a politics of selective 'equality.'" Instead, postmodernism consistently poses the opposites as legitimate alternatives in the search for truth.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of postmodern thought what is considered "modern experience" tends to exclude a "foreign experience" and to describe it instead as a faded "tradition." Also, what is considered "modern truth" might exclude someone else's truth as "superstition." "Modern politics" might make certain people on the margins of that political reality "invisible."<sup>6</sup> Thus when applied to biblical criticism, postmodern thought consistently problematizes the task of interpretation. "Much postmodern interpretation is polemical rather than logical and the modality of polemics must confuse readers who are used to impersonal exegesis."<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, postmodern biblical interpretation reminds us that



there is no such thing as “impersonal” or purely objective exegesis. Indeed, biblical exegesis is often very personal, very passionate, and very relevant. Biblical exegesis should have theological value. Otherwise, why engage these ancient texts at all if they have no comprehensible, current-day meaning? Critical questioning of the biblical material from the perspective of the reader’s realities must accompany any historical, literary, and theological inquiry of that material. Postmodern thought quite rightly insists on such an approach to the task of biblical interpretation.

However, although postmodern critique maintains a reader-oriented perspective at the forefront of the interpretative task, and rightly questions the exclusive hold on the task of biblical interpretation by the historical critical method, one should not disavow historical methodologies completely. Postmodern interpreters remind us that scientific exegesis can be isolating and distancing from the life and meaning of texts. In particular, they question the notion that biblical documents, including specific passages within those documents, can have only one meaning that typically resides only in authorial intent and the understanding of the original audience. While important and necessary caveats, nonetheless the search for historical meaning in these ancient texts as a vital, though not exclusive, aspect of biblical interpretation must not be abandoned. It is both legitimate and possible to reconstruct significant historical understanding about the original authors and their audiences through careful historical investigation of the biblical material.

Postmodern thought has helped all of us to remember that no interpretation can ever be completely devoid of subjective bias. We all have our own, personal (or communal), current-day questions and concerns, whether unconscious or not, that we carry with us into the interpretive task, whether we admit it or not, including the task of biblical interpretation. As one critic writes, “reorienting interpretation in relation to the reader rather than the writer is a characteristic found in much ‘postmodern’ reading.”<sup>5</sup>



Yet, I still strive for historical reconstruction, even if in the long run I realize that much of my interpretation might offer more historical construction.<sup>9</sup> I may never get completely into the shoes of my Christian forebears in the early centuries. I can only catch glimpses, albeit significant ones, of their experience in my reading. And it is from those glimpses that we can construct a reading of those ancient texts, which along with our own yearnings and experiences become viable for our faith today. For this dose of hermeneutical reality, I think we can be grateful to postmodern thinking.

### **Postcolonialism and the Bible**

Similar complexities and ambiguities characterize my reading to date of postcolonial theory and its application to biblical interpretation, although I find much more affinity with it than with postmodern theory. In general, postcolonial thinking asks how imperialism, wherever it is found, has affected its colonies. As one postcolonial critic put it, "to be colonized is to be removed from history."<sup>10</sup> Postcolonial criticism attempts to write the colonized back into history. It undertakes this task with two fundamental foci. First, postcolonial interpretation studies "the totality of 'texts' [written and otherwise] that participate in hegemonizing other cultures." Second, postcolonial interpretation undertakes "the study of texts that write back to connect or undo western hegemony."<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, most postcolonial critics resist being subsumed under postmodernism; otherwise we risk "postmodern colonization of the postcolonial."<sup>12</sup> According to Georg Gugelberger, postmodernism "tends to postulate the death of history," but "postcolonial writing insists on the historical as foundational and all-embracing."<sup>13</sup> This corresponds to my earlier concern not to eradicate completely the historical aspects of biblical interpretation.

Thus, when applied to biblical interpretation, I found postcolo-



nial criticism more helpful than postmodern criticism in reading the Bible. Fernando Segovia, for example, posits three aspects in the "postcolonial optic" for reading the Bible. First, he asks about those signs of colonial domination present in the world of the biblical texts. In the case of the New Testament, it is obvious that these documents emerge from communities immersed in the imperial domination of Rome. For example, Paul's Christian communities were founded in the imperial "colonies" of the Greek east. When reading Paul's letters, as well as the rest of the New Testament, we must ask about the overwhelming power and reality of the Roman Empire and its impact on these New Testament communities. To what extent did these New Testament documents, including Paul's letters, accommodate or resist the imperial dominance and concomitant colonialism of its context?

Second, Segovia suggests that a postcolonial reading of the New Testament revisit historic interpretations of its texts and the methodologies used, especially traditional historical-critical methods, precisely because these emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the context of such colonial powers as Spain, France, and England. Imperialism, as defined by postcolonial theorists, imposes one dominant country and its culture over another, distant nation, usually for economic purposes. The imperialism of Spain, Portugal, France, and England, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, generally speaking, carried with it a missionary agenda as well and hence the appropriate biblical interpretation to support both imperialism and missionizing. U.S. imperialism ("manifest destiny") in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, also contributed to this phenomenon. Segovia argues that the biblical interpretations and historical critical methodologies that accompanied imperialism should not be left dormant without a close, critical analysis.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, just as postmodernism problematizes the mythical absolutes of empirical experience, scientific knowledge, and equal distribution of power, postcolonialism questions imperial domi-



nation, wherever it might be found, in both the ancient and modern worlds. Neither theory allows sleeping giants to lie.

Segovia also posits a third set of questions, connected to the role of modern colonial powers. What is the role of "the children of the colonized," to use Segovia's term, in the whole enterprise of biblical interpretation? As people who have experienced the effects of colonial domination for generations, they are in a unique position to read imperial and colonial reality as integral aspects of the biblical text. Therefore, it is imperative for the profession of biblical criticism to invite and include the children of the colonized in the task of biblical interpretation, those whose parents and grandparents, whose "antepasados" or forebears, experienced imperialism and colonization in generations not too far removed from our own.

As in postmodern theory, postcolonial focus on the children of the colonized allows for a shift of biblical interpretation from text to reader. Such a shift is legitimate and necessary in our postcolonial era because the effects of the long colonial history of the West over non-western cultures, including non-western minorities in the U.S., still dominate the landscape of our world. Readers from non-western cultures know what imperialism and colonialism looks and feels like. Providing the children of the colonized access to the whole field of biblical interpretation makes possible a better, more complete reading of the biblical texts.

The rest of this article, then, is an exercise in postcolonial reading of a New Testament text, namely Paul's Letter to the Philippians. As a child of the colonized, in my case, a child of parents just a generation removed from the 1898 take-over of the island of Puerto Rico by U.S. forces as spoils of the Spanish American war, I will read about another colonized region, the city of Philippi in the first century of the common era, the heart of Roman imperial domination in the Greek east. Thus, in the first instance, I want to read Philippians in its historical context because, despite the concerns of postmodernism, I must attempt



some kind of historical and literary reconstruction. Nonetheless, such a reading will engage the “postcolonial optic” proposed by Fernando Segovia; namely, how does this document resist or accommodate Roman imperial hegemony?

Second, however, I will also engage the question of my own experience as a child of colonization. What do I bring to the table of interpretation with regard to this ancient text? What aspects of imperialism in this text do I see that either remind me of my own context, or that my own context allows me to see, with regard to the ancient text and context?

### **A Reconstruction of Philippians Using Rhetorical Analysis**

The occasion for Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, written sometime in the decade of the fifties or early sixties C.E.,<sup>15</sup> is illuminated by a rhetorical analysis of the letter that helps us reconstruct, to some extent, what might have happened.<sup>16</sup> Paul begins the letter with an *exordium* (introduction) in which he gives thanks to the Philippians for their ongoing partnership with him and his ministry, even though he has been imprisoned (1:3-11). In the *narratio* of the letter (“statement of the facts”), Paul reports on his situation in a Roman prison and his desire to see the Philippians, if he survives an upcoming trial (Phil 1:12-26). Then Paul turns to the all-important *propositio* (purpose statement) of the letter, in which he exhorts the community toward unity and steadfastness in the midst of conflict and opposition (1:27-30). Thus, while Paul resolutely faces his own opposition in an imprisoned situation, he seeks to encourage the Philippians to overcome their situation of conflict and opposition.

In the heart of the letter, the *probatio* (“proofs”), Paul wants the Philippians to follow certain examples as a response to their situation of conflict (Jesus, Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, 2:1-30). Paul also acknowledges the presence of opposition in Philippi and offers an alternative “discourse” – keeping their “eyes on the prize,” the prize being a “heavenly citizenship” beyond their current state of conflict in Philippi, a conflict evidently brought about



by their faith commitments (3:1-21). Both these sections (Phil 2 & 3) constitute that part of Paul's rhetoric in which he cites examples, both positive and negative, to "prove" to the Philippians that seeking unity in the midst of conflict (what he asks of them in the *propositio* of 1:27-30) is both preferable and possible.

Finally, Paul turns to a *peroratio*, or recapitulation, of his exhortation to the Philippians, in which he encourages unity, peace, and love, not only for the community as a whole (4:4-9), but especially for two women leaders, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3). These women have worked together with Paul on behalf of the gospel, and now seem to be divided against each other. Paul exhorts their unity in such a way that their continuing division could very well threaten the well being of the entire congregation.<sup>17</sup> In a final *peroratio* to the letter, Paul thanks the community again for their partnership and monetary support of his ministry (Phil 4:10-20; cf. 1:3-7). Paul mentions Epaphroditus, whom he previously praised (Phil 2:25-30), as the one who delivers the Philippian gift. This offering from the Philippians to Paul in prison exemplifies a kind of "underground economy" that the Pauline mission utilizes over against the imperial political economies, a point to which I will return below.<sup>18</sup>

In short, Paul's Letter to the Philippians represents a "letter of friendship" between himself and his congregation in the Roman colony of Philippi.<sup>19</sup> His difficult situation of imprisonment, including the possibility of death, does not preclude ministry to a congregation that has been supportive of the Pauline mission faithfully throughout, especially given their own situation of difficulty that they currently confront. Paul exhorts them to unity and steadfastness in the face of opposition, and cites models of those who have remained faithful in similar circumstances, including himself, his close associate Timothy, a church representative, Epaphroditus, and above all Jesus Christ.



## Aspects of a Postcolonial Reading

A postcolonial reading of the Philippian letter and context by this Latino “child of colonialism” yields four sets of questions for the text.

### 1. *Paul's Imprisonment*

First, the fact of Paul's imprisonment in a Roman cell merits attention. What was Roman imprisonment like and how did it impact Paul's Letter to the Philippians? Scholars have debated as to whether Paul was imprisoned in Rome or some other location, closer to Philippi when he wrote this letter. In particular, Ephesus has been suggested as a more logical alternative than Rome, given references to frequent travel in this letter and the proximity of Ephesus to Philippi (300 miles versus 800 for Rome).<sup>20</sup>

Others suggest Rome as provenance for the letter because of references to the Roman guard (the “praetorian,” Phil 1:13) and to “the household of Caesar” (4:22). However, given the widespread influence of the Empire, including its prison system and bureaucracy, the “praetorian guard,” and “Caesar's household” (*oikia* – bureaucracy and servants) could be anywhere, but most especially in major urban centers like Ephesus and Philippi. Philippi, in fact, held status as a Roman “colonia,” which meant its residents, many veterans of Roman wars and their descendents, lived tax-free, automatically received coveted Roman citizenship, and emulated Roman institutions. The concerns that Paul expresses in Philippians for his survival in a Roman prison (1:19-26) cannot be limited to a final imprisonment in Rome. Rather, Roman imperial hegemony, including the terror of prison, extended itself to the provinces and the colonies, especially major economic and administrative centers, such as Ephesus in Asia.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, the internal evidence in Philippians points to a difficult imprisonment for Paul. First, there are a group of opponents, who, even though they preach Christ in Paul's absence, do so without his well being in mind (Phil 1:15-18). Quite possibly



they question Paul's integrity because, after all, he is in prison. Paul "rejoices" that they continue to preach Christ, but one senses that their lack of loyalty to him is a source of pain. Second, Paul's emotional plea for release so he could once again minister to the Philippians (Phil 1:19-26) reflects the hardship of an imperial prison. He could very well not be released and face death after writing this letter, and he knew it.

Further, Paul's preaching of "good news" (*euangelion* – a term often used with regard to the "good news" of an imperial celebration or military victory) about another "lord" (*kurios* – a term often reserved for the emperor) probably landed him in jail, facing the possibility of execution.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in his letter, Paul argues that just like he himself may have to sacrifice his life as a "libation" for the cause of the gospel and his churches (Phil 2:17), the Philippians should continue their faithfulness and unity for the gospel, in spite of the opposition of enemies in Roman Philippi.

In short, Roman imprisonment, wherever it was, was not pleasant for Paul. He suffered harsh treatment, confronted the possibility of death, and was challenged for his authority over the churches he himself founded. However, Paul turned these negatives into positives. He expected to be released so that he could continue his ministry, although he trusted that the gospel would continue to be preached despite his absence (cf. Phil 1:12-30). Moreover, and perhaps most important for our understanding of the overall thrust of the Philippian letter, Paul used his status of suffering as a model for his congregations, including the Philippians. He expected them to endure and move forward in the midst of their conflict and opposition, just like he did in his. Roman prison chained him but not the gospel message or the gospel communities.

## *2. Model Leaders*

Along these lines, Paul puts forward valiant examples in the *probatio* of his letter, namely Jesus, Timothy and Epaphroditus.



Each of them sacrifices something for the well being of the gospel community. In an Empire enamored with glory and honor, Paul pictures Jesus as “emptying himself” of his heavenly glory for the greater good (2:7a). His “servant” attitude (*doulos* – slave) included taking human form (2:7b). Now, in a postcolonial reading, the children of the colonized who resist any return to servitude might question such a “journey downward.” However, the payoff of ultimate vindication and exaltation (“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,” Phil 2:9-11), in which Paul again uses the terms of imperial ideology (Jesus as *Kurios* [Lord], and in that way giving *doxa* [glory] to God the *pater* [father]), contradicted how one expected to be glorified and honored in the Empire. No crucified carpenter should expect to receive ultimate vindication and honor, such as depicted in the Christ Hymn Paul cites in Phil 2:5-11.

Similarly, Paul praises the leadership of Timothy, who like Jesus showed interest in the well being of the community more than his own (2:20-21), and Epaphroditus, who sacrificed his own health to be with Paul on behalf of his community, the Philippians (2:25-30). These leaders – Jesus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, as well as Paul—showed qualities that went beyond the expectations of typical leaders in Rome’s imperial politics, with their search for glory and honor. The inclusion of Paul’s “coworkers” Euodia and Syntyche in the discourse, and Paul’s effort to end their leadership rift (Phil 4:2-3) also shows the unique diversity of Paul’s leadership team. Rarely in imperial commendations does one see the commendation of women as community leaders as we do in Paul here in Philippians, but also in his Letter to the Romans with Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Paul often commended leaders for their sacrifice and risks on behalf of the gospel community, regardless of their status



in the larger Greco-Roman society. Such practices went against the grain in the leadership practices of the Roman Empire. Indeed, having as founder a leader crucified on a Roman cross represented the height of “foolishness” in the eyes of imperial society (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25). Moreover, to name such a crucified founder, “Savior” (Phil 3:20) and “Lord” (Phil 2:11), terms reserved for the Roman emperor, represented the type of challenge that probably precipitated Paul’s imprisonment.

### *3. Heavenly Citizenship*

Third, the goal of heavenly citizenship in Philippians 3:20 seems directed precisely at a coveted status throughout the Empire, but especially in Roman colonies like Philippi, where Roman citizenship was offered, particularly to local political and religious leaders, in exchange for loyalty to the Empire. In fact, for its loyalty to him, Octavian renamed the city in his honor in 31 BCE, “Colonia Augusta Iulia Philippensis,” and established it as a haven for his military veterans. Modeled after Rome in its administration, governance, and architecture in the period following finding favor with Augustus, Philippi flourished economically and politically.<sup>24</sup> No wonder, then, that a group of believers in the Lordship of Jesus the Christ might encounter opposition and persecution in such a setting.

The Apostle Paul called such opposition “dogs” in his letter to the Philippian Christians (Phil 3:2). Because of the Jew-Gentile polemic and biographical references that follow in Phil 3:3-6, most commentators interpret Paul’s harsh reference to “dogs” as a reversal of what Jews called Gentiles. According to this view, Jewish Christian opposition to a Gentile Christianity devoid of circumcision and dietary requirements, as in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, was present in Philippi as well.<sup>25</sup> However, such an understanding is not without its difficulties. Why is this problem addressed only here in Phil 3, and not even alluded to elsewhere in the entire letter?



More likely, Paul cites the Jew-Gentile polemic from elsewhere among his churches in his biographical references of 3:4-6 ("If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless") as a comparative challenge. Just as he and his churches have confronted this opposition and seen what is really to be valued ("knowing Christ Jesus my Lord," and "gaining" him, 3:8), Philippian Christians should confront their opposition to their new-found faith, even if it challenges their status as loyal Roman citizens. After all, theirs is a "heavenly citizenship" (3:20). Paul's opponents elsewhere "serve as a foil to Paul himself with his own faultless credentials,"<sup>26</sup> and ultimately in this context to the Philippian believers so that they might truly "stand firm in the Lord" (4:1).

Thus Paul challenges the notion of honor by means of earthly achievements, whether in the Jewish law, like he did, or in Roman citizenship, like many in Philippi and throughout the Empire. In the Christian community, honor lies in gaining Christ and God's righteousness – *diakaiosune* – the Roman value of justice which Paul transposes into a divine value ultimately achieved by faith in Christ, not faith in law or a political status (3:7-9). In this way, Paul subtly, but firmly, challenges the hegemony of the Roman state, even in matters of religious allegiance. He echoes the gospel adage, "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" (cf. Mk 12:17). For Philippian Christians, as for Pauline Christians everywhere, their ultimate loyalty is to "our citizenship" in heaven, from whence "we are expecting a Savior [*soter*, another term reserved for the Emperor], the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20). In what must have been a radical departure for any Philippian colonist, imperial Roman citizenship must take second place in such a worldview.



#### 4. An "Underground Economy"

Finally, as I already mentioned, a postcolonial reading of Philippians must explore the "underground economy" of the Pauline mission. Paul often worked "with his hands" – at manual labor (cf. 1 Thess 2:9, 2 Cor 11:7) – in order to support his ministry and not depend on the poor in his churches. However when imprisoned, as he was when he wrote to the Philippians, Paul depended on gifts from his supporting congregations. Indeed, Paul practiced *koinonia* with several of his churches, entering into an agreement of mutual benefit with a partner (*koinono*) in order to carry out a joint enterprise (Phil 4:15, cf. Gal 2:9).<sup>27</sup> In Paul's case, the venture was spreading the gospel and establishing communities of faith. For this ministry Paul depended on his own manual labor, on *koinonia* with churches, or on the support of well-to-do individuals within the community, like the patroness Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2).

Paul also organized a collection for the Jerusalem church from his Greek churches. Thus he had "a horizontal movement of resources from one subject people to another."<sup>28</sup> Details about this collection (1 Cor 16:1-4, 2 Cor 8 and 9) "indicate that the network of assemblies had an 'international' political-economic dimension diametrically opposed to the tributary political economy of the Empire."<sup>29</sup> Money in the Empire flowed from bottom to top, and from the margins (conquered territories) to the center (Rome) by means of extreme and extensive taxation. In Paul's churches, resources traveled to where they were needed to carry out the gospel mission and to "remember the poor" (Gal 2:10). Thus, by means of this "underground economy," Paul once again challenged business as usual in the Roman Empire, even if only within the limits of his small, urban congregations.

#### A Latino Reading of Philippians

After a historical/literary reading, with the help of rhetorical analysis, to establish the probable occasion and purpose of Paul's



Letter to the Philippians, and a postcolonial reading that reflects on four anti-imperial aspects of the letter, I now turn to a more specifically Latino reading. How do we incorporate the perspectives of actual flesh and blood postcolonial readers of the biblical text, in this case a Latino reader, as suggested by Fernando Segovia? At this point, my comments can only be suggestive.

Clearly, imprisonment was a reality in Paul's ministry (cf. 2 Cor 11:23). Roman imprisonment was hellish in every way. It was an instrument of imperial terror and control.<sup>30</sup> A postcolonial reading of Philippians explores the contours of what it meant for Paul to be a Roman prisoner, but it also explores the use of prison in both colonial and neocolonial settings in our modern and postmodern era. For example, the prison experiences and writings of such figures as the Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos, as well as the African American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., who modeled his Letter from Birmingham Prison after Paul's prison letters, must be mined to determine aspects of postcolonial reality in our own day.<sup>31</sup>

Recently, the Puerto Rican singer and *independista* Danny Rivera, imprisoned for protesting the occupation of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques by the U.S. military, described the meaning of his experience in a federal prison as "estar encarcelado sin ser criminal, simplemente por amar la libertad y la justicia" ("being imprisoned without being a criminal, simply for loving freedom and justice").<sup>32</sup> Such reflections and experiences, as those of Albizu Campos, King, Rivera and many others, can bring to light comparative imperial and postcolonial reflections, including those from religious and biblical perspectives. They can help us read the biblical text from a postcolonial perspective, and not just an assumed, but actually non-existent, "objective," "unbiased" cultural and political stance.

A second avenue of postcolonial dialogue between Paul, Philippians, and Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. involves the issue of leadership. Paul empowered leaders after the model of Jesus, to



serve his communities regardless of their status in the Empire. Service and sacrifice were the key qualities expected, unlike leaders in the Empire, where family ties, social status and wealth were consistently touted as the means of leadership advancement.<sup>33</sup> In the U.S. Hispanic/Latino community, including our churches, the children of the colonized have consistently developed our own cadre of leaders, from the bottom up, regardless of the credentials and expectations of the larger, dominant society. More and more avenues of leadership are opening up for our marginalized Latino communities (e.g., through the efforts of the Hispanic Theological Initiative), but the church and other grassroots communities, like Paul's urban communities, continue to be a locus of leadership development. In our postcolonial world, we must continue to ensure access to leadership opportunity without recreating the colonizer's oppressive and limiting structure. Similar to Paul's earliest congregations (and unlike later generations of his congregations as represented in the Pastoral Epistles, which began to limit the role of women and the poor in the exercise of church leadership), our community must keep lines of leadership and authority fluid rather than hierarchical.<sup>34</sup>

Third, we must reflect on the issue of citizenship. In 1917, the Jones Act by the U.S. Congress declared residents of the island of Puerto Rico citizens of the United States. The island had been under U.S. control since 1898. One rationale for this action lay in the need for recruits when the U.S. entered World War I, rather than an act of benevolence and liberation. Why not send our colonized peoples to the battlefield?<sup>35</sup>

The long-term impact of this unilateral act has been a source of much intense debate. Many have lauded the easy access to and from the island to the U.S. mainland for jobs and better living conditions. However, the elimination of the entity of Puerto Rican citizenship and, therefore, the concept of nationhood for Puerto Rico, has had a negative impact over time. Much like Roman Philippi, citizenship has had a two-edged sword. Residents of the



former city-state Philippi could have Roman citizenship and all its benefits with regard to taxation and military security, but their loyalty to Rome must be unquestioned. The cost of economic and military security was loss of identity. This resonates very much with the current neocolonial status of Puerto Rico, exemplified by the struggle to manage the future of its people and their health on the island of Vieques. As in Paul's exhortation to the Philippians (Phil 3:20), in the Vieques crisis the people of Puerto Rico have found an "ur-citizenship"<sup>36</sup> that supercedes the technicality of U.S. citizenship and the lack of a defined nationhood. They have found a postcolonial voice.

Finally, what of the economic dimensions? Fernando Segovia writes that at each stage of imperialism in the modern and post-modern era, capitalism has prevailed and dominated the economic landscape, from mercantile capitalism in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, to monopoly capitalism in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, to global capitalism in the latter half of the twentieth century to the present.<sup>37</sup> At each turn, millions are left behind in any ensuing economic upswings, but especially in the downswings. "The poor you shall always have with you," seems to be the acceptable mantra of this monopoly and global capitalism.

The need for small, just, "underground economies," like those that Paul mobilized with his churches, also always seem to be with us. From *cooperativas* to the "sweat equity" of Millard Fuller in Habitat for Humanity, the church seems to be and needs to be on the forefront of these economies. The hegemony of the Empire and the urgency of his eschatology undoubtedly kept Paul from larger challenges to oppressive economic imperial practices. His approaches were subtle and subversive, but ineffective on the grand scale. Three hundred years after Paul, the church became part of the state, and five hundred years after that the road to feudalism and monopoly capitalism was well on its way with the church's blessings.



Let us hope that in our own day the cries of the children of the colonized for more just economic policy will be heeded, especially after the debacle of the Enron and World Com scandals, where the ideal of making money at all costs, that “trickle-down” economics will work even for the poorest of the poor, has been proven wrong.

## Conclusion

This has been a modest effort at incorporating incipient understandings of postmodern thought (no interpretation is ever set in stone) and postcolonial theory (texts and readers from imperial settings ought to be in dialogue) with a re-reading of the New Testament (faith documents from an emerging religious community in the midst of a cruel and oppressive empire twenty centuries ago). The Letter to the Philippians by the Apostle Paul in the mid-fifties C.E. presents a good learning ground for this effort. After all, Philippi was a major urban center of conquered and colonized imperial territory in the Greek East. Paul was an itinerant preacher with an urgent message about a founding religious figure crucified on a Roman cross. He established a small, struggling community of adherents to this message, whose loyalty to another *Kurios* severely challenged their expected loyalty to Caesar *Kurios*. Paul's community had all the makings of a postcolonial statement in the midst of an extremely volatile imperial hegemony. It did not go that far, but it is a miracle the community survived and thrived at all. It gives hope to all postcolonial communities of today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I began my journey in postmodern and postcolonial theory as applied to biblical studies at the West Regional Meeting of the Hispanic Theological Initiative held at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis on February 9, 2002. I am indebted to Leo Sanchez for the invitation to speak at the conference. This article represents a revision of the original paper delivered there and later delivered at another HTI event. Parts of the essay will also be revised for a chapter on Philippians in the forthcoming book, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament*, edited by Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah.

<sup>2</sup> A.K.M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.



- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4-5.
- <sup>5</sup> David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer, eds., *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., xii.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., viii.
- <sup>9</sup> A distinction made by Fernando Segovia, "And The Began to Speak in Other Tongues': Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 28-31.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Rodney, cited by Georg M. Gugelberger, "Postcolonial Cultural Studies" in M. Groden and M. Kerismwirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 582.
- <sup>11</sup> Gugelberger, "Postcolonial Cultural Studies," 582.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 583.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 584.
- <sup>14</sup> For an outline of this "postcolonial optic," see Segovia's essay, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic" in Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000), 119-132.
- <sup>15</sup> The dating of Philippians depends on whether Paul wrote the letter from Rome during his last imprisonment there in the late 50s or early 60s, or from an imprisonment elsewhere earlier in the decade of the 50s. See the various commentaries for full discussion of dating including Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 34-37; Peter O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 19-26; Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 27-31; Ben Witherington III, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 24-29.
- <sup>16</sup> This rhetorical analysis follows, with slight variation, Duane Watson, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Philippians and Its Implications for the Unity Problem," *Novum Testamentum* 30 (1988), 57-88; and Witherington, *Friendship and Finances*, 5-20.
- <sup>17</sup> A point made by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 169-170.
- <sup>18</sup> See Richard Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 249-251.
- <sup>19</sup> See Fee, *Philippians*, 2-14, for discussion of the ancient letter of friendship and the assignation of Philippians as such. See also Witherington, 7-10; Osiek, 21-24.
- <sup>20</sup> See Osiek, 27-30, for this conclusion. Fee, 34-37, O'Brien, *Commentary*, 19-26, and Witherington, *ibid.*, 24-26, discuss the options and support the traditional view that Paul wrote from Rome.
- <sup>21</sup> Richard Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 36-54 describes the varieties and types of Roman imprisonment throughout the Empire, although he argues for the traditional view of a final imprisonment in Rome as the occasion for Philippians. Osiek, 30 acknowledges the widespread nature of Roman prison practices, including the use of "praetorian" for any Roman military guard or a provincial Roman governor's residence. Thus she makes the case for a Roman imprisonment of Paul in this instance, outside of Rome, perhaps Ephesus.



- <sup>22</sup> See Cassidy, *ibid.*, 55-67, for a discussion of the “probable” charge against Paul, *maiestas* – “treason.” His preaching was interpreted as detrimental to the stability of the Empire and, therefore, treasonous. For a discussion of the terms of imperial ideology, including *euangelion*, *pistis* (faith or loyalty), *diakaiosyne* (justice), and *eirene* (peace), transposed by Paul consciously into his Christian theological language, see Dieter Georgi, “God Turned Upside Down – Romans: Missionary Theology and Roman Political Theology,” in Horsley, 148-57.
- <sup>23</sup> For a study of Paul’s commendation of leaders to these communities, in comparison to commendations in the Greco-Roman world, see my dissertation, “Paul’s Use of Greco-Roman Conventions of Commendation,” Boston University (1996).
- <sup>24</sup> See Chaido Koukouli-Chrysantaki, “Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis,” in Charalambos Bakirtzis and Helmut Koester, *Philippi at the Time of Paul and After His Death* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998), 5-35.
- <sup>25</sup> For this view of a Jew-Gentile polemic in Philippians, see Fee, 285-303, O’Brien, *Commentary*, 345-364, and Witherington, „ 83-90. For a different perspective, cited here, see Osiek, 79-86.
- <sup>26</sup> Osiek, 81.
- <sup>27</sup> See J. Paul Sampley, *Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) on the Roman law of *societas* (*koinonia* in Greek) and its appropriation in Pauline mission strategy, including with the Philippians.
- <sup>28</sup> Horsley, 251.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.
- <sup>30</sup> Even in its “less severe” forms, as suggested by Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 37-43.
- <sup>31</sup> For a recent study of the religious and postcolonial reflections of Albizu Campos, see Luis G. Collazo, *Espacio para Dios: Desde Albizu Campos hasta Julia de Burgos* (Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico: Fundacion Puerto Rico Evangelico, 2001), 19-51. The volume also includes a brief reflection on King (53-58).
- <sup>32</sup> Danny Rivera, *Enamorado de La Paz: Diario en La Carcel Federal* (Puerto Rico: Editorial Makarios, 2001), 6.
- <sup>33</sup> The thesis that motivated my dissertation; see *Paul’s Use of Conventions of Commendation*, 4-5.
- <sup>34</sup> I also pursued these issues in “Paul, Leadership and the Hispanic Church” in Eldin Villafañe, *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 103-122, as well as in a forthcoming book, *Leadership in the New Testament* (Chalice Press).
- <sup>35</sup> Such is the analysis of Manuel Maldonado Denis, *Puerto Rico: Una Interpretación Histórico-Social* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1969, 1977), 102-104.
- <sup>36</sup> “Ur” is the German word for above, and “ur-citizenship” is a term coined by the author to signify a citizenship above that of American citizenship.
- <sup>37</sup> Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical studies*, 127.



## **Postcolonial Criticism in Biblical Interpretation: A Response to Efraín Agosto**

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**M**y response to Agosto discusses postcolonial criticism and its use in the interpretative task. First, I give some important definitions, after which I comment on Efraín Agosto's presentation. Finally I make some suggestions for future work in the area of biblical criticism from a postcolonial perspective.

As a historian I love to put everything in perspective, understanding that a single perspective is not the only one there is. And so, to talk about postcolonialism and interpretation, I first offer my definitions of modernity, postmodernity, and postcolonialism. As Dr. Agosto argued, these concepts defy a particular definition, but it is important, for me nevertheless, to provide a concrete understanding since this will guide the rest of my response.

Modernity, understood as a period in time, emerged with Columbus' voyage to what it is today called the Americas. The Renaissance and Reformation are the other two key events in the process of dating the beginning of modernity, which extends to the present day. But modernity should not be seen simply as a epoch or as a period in time, but as a discourse, "a highly complex yet coherent narrative containing assumptions about how it is

possible to represent the state of nature as supported by a new realist historical consciousness of change over time.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, beliefs, characteristics, cultural trends, and rules define modernity. This discourse is about control over truth, and rationality became the foundation of this ultimate concern.

The West was created by the discourse of modernity. The idea of superiority of the rational over the irrational is one of the principles of modernity that gave birth to Western imperialism. As Enrique Dussel and other scholars have argued, “modernity is, in fact, a European phenomenon.”<sup>2</sup> But Dussel goes further by stating that modernity is “constituted in a dialectical relation with non-European alterity that is its ultimate content. Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the “center” of a World History that it inaugurates; the “periphery” that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time Eurocentrism, as part of modernity, works toward the creation, oppression, and domination of the Other, through colonial discourses. And modernity, as Walter Mignolo states, “carries on its shoulders the heavy weight and responsibility of coloniality.”<sup>4</sup> So modernity and coloniality, which cannot be separated, formed the modern/colonial system. This means that to be able to break away from coloniality and the colonial discourses, modern epistemology needs to be challenged.

Postmodern thought became one of the greatest challenges to objectivism and the superiority of the West. As Jean-François Lyotard, Keith Jenkins and other scholars have proposed, we live in a condition of postmodernity. There is no one definition about this condition, but arguments such as the denial of grand narratives, the deconstruction of meaning and language, and the openness to relativism have become its major theoretical perspectives. Because of the difficulty in summarizing the entire discussion surrounding the definition of postmodernity, postmodernity will be understood here as a political, cultural, economic, and social condition that promotes a critique (counter-discourse) of the



establishment of modernity and its discourse as a universal reality. I am interested in counter-discourse characterized by challenges to the scaffold of modernity, objectivity, truth, and empiricism. But postmodern thought does not directly challenge the situation of colonialism; that is where postcolonial criticism enters the discussion.

Most scholars agree that the 1978 publication of the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said was a key event in the creation of postcolonial studies, which "is not housed in a single discipline or program."<sup>5</sup> Though it is not a definitive definition of Postcolonialism, I agree with Simon During's definition that "post-colonialism is regarded as the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images."<sup>6</sup> The dis-discovery of an identity happens when these groups confront colonial discourses and imaginaries with their own histories, analysis, and with the production of a decolonial imaginary.<sup>7</sup> In other words, postcolonialism, in this sense, does not imply temporality, but a process. Postcolonialism provides a deconstruction and re-construction of the imaginary constructed by the colonial power. Agosto argues that when postcolonial criticism is applied to biblical interpretation, its use is closer to an interpretative method than to a theory. I will argue that it is more than that; it is a liberating spirit through which the oppressed and marginalized can obtain a voice and her/his identity is discovered.

At the beginning of his article Agosto states the importance of a historical critical method in his own work. In his reading of Philippians he uses this method and does an excellent job constructing a historical meaning and a world in which the letter was written. Of course, Agosto is the first to say "that no interpretation is completely objective, or devoid of subjective bias." So after using rhetorical analysis to elucidate the structure of the letter, he explores the content of it from a postcolonial perspective. His



reading follows Fernando Segovia's postcolonial optics. Agosto discussed the issues of political situation, leadership (including the mention of women, which in itself is a postcolonial aspect of the letter), citizenship, and economics to later turn to the core of his argument which is a reading of the letter from a Latina/o perspective. Already, a reading from a Latina/o perspective has a subversive aura so including a postcolonial critique would make this reading dangerous for the dominant culture but liberating for the people in the borderlands of society. It is in this last part of the paper that Agosto makes the case for an interpretation and a contextualization of the message of the book, focusing on the hope provided by Paul to people in a colonial reality. He uses the example of the present Puerto Rican situation of colonialism to establish some connections.

I find Agosto's argument compelling. Nevertheless, it is important to situate his effort in the context of postcolonial criticism. However, there are some important points to make before entering into this discussion. Following Segovia's argument, Agosto states "that a postcolonial reading of the New Testament revisits historic interpretation of its texts and the methodologies used, especially traditional historical-critical methods, precisely because these emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries when colonial powers emerged as well." Two things must be said about this argument. First, I disagree with Agosto in his statement about the emergence of colonial power. Arguing that colonial powers emerge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lets off the hook Spain and Portugal's colonization of the Americas. It is traditional in postcolonial studies to talk about colonialism and modernity and to tie them in with the Enlightenment and these two centuries. But this leaves Spain and Portugal out of the European consciousness, ultimately excluding the colonized Latina/o people in the Americas from postcolonial studies. Hence, we as Latina/o scholars have to be careful not to perpetuate the cycle of oppression and exclusion from the academic discourse.



Second, this statement talks about a postcolonial approach to biblical interpretation that does not deal directly with the text but with the latter interpretations of this text. Efraín Agosto's postcolonial and Latina/o approach deals directly with the content of the text. This approach locates Agosto's work in the context of postcolonial criticism that deals with primary texts and wants to give new interpretation to them. It aims to provide excluded and colonized people with a sense of presence and subjectivity. Without a doubt, Agosto's interpretation gives Latina/o and other marginalized groups an analytical voice.

I turn now to offer some suggestions for future work in biblical interpretation from a postcolonial perspective. R. S. Sugirtharajah captures perfectly what postcolonial criticism does in biblical studies when he states: "It challenges the context, contours and normal procedures of biblical scholarship."<sup>8</sup> He continues by arguing that postcolonialism "enable[s] us to question the totalizing tendencies of European reading practices and interpret the text on our own terms and read them from our specific locations."<sup>9</sup> Agosto's reading is an example of the latter practice of reading from a specific place, but I believe the former—questioning European reading practices—should be given more attention. For, postmodernism challenges not only the content of modern narratives but also the scaffolds which sustain them. In the same way, postcolonial criticism deals as much with the content of the colonial narratives as with the way they are constructed. This is what I believe has been lacking in postcolonial criticism from a Latina/o perspective. The constant, and undoubtedly important, search for new interpretations and new voices has limited the needed analysis of the modes of interpretation and methods provided by the modern/colonial system. This kind of analysis looks for the decolonization of theories and methods that have been used to exclude and oppress the subalterns of society. Power is the basis for the construction of a colonial imaginary, which leaves the subaltern outside of the discourse with no voice of interpreta-



tion. The deconstruction and decolonization of the scaffolds that provide space for exclusion leads to liberation by constructing a decolonial imaginary and providing the subaltern with a voice. If we continue to uncover voices and interpretations but do not challenge the traditional ways and methods of doing interpretation, we will become agents of oppression because the recovered voices will only be a footnote.

The way we people of the border do history, theology, sociology, biblical research, or other academic work is still considered particular and political. It is political and it should continue to be political because liberation and decolonization is a political action. In order to change traditional narratives and biblical scholarship it is important to challenge institutional practices that reproduce modern epistemology with a political and subversive agenda for liberation. It is to undress traditional ways and methods from their presumption of universality and prove their particularity. Fernando Segovia argues, "Biblical criticism...had become in the process but another example of a much more comprehensive process of liberation and decolonization at work in a number of different realms—from political to the academic and, within the academy itself, across the entire disciplinary spectrum."<sup>10</sup> In order to be part of this project, it is important that we allow the voices filled with life and discursive location of those who suffer in the borderlands of academic discourse and society in general to be heard. In this way, we would step away from modern epistemology and dis-cover a border epistemology, an epistemology brought out of the experience of oppression and colonization. It is not for the South (subaltern) to become the North (colonial power) but for us to develop open systems of knowledge based on justice.

In conclusion, to do history, biblical criticism, theology, or other work from a postcolonial perspective is to challenge and deconstruct systems of power; it is to dis-cover and construct a decolonial discourse.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Alan Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 163.
- <sup>2</sup> Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, ed. John Beverley, Michael Aronna and José Oviedo (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 65.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Jenny Sharpe, "Postcolonial Studies in the House of US Multiculturalism," *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz & Sangeeta Ray (Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 112.
- <sup>6</sup> Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today," *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 125.
- <sup>7</sup> I am using the term dis-covery following María Pilar Aquino's conception. Talking about the standpoint of Latin American women, she says: "the five hundred years of European presence in Latin America have served not so much as an occasion for imagining what our history actually was or could have been but rather as an occasion for a continuing *dis-covery*." She goes on to say: "The great European invasions did not *dis-cover* but rather *covered* whole peoples, religions, and cultures and explicitly tried to take away from natives the sources of their own historical memory and their own power." [María Pilar Aquino, "The Collective "Dis-covery" of Our Own Power: Latina American Feminist Theology," *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, eds. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 241.] I believe normative knowledge works in the same way.
- <sup>8</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation," *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 16.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Fernando Segovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic," *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 53.

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