



Christian Spirituality in Light of the U.S. Hispanic Experience

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SPIRITUALITY, ACCORDING TO ROWAN WILLIAMS, INVOLVES NOTHING LESS THAN the pursuit of wholeness. Further, it is not limited to the private arena, but has public and social aspects. Williams observes:

“Spirituality” becomes far more than a science of interpreting exceptional private experiences; it must now touch every area of human experience, the public and social, the painful, the negative, even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and relational world. And the goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness—an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre of God’s work.¹

For the Christian, this pursuit of wholeness begins with the act of “being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) by the grace of God.”²

¹Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980) 2.

²Ibid.

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Hispanic spirituality, with its emphasis on family and community and its ability to celebrate life in the midst of suffering, models spirituality as a public pursuit of wholeness rather than as private religious experience.

We experience this healing act, according to Williams, in a shared life and language and in a public and historical community that gathers to read certain texts and perform certain acts.

In this essay, I will address these important dimensions of spirituality in light of U.S. Hispanic reality. Because of changing demographics in the United States as we move into the twenty-first century, such an inquiry has significance for the broader culture as well.³

If we are to engage in witness, outreach, and a ministry of healing among U.S. Hispanics, we cannot disconnect this ministry from the context, culture, and longing for wholeness of Hispanic communities. This requires that we explore four themes that are foundational to this pursuit of Hispanic/Latino spirituality:

- I. La Familia (The Family)
- II. Mestizaje
- III. Popular Religiosity
- IV. Festive Hope⁴

I. LA FAMILIA (THE FAMILY)

Father Virgilio Elizondo, rector of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, and founder of the Mexican American Cultural Center, points to the “faith of our abuelos and abuelitas” (i.e., the faith of our grandfathers and grandmothers) as the key component that defines a Hispanic/Latino spirituality.⁵ *La Familia* (the family) give primary shape to a Hispanic person’s personal, social, and religious values. The family, not the individual, is the main focus of social stratification. The fundamental religious values that shape a U.S. Hispanic sense of wholeness are taught primarily by the grandparents and parents. Central to this vision is that “*la familia es lo más importante*” (the family is what is more important). Grandmothers and mothers, especially, teach the presence of God in everyday situations. Parents teach their children early in life to pepper their speech in everyday affairs with phrases such as: “*Dios te bendiga*” (May God bless you), “*Vaya con Dios*” (May God be with you), “*Si Dios lo permite*” (If it is God’s will). There is no compartmentalizing of the sacred and secular worlds in this way of life. This is affirmed by the family altar in many U.S. Hispanic homes. Many previously Roman Catholic families keep these altars even after affirming an evangelical catholic faith. Such altars contain statues of Jesus, Mary, and the family’s saints. They symbolize God’s presence and blessing of the family.

Roberto S. Goizueta’s *Caminemos con Jesús* is one of the most influential

³See Brook Larmer, “Latino America,” *Newsweek* (12 July 1999) 48-51. Latinos will be the largest U.S. minority by 2005 and by 2050 will be nearly one quarter of the U.S. population.

⁴These themes are underscored by Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal U.S. Hispanic/Latino theologians. Two important anthologies are *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), and *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from a Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

⁵Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983) 28-29.

works of U.S. Latino/Hispanic Christian spirituality. In a chapter entitled “Nosotros: Community as the Birthplace of the Self,” Goizueta shows that to have an autonomous personality in the Hispanic reality is to have “no identity,” to be a “no-body.”⁶ In fact the use of the word “*individuo*” (that individual) carries in many cases a pejorative connotation of being a selfish person.

Mainstream American culture, however, values self-sufficiency, thinking independently of others, and living alone as signs of maturity. Individuals are seen as whole and mature if they depend on their own resources. Christian spirituality, in particular that of the baby-boomer generation, has been marked by individual soul-searching and personal spiritual journeys. In contrast, the Latino/Hispanic spiritual journey toward communion with God and spiritual wholeness is rooted in the family experience with God.

Justo L. González, commenting on the experiences of U.S. Hispanics who have heard the message of grace from Protestant non-Hispanic missionaries, argues that “[w]e have been healed, but not all our healing has been straight.”⁷ Because Hispanics have been healed in the Protestant faith, they claim this faith. However, this healing has sometimes created a new kind of brokenness. It may be compared to the healing of a bone not properly set. The missionaries often did not affirm as valuable or important the very things that gave purpose and meaning to life. My own experience is an example of a healing that has not been straight. When I was eighteen years old, I became a member of the Lutheran church. I had a wonderful pastor, and I heard the message of Jesus Christ and his free grace wonderfully proclaimed to me. At the same time, this message was not explained in dialogue with the religiosity of my family. Somehow, it was impressed upon me that I had to distance myself from their religiosity. Their way of life had nothing to offer toward my achievement of wholeness in life.

Hispanics underscore the importance of the family unit. Evangelical spirituality must affirm the most profound values of U.S. Hispanics. It must be reflective and in dialogue with important religious symbols that affirm the value of the family among U.S. Hispanics. A natural starting point for such reflection and dialogue is the biblical story of creation. A trinitarian God in relationship created human beings according to his image (Gen 1:27). God created humanity as male and female—a family. Ignoring the importance of the family will lead to a crisis during important stages in the life of U.S. Hispanics. It may also lead to the rejection of the evangelical faith because of a failure to understand the family dimension at the center and core of U.S. Hispanic spirituality.

⁶Robert S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 50.

⁷Justo L. González, foreword to *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology*, ed. José David Rodríguez and Loida L. Martell Otero (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) x.

II. MESTIZAJE

“*Mestizaje*” is the key concept that explains Hispanic religiosity and spirituality. What makes a person a “Hispanic” is not race or a particular country of origin but rather the Spanish language, the culture and traditions that have come about from the “mixture” (*mestizaje*) of several races and cultures of people. *Mestizaje* is characterized by the mixture of human groups of different races that determines skin pigmentation, shape of eyes, and bone structures. In the case of the U.S. Hispanics, the Iberian Spanish conquest led to a mixture with Indian blood and that of African slaves in the new world. United States history includes also the conquest of the northwest territory of Mexico through territorial expansion. As Virgilio Elizondo observes, “it is a fact of history that massive *mestizaje* giving rise to a new people usually takes place through conquest and colonization.”⁸ The Hispanic people were formed through this kind of *mestizaje*. Churches need to be sensitive to the fact that *mestizaje* has occurred through the imposing of a different culture and a different way of life, including religion, upon the Hispanic people.⁹

One example of this is the way the Roman Catholic *conquistadores* built altars in the most sacred places of worship of the Aztec and Mayan Indians. It was a way to substitute and supplant the most important religious symbols of a culture with their own religious symbols. A people’s fundamental religious symbols, of course, provide their ultimate identity, because these symbols mediate for them the absolute. In the case of a conquered people, new symbols, new language, and a new way of life are imposed by the conquerors and presumed to be superior.¹⁰

This negative aspect of *mestizaje* persists in many ways in North America. In the 1960s one could find signs in San Antonio, Texas, that read: “Mexicans and dogs not allowed.” Even today, Hispanics, based on the color of their skin or their way of life, are stopped and harassed by the police in many parts of the country. U.S. Hispanics often find themselves strangers in their own land. Out of the displacement and sense of inferiority imposed on Hispanics by the mainstream American culture have come rekindled hopes and aspirations based on the concept of *mestizaje*. José Vasconcellos coined the phrase “cosmic race” to speak of the *mestizo* people—a people that is superior, not in the sense of the superman of Friedrich Nietzsche, but because *mestizo* people bring together more than one culture and race to live in harmony and peace with one another.¹¹ This is demonstrated in particular in the popular religiosity of the people.

The reality of U.S. Hispanic *mestizaje* is shown in the demographics. Mexican-Americans comprise the largest subgroup (about 64% of the total His-

⁸See Virgilio Elizondo, “Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in *Mestizo Christianity*, 10.

⁹See Justo L. González, “Hispanic American Religion,” in *World Religions in America*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 111-129, for a general overview of this *mestizaje* and conquest.

¹⁰Elizondo, “Mestizaje,” 10-11.

¹¹Roberto Goizueta, “La Raza Cósmica?: The Vision of José Vasconcellos,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 1/2 (1993-1994) 5-27.

panic population). The groups that follow are the Puerto Ricans with 10.5% and the Cubans with 5%. The fastest growing group, however, is made up of people with Central American and South American backgrounds, together forming 14% of the Hispanic population. It is more than likely that about 80% of the total U.S. Hispanic population have a Mexican or Central American background.¹²

Significantly, two-thirds of all Hispanics counted are native U.S. Americans. However, only one in four Hispanics (25%) declared that they spoke or preferred English, while 56% were bilingual with Spanish preference, and 19% spoke Spanish only.¹³ This means that to minister to Hispanics in the name of the healing Christ, churches must be sensitive not only to recent immigrants but also to the second and third generations of Hispanics. They must also be sensitive to the need for the use of the Spanish language. Spanish has to do with the affirmation of the core values and religiosity of U.S. Hispanic people. It is a medium to achieve healing and wholeness within the reality of *mestizaje*.

III. U.S. HISPANIC POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

Popular religiosity is crucial to Hispanic/Latino wholeness and healing. U.S. Hispanic popular religiosity has an unmistakably Roman Catholic flavor. This may cause some Protestant or evangelical Christians to disdain this important aspect of the Hispanic psyche. In fact, the topic of a “popular” religiosity is not accepted in several Roman Catholic circles as well. Latino/Hispanic popular religiosity is better understood as “the faith of the people.”¹⁴ U.S. Hispanic Roman Catholic theologians make great efforts to ground Christian faith in scripture and also, in true Roman Catholic style, in the written post-apostolic tradition. However, they find in the faith of the people an intuitive awareness, referred to as a *sensus fidelium*, that interprets “whether something is true or not vis-à-vis the Gospel, or that someone is acting in accordance with the Christian gospel or not, or that something important for Christianity is being heard.”¹⁵ The faith of the people, for example, finds that God as Creator honors and values the Hispanic situation of *mestizaje*. God honors and uplifts his creation. The faith of the people is able to discover God’s presence, God’s sacramentality, in his affirmation of the Hispanic way of life and consciousness. Two particular religious symbols are foundational to U.S. Hispanic popular religiosity: the Virgin of Guadalupe and the crucified Christ.

La Morenita, the Virgin of Guadalupe, is the manifestation of Mary as the *mestizo* virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac in 1531. Tepeyac was an important shrine for the worship of the Aztec goddess of war, Tonantzin. An evangelical catholic

¹²Justo L. González, “The Challenge Is More Than Numbers” (paper presented at the North American Mission Executive Conference, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, El Paso, Texas, 9 April 1999) 9.

¹³*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴See in particular, Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), and Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 1-46.

¹⁵Orlando Espín, “Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *Mestizo Christianity*, 149-152.

Christian could certainly be turned off by what appears to be a syncretistic practice. The Nican Mopohua narrative of the virgin apparition is written in Nahuatl, the language of the people. The language, and symbols such as numerology and roses, are important to Aztec culture.¹⁶ However, this narrative is definitely about an apparition of Mary as a *mestizo* virgin who affirms the reality and worthiness of the *mestizo* people. She manifests herself as a humble and pure virgin who brings God's acceptance, love, and embracing of the *mestizo*. They are most worthy in God's eyes. She reveals this reality to Juan Diego, a poor *mestizo* faithful, who was considered inferior in God's eyes by the Spanish bishop. To Juan Diego, in his own native language of Nahuatl, she reveals God's intention to build a temple in her name as a place of refuge for the oppressed and dispossessed. The figure of a pure *mestizo* virgin is an important affirmation. The conquest of the people was brought about through the rape of their mothers by the white *conquistadores*. Now a *mestizo* woman, a pure virgin, brings to the new people honor rather than dishonor. She speaks to Diegito in very loving, motherly, and humble terms that he, and not the bishop, is the carrier this time of God's gift of acceptance and affirmation to his people. She affirms a place of refuge and honor for a people forged in conquest out of white and Indian blood. Jeanette Rodríguez describes admirably what is offered to U.S. Hispanics through La Guadalupana. She writes:

Guadalupe's message of love and compassion, help and protection, cannot be frozen into a mere devotional experience. Rather the message has to do with the affirmation of a people. Her image is a carrier of eschatological hope insofar as the people visit her, look upon her and know that everything will be fine....[S]he hears, affirms, heals, and enables them.¹⁷

Evangelical catholic Christians need to remember that one of the most important images for Martin Luther is the servant mother Mary, who in humility proclaims God's love and affirmation of his people. Mary embodied for Luther a humble servant of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Mary underscores for Luther a theology of the cross that affirms God's dialectic of calling worthy what is unworthy and unworthy what is considered worthy through human eyes. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56) affirms in a powerful manner the narrative of La Guadalupana. This is not merely a story of syncretistic worship. The narrative reflects God's affirmation and healing of the helpless vis-à-vis the disdain of the powerful.

Probably the most universal symbol of Hispanic religiosity is the symbol of the crucified Christ. In particular, *Viernes Santo*, Good Friday, is a very important date in the popular religiosity of Hispanics. In 1986 I was struck with the devotion I found among *mestizos* to a black and *mestizo* crucified Christ at the cathedral in the

¹⁶See Jeanette Rodríguez, "Sangre Llama a Sangre: Cultural Memory as a Source of Theological Insight," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 122-133. Rodríguez has provided an excellent summary of how the Virgin of Guadalupe uses the language and symbols of the people in this narrative to express God's affirmation of the *mestizo*.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *The Magnificat, Luther's Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956) 300-301.

main square of Guatemala City. I believe, along with Virgilio Elizondo and Jon Sobrino, that many times the faithful in Hispanic/Latino communities emphasize the passive aspect of the suffering of the cross.¹⁹ The crucifixion of Jesus is used to show the suffering, death, and desolation of the faithful in the world. However, Elizondo argues for an active appropriation of the cross. He emphasizes that Jesus was a Galilean, speaking from outside the circle of human influence a message of hope for the sinful, the helpless, and the dispossessed. The cross becomes an active religious symbol of God's unconditional love, standing with the helpless and against the demonic power of the world. The black Christ in the cathedral of Guatemala City is strategically located in the back of the church, at the side that points toward the Palacio Presidencial, the center of political power. This suggests that the black and *mestizo* Christ stands with the helpless and the dispossessed. Christ stands as an active companion with those in need. He is more than a suffering or dying Christ.

Harold Recinos underscores this active vision of the crucified Christ in the telling of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.²⁰ This narrative is a powerful popular religious symbol among exiled Salvadorans in the city. It expresses for them how the people of God, though despised by the world, are uplifted by God. They have a name and a future. The rich man is nameless, but Lazarus is remembered and loved by God in his human condition. God is active in this parable to transform the fate of the helpless and destitute. In other words, Lazarus becomes a figure of Christ. As he is an active disciple of the cross, God honors him for his stand of faith.

Students of the reformation know that Luther's theology of the cross affirms the way of discipleship in affirmation of the neighbor and of all humanity. From an Hispanic perspective, Samuel Solivan affirms a similar vision in his attempt to construct what he calls an "orthopathos."²¹ He argues that there needs to be a way for theology to take seriously the experience of the suffering and the poor. Orthodox theology has often pursued propositional truth without engaging and affirming the suffering of the helpless and the dispossessed. Also, those who have pursued an orthopraxis have failed to engage the real meaning of Christ's transformative love for others. Only in an engagement of Christ's incarnational relationship with others, an orthopathos, are we able to understand the profound meaning of the popular religiosity of U.S. Hispanics.²²

It is when we are engaged in this incarnational relationship with Jesus that we are able to live the scandal of the cross articulated so well by Elizondo:

¹⁹Cf. Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 41.

²⁰Harold Recinos, "The Barrio as the Locus of a New Church," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 186-187.

²¹Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 66-88.

²²Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 68-69, makes a similar argument. See also my own proposal: Alberto Lázaro García, *Theology of the Cross: A Critical Study of Leonardo Boff's and Jon Sobrino's Theology of the Cross in Light of Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross as Interpreted by Luther Scholars* (Th.D. diss., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1987).

Why is the “scandal” of the cross as necessary for salvation today as it was for Jesus? Because the cross continues to reveal the impurity of the pure and purity of the impure, the innocence of criminals and the crimes of the innocent, the righteousness of sinners and the sin of the righteous, the wisdom of the foolish and the foolishness of the wise.²³

This is what Luther understood as the way of the cross in his Heidelberg theses.²⁴ Luther does not separate orthodoxy from orthopraxis. The righteousness of God is completely realized in Christ’s condemnation of our human pride and in his affirmation of the sinful and helpless through a life of faith. Similarly, the life of a Christian is one of active discipleship for others on the way of the cross. Luther affirms: “For one becomes a theologian by living, by dying, by being damned: not by mere intellectualizing, reading, and speculating.”²⁵

IV. FESTIVE HOPE

Anyone acquainted with Hispanic culture knows that one of the blessings that Hispanics share is their capacity to celebrate. In the midst of death and difficulties the Hispanic celebrates life. This is possible because most Hispanic fiestas are grounded in a profound spirituality. Hispanics, for example, celebrate the patron saints of their towns, families, and nations. Hispanics also use religious celebrations to strengthen familial bonds. Baptisms and weddings bring extended families closer together. It is during these religious ceremonies that godfathers and godmothers become part of the family—in fact, the word godfather in Spanish is “*compadre*” (one who “co-parents” with the parents of the baptized). In this section I want to show briefly how this festive hope is manifested through two unique celebrations of Hispanic culture, the *Posada* and the *Quinceañera*.²⁶ I will then conclude by highlighting some important dimensions of U.S. Hispanic spirituality in light of the festive hope of the Hispanic community.

1. *La Posada*

This festival involves a reenactment of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This activity is usually organized by the *abuelitos*, the elders, in the homes. Groups of the faithful go from house to house carrying statues of Mary, Joseph, and the donkey. Inside each house there is a small group of people representing the Judeans who reject them one by one, until a small group of faithful invites them in and there is great celebration. The rite is centered on two central experiences—the rejection of the poor, nameless couple from the “inferior” region

²³Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 41.

²⁴Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation, Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 39-74. See in particular theses 4, 21, and 28.

²⁵Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos (1519-1521)*, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. to date (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 5:163, lines 29-30: “Vivendo, immo moriendo et dam-nando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando.”

²⁶Cf. Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 32-46, and C. Gilbert Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), for more examples of the Hispanic living faith and festive hope.

of Galilee and the great joy that accompanies those who open their home and hearts to these rejects because they are in fact the ones chosen by God. Action, pageantry, and music all contribute to a profound experience of the pain of rejection and the joyous miracle of being accepted by God in spite of our human situation. The event also helps the participants remember how God acts toward them. Hispanic immigrants re-enact their own journeys through deserts, rejection, unemployment, and racism to God's gracious acceptance.

2. *The Quinceañera*

This celebration occurs at the fifteenth birthday of a young woman. It marks a very important rite of passage. She is recognized as a woman, one capable of motherhood. While this celebration has become very secularized in many quarters, in Mexican communities it is a time to acknowledge the worthiness of the young lady and her important given role in the community. It is through her that life is re-affirmed and the continuity of the family and the community is honored. This festive celebration is accompanied with music, dances, songs, and prayers at the church. The celebration contains all the important elements of festive hope and spirituality. The participants are reminded of God's faithfulness and his gift of life to a people who have suffered death and alienation. The *Quinceañera* and the family affirm their community and personhood through this festive celebration of God's gift of life and family.

Robert Goizueta has provided a profound study of the importance of festive hope for U.S. Hispanics in *Caminemos con Jesús*.²⁷ He underscores the importance of a relational anthropology in Hispanic life. Hispanics do not find meaning and wholeness apart from community.

Our triune God has revealed himself magnificently in the act of creation. God is to be understood, therefore, not only through words. To live as God's children, we must commune also with the beauty of God's creation. The arts, music, and an active celebration of God's gift of life contribute to a profound spirituality. Every constructive act of play and celebration that honors our relationship with one another and creates community brings wholeness and healing to human lives. The deeply rooted sense of community, giving identity to Hispanic people, allows us to celebrate life. It is in this light that we have a festive hope. Hispanic spirituality is filled with laughter, tears, pageantry, action, and the intentional exercise of the affective domain. This is particularly manifested in the devotional piety of Roman Catholicism and in Pentecostal worship. Life is celebrated in spite of suffering and sorrow. In this communal action Hispanic Christians celebrate God's gift of grace and the hope of a new creation—that pursuit of wholeness—in spite of our human predicament and condition. ⊕

²⁷Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 77-100.