

MAÑANA

Christian Theology
from a Hispanic Perspective

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Justo opens the way for this new religious *mestizaje*, a new and fruitful encounter of traditions, which will be the Christian expression of the future. What today appears to be opposing and contradictory ways will tomorrow be appreciated as elements of the new religious expression. It will be like a new Pentecost, and in Christ we will all be a new creation—*el Cristianismo mestizo de las Américas!* The truth of the gospel will be known and appreciated not only in the mind but even more so in the heart, which is concerned with ultimate reality in terms of *flor y canto*. We will worship not only in word and song but in dance and collective ritual. We will work not only for the salvation of individuals but for the salvation of peoples. The gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ will certainly enrich the life and cultures of the Americas as our own Iberoamerican heritage brings out new aspects of the gospel that have heretofore been unsuspected.

A new day is beginning, and it is great to be a part of it!

Virgilio P. Elizondo
Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe
Diciembre 12, 1989

writes from Catholic perspective

CHAPTER 1

The Significance of a Minority Perspective

What follows is not an unbiased theological treatise. It does not even seek to be unbiased. On the contrary, the author is convinced that every theological perspective, no matter how seemingly objective, betrays a bias of which the theologian is not usually aware. Obviously, some theologies are more biased than others. But before we attempt to pass such judgments, we must be aware of the bias that is inherent in the judgment itself. Deep-sea divers tell us that in an ocean environment, where everything is moving, what most draws their attention is not what moves, as happens on land, but rather what stands still. Likewise, when it comes to detecting prejudice or even tendentiousness in a theology, we must not be too quick to pass judgment on those views that differ from the established norm. It may well be that our common views, precisely because they are common, involve a prejudice that is difficult for us to see, and that a seemingly more biased view will help us discover that prejudice. This is probably one of the most significant contributions that a minority perspective can make to the church at large.

This does not mean, however, that the task of theology will then be to bring together all these various perspectives, compare them, and seek to produce a theology that is free from every bias. This has been the manner in which many in the academic world have approached the theological enterprise. There is a great deal to be said for the academic goal of rational objectivity. But if there is one thing that can be said with absolute certainty about the God of Scripture, it is that God cannot be known through rational objectivity.

Furthermore, one could even go so far as to say that the God of Scripture is not an unbiased God. God has certain purposes for creation and is moving the world and humankind toward the fulfillment of those purposes. This means that, in a sense, God is biased against anything

that stands in the way of those goals, and in favor of all that aids them. If this is true, the task of theology will not be to produce some sort of neutral—and therefore inane—interpretation of the nature of God and the universe, but rather to discover the purposes of God, to read the “signs of the times,” and to call the church to obedience in the present situation.

This in turn means that theology cannot be done in the abstract. There is no such thing as a “general” theology. There is indeed a Christian community that is held together by bonds of a common faith. But within that community we each bring our own history and perspective to bear on the message of the gospel, hoping to help the entire community to discover dimensions that have gone unseen and expecting to be corrected when necessary.

Given this situation, a brief statement regarding the author’s perspective seems to be in order.

The Experience of Being a Member of a Religious Minority

I grew up in Latin America, in a country where hardly 4 or 5 percent of the population was Protestant. It was also a time and a place where Protestantism was understood almost exclusively in terms of opposition to everything Catholic, and where most Catholics knew very little about Protestants, beyond the fact that we were heretics. Most of my classmates in high school were Catholic in a very superficial manner. But some others were very devout, and one of the manifestations of their devotion was that they crossed themselves when they learned that I was a Protestant. There were long and passionate debates—whispered in the library and shouted in the playing field—about the authority of the pope, the need for confession, the mediating role of the saints, the authority of Scripture, and a dozen subjects about which neither of the parties involved knew a great deal.

As I now look back upon those experiences, I realize that they influenced my theological outlook on several points.

The most important of these—and one to which I still hold—is the authority of Scripture. When one is a member of a minority, and the entire establishment is trying to convince one that one is wrong, it is necessary, for sheer psychological and political survival, to find an authority that goes beyond the hostile environment. This my friends and I found in Scripture, which had the added advantage that it was an authority that our opponents acknowledged. To argue on the basis of consensus or even common sense was futile, for we soon learned that

“common” sense is indeed the sense of the community, and that there was little we could gain on the basis of it. But if I could prove to my classmates that the Bible was on my side on some particular issue, soon I would have them confounded and running to their priests for answers to my arguments. Later experiences of theological education and reflection have affected my understanding of the authority and the message of Scripture. But to this day I have never been tempted by a shallow liberalism that equates the biblical message with the supposedly “best” features of our society. There are many theological reasons why I have felt compelled to reject that facile approach. But I suspect that behind those theological reasons still stand the earlier experiences of my naive debates with my classmates.

Another point at which the experience of being a member of a religious minority influenced my outlook was my view of world history. In search of vindication outside our immediate environment, we often turned toward the United States and Protestant Europe. In many ways, both spoken and implicit, my fellow believers and I came to the conclusion that North American culture was more Christian, and more advanced, than ours. Missionaries have often been blamed for spreading such views. There is no doubt that many of them had difficulty distinguishing between the gospel and North American culture. But as I now look back upon those days, I must confess that there were many reasons why we ourselves were ready to accept such a confusion of Christianity and culture. In the midst of a society built on the general assumption of an agreement between Catholicism and culture, we found it comforting to be able to point to another society where there seemed to be a similar connection between Protestantism and culture. And we found it particularly comforting when we could point to the technological, political, and economic triumphs of that society. Later events have radically altered my views on this matter. But such views were a significant part of the experience of being a member of a religious minority.

Furthermore, this was—and still is—a widespread view among Protestants in Latin America. Out of a sense of gratitude and loyalty to the early missionaries, and to the millions in the United States who still support their churches, many Latin American Protestants feel that they owe a measure of loyalty to the United States and to its culture. Such feelings are part of the motivation of many Protestant Latin Americans who migrate to the United States, and therefore in Hispanic Protestantism in the United States there is a core group of those who believe that any criticism of the society in which they now live is disloyal, not only to their adopted nation but also to their religion. Although many who

come to this country with such views soon change them as a result of the oppressive and racist situations in which they find themselves, their place is taken by new Protestant immigrants, and therefore there is always in Hispanic-American Protestantism a significant number of those who hold the same views of North American culture and society that I held in my earlier days. One of the urgent pastoral tasks in Hispanic Protestantism is to help these people in their pilgrimage, showing them that Scripture gives them leave to be themselves.

Finally, a third way in which those early experiences colored my theological outlook was my view of the relationship between the church and the world. For us, the church was very much a refuge from a hostile world. We had an overpowering sense of mission. But this had very little to do with changing the world around us and was centered on the goal of adding other refugees to our Christian community. Further study of Scripture has long since taken me beyond that point. But I still feel a deep kinship for the early Anabaptist view of the church as distinct from the civil community, and never coextensive with it. In my youth, I was constantly placed before a difficult choice: I decided either for the life and values of the Christian community or for those of the society around me. There was no third alternative. Today, I still find it difficult to belong to a church where such radical demands are seldom made. Although I no longer agree with Kierkegaard's existentialism, nor with his stance as the lone knight of faith, I still resound to his poignant criticism of a Christendom in which faith has become the mainstay of middle-class decency:

In the magnificent cathedral the Honorable and Right Reverend Geheime-General-Ober-Hof-Pradikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world, appears before an elect company and preaches with emotion upon the text he himself elected: "God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things that are despised"—and nobody laughs.¹

The type of Christianity that was common among the majority of the population in the United States went to my homeland and taught me how to be part of a Christian minority. And now that various circumstances have brought me to the land whence the missionaries came, I find that the minority stance that they taught me forces me to rebel against the Christianity that sent them!

The Experience of Being a Member of an Ethnic Minority

At a later stage in my life, the experience of being a member of a minority took on a different dimension. This was when I came to live in the United States and found that although now my religion was that of the majority, I had now become part of an ethnic minority. This awareness came to me by stages, and I still remember minor incidents that prompted me along the way. Some of these incidents would seem to be a case of hypersensitivity to any who have not experienced them. I remember, for instance, arriving at a store in New Haven, Connecticut, and having two clerks follow me, as if they expected me to steal something. And I remember my first faculty meeting in a white teaching institution many years later, when a suggestion I had made was completely ignored until, later in the discussion, it was made by a white colleague, at which time it was enthusiastically received. But these personal incidents played only a minor role, for what they did was to give me the freedom to look at North American society with a critical eye and to see what was being done not only to Hispanics, but also to Afro-Americans, to farm laborers of whatever race, and to Native Americans. At a later time, this rising consciousness came to include women, the elderly, and others. Thus my experience of being a minority in the ethnic sense opened my eyes and ears to the oppression that is very much a part of our society, and to hear the voice of the oppressed who are crying out, often in the name of Christianity.

The result of all this for me is that the authority of Scripture has been heightened, but its thrust has been somewhat changed. I still believe that it is the authority of Scripture that can provide us with a needed corrective that comes from beyond the mores and prejudices of society. In this country, as in Latin America, this appeal to Scripture has the added advantage that many in the ruling group claim to acknowledge biblical authority. Thus if we can show that the witness of Scripture is on our side in our present struggles, this will provide us with significant leverage against all sorts of oppression.

But there is more to the question of the authority of Scripture. It is a well-known fact that the Bible has been used repeatedly in order to support repression and injustice. In Latin America, the Spanish conquest was justified on the basis of supposedly biblical teaching. In both North and South America, the Bible has been used to destroy significant cultures and civilizations. Again, in both continents Paul's authority has been adduced in favor of slavery. In the United States, even after the abolition of slavery, and to this day, white supremacists claim that the Bible is on their side. Those—both men and women—who wish to keep

women subservient are constantly quoting the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Epistles.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that many among the groups in this country who feel oppressed are inclined to abandon any attempt to accept or claim the biblical faith. A growing number of women born within the church are convinced that the Bible is essentially a sexist book and therefore have dissociated themselves from it.² Some Native Americans, in their quest for roots and a sense of identity, are exalting the religion of their ancestors and claiming that Christianity is pale-face religion.³ A similar movement has existed among Afro-Americans for decades,⁴ as can be seen in the appeal of the Black Muslims.⁵ Among Hispanics, there is a growing tendency toward radical secularization and bitterness. This secularization, however, is not due to the intellectual difficulties with which academic theologians often deal but rather to the existential difficulty that the gospel of love is not translated into actual good news.

At the same time, precisely among these oppressed groups, there is a strong movement of return to "the old time religion," with its promise of heavenly rewards and its acceptance of the earthly status quo. Among Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and poor whites, this phenomenon is quite noticeable in the growth of the fundamentalist churches, which, as will become apparent in the pages that follow, are not much closer to the fundamentals of biblical faith than are the liberals. Among certain groups of women, a parallel phenomenon can be seen in the present popularity of books and movements that promise marital bliss in exchange for submission, supposedly on the basis of biblical authority.⁶

But these are not the only options open to us. Among women and the various ethnic minorities, there are also an increasingly significant number of people who believe that when one reads Scripture correctly, one comes out with different conclusions—conclusions that are both liberating and true to the biblical message.⁷

In summary—and in ways that will become clearer in the chapters that follow—the experience of being part of an ethnic minority has led me to reinterpret the meaning of the Bible, which I still cherish as a result of my previous experience of being part of a religious minority.

The Changing Latin American Scene

A great deal has changed in Latin America since the days when I debated religion with my classmates. This is not the place to describe

all those changes. But it is necessary to acknowledge one particular, significant change that has taken place in Latin America, and that has helped shape a great deal of what I shall have to say in my later chapters.

In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has taken increasing cognizance of its responsibility toward the impoverished masses of the continent.⁸ This responsibility includes the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments—and there are many priests whose ministry is limited to that. But it includes also genuine care for the physical and psychological needs of those masses. At first, the leaders in this movement were concerned almost exclusively with the immediate needs of individuals and small communities. But they soon came to the conclusion that they were struggling against conditions that were derived from the very structure of society, and that the demand of the gospel was therefore that they address themselves not only to the immediate needs of their parishioners but also to the task of creating a more just society. Since the Roman Catholic Church is quite powerful in many Latin American countries—or at least seems to be so—this newly discovered responsibility has led to many confrontations with repressive governments in various countries. The leaders of the movement are convinced that their struggle is not only against such repressive governments but also against the national and international economic structures that support them.⁹ The result is that dozens of priests—and an archbishop—have died under mysterious circumstances, while the number of lay leaders—both men and women—who have suffered a similar fate is beyond counting. A list only of those who have died in the relatively small country of Guatemala, for instance, reads like the worst reports of persecution in pre-Constantinian times. All this has led many in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America to a reassessment of its tradition, which in many points is quite similar to the reinterpretation of Scripture that I propose here. This reassessment has been linked to a return to scriptural authority, and thus a new form of ecumenism has developed that would have astounded the great proponents of ecumenism of a few decades ago.

The other side of this ecumenism is the changes that have taken place within Protestantism. The Protestantism that I knew in my youth, with its strong anti-Catholic emphasis and its pro-American sentiment, still exists. But alongside it there is a new Protestantism, one that has matured and has begun to interpret Scripture and theology in its own way. Much of this has taken place through the influence of developments within Catholicism, but much of it is also the result of the reflection of Protestants as they become more deeply rooted in their cultures and in

the social and economic struggles of their nations.¹⁰ This new Protestantism is more ready to enter into genuine dialogue and collaboration with the new Catholicism.¹¹

Thus Protestants and Catholics are working together toward a more just society. But they are not doing this simply on the basis of the traditional Catholic and Protestant theologies. Rather, they are rediscovering forgotten aspects of their traditions and their sources of authority and finding that on the basis of these new discoveries they are often called to a common task in the world. Or, in other terms, one could say that what has happened is that, by virtue of their social stance, the more radical leaders of the Roman Catholic Church have found themselves attacked by those in power—including many in the hierarchy—¹² and have thus had to appeal to the biblical bases for their actions, much as I found myself having recourse to the Bible in my earlier debates with my classmates.

This brief discussion of recent events in Latin America is important to our task because in many ways those events influence the lives of Hispanics in this country. To this we shall return in a later chapter, for events in Latin America greatly affect the Hispanic community in the United States. But rather than dealing with the more distant Latin American situation, the purpose of this essay is to deal first of all with the situation in which we ourselves live: the United States.

Fuenteovejuna Theology

Lope de Vega's play, *Fuenteovejuna*, tells the story of the small town of that name, which was under the tyrannical rule of Don Fernán Gómez, knight commander of the Order of Calatrava. After much suffering, the townspeople finally rebel and kill the commander, placing his head on a pike as the banner of their freedom. Their battle cry is "Fuenteovejuna, *todos a una*" (Fuenteovejuna, all are one). When the Grand Master of the Order hears of this, he appeals to Ferdinand and Isabella, who appoint a judge-inquisitor to find the guilty parties and punish them. The judge, however, finds that he can make little progress in his inquiry, for whenever he asks, "*¿Quién mató al comendador?*" (Who killed the commander?), the answer is always the same: "Fuenteovejuna, señor" (Fuenteovejuna, my lord). Irritated, he puts three hundred of the local inhabitants to torture. Still, from all of them—men, women, children, people in their old age—the answer is the same: "Fuenteovejuna, señor." Finally the judge asks for instructions from Isabella

and Ferdinand, who respond that, given such unanimity, there must have been just cause for the commander's death.

The interesting point, however, is that when the townspeople respond "Fuenteovejuna, señor," they are not simply trying to cover up for one another. What has happened is that through their suffering and final uprising, such solidarity has arisen that they do believe that it was the town, and not any individuals in it, that killed the commander. Not only will they not fix individual responsibility; they could not do so even if they tried. "Fuenteovejuna, *todos a una*," has become more than a battle cry and is now the very reality by which they live.¹³

This book is very much like Fuenteovejuna. It includes material and insights gleaned from hundreds of encounters and discussions with Hispanics in all walks of life and with various levels of theological sophistication. I remember some insights that came to me in Sunday school in a Pentecostal church in the Bronx. I remember others that came from students many years ago at the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. Also, much of the material included here has been the subject of discussion of a group of friends who, under the title of "Hispanic Instructors," have been meeting regularly at Perkins School of Theology for several years. The dialogue has certainly included books and articles by colleagues from all over the world. But by and large, I would be hard pressed to determine where or from whom I gained a particular insight. All I can say is that what appears in the pages that follow expresses much of what I have shared with and learned from my Hispanic sisters and brothers over the course of years. Clearly, I cannot claim to speak for all of them, for there are among Hispanics many varieties and shades of opinion. But I also cannot speak without them.

However, the reason for calling attention to the story of Fuenteovejuna goes beyond a mere acknowledgment of indebtedness to colleagues and friends. It is also a call for a different style of doing theology—a Fuenteovejuna style. If theology is the task of the church, and the church is by definition a community, there should be no such thing as an individual theology. The best theology is a communal enterprise.

This is a contribution that Hispanics can bring to theology. Western theology—especially that which takes place in academic circles—has long suffered from an exaggerated individualism. Theologians, like medieval knights, joust with one another, while their peers cheer from the stands where they occupy places of honor and the plebes look at the contest from a distance—if they look at all. The methodology of a Hispanic "Fuenteovejuna" theology will contrast with this. Ours is not a tradition that values individualism, as does that of the North Atlantic.

Indeed, ours is a language that does not even have a word for that "privacy" which the dominant North American culture so values. Coming out of that tradition, our theology will result from a constant dialogue among the entire community. In the end, to the degree that it is true to the faith and experience of that community, to that very degree will it be impossible for any of us to speak of "my" theology or "your" theology. It will not be a theology of theologians but a theology of the believing and practicing community. When someone asks us, "*¿Quién mató al comendador?*" all we shall be able to answer is "Fuenteovejuna, señor."

CHAPTER 2

Who Are We?

When I began teaching in Atlanta, Georgia, I opened my first lecture by telling my students that there was a time when Havana—not Savannah, Georgia, but Havana, Cuba—was the capital of Georgia. And then I went on to say, "Welcome, y'all furriners." This was intended only as a joke, but it may also serve to point out a fact often forgotten: As far as time is concerned, it is not the Hispanic-American but the Anglo-American who is the newcomer to this country.¹ Nineteen years before the British founded their first colony in the land that Sir Walter Raleigh called Virginia, the Spanish based in Cuba founded a city that still exists in Saint Augustine, Florida. And twelve years before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, the Spanish founded the city of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Hispanics in the United States

Actually, the first Hispanics to become part of this country did not do so by migration but were rather engulfed by the United States in its process of expansion—sometimes by purchase, sometimes by military conquest, and sometimes by simple annexation of territories no one was strong enough to defend. Even without turning back to history, this is clear when one looks at a map of the United States and finds in it such names as Florida, California, Nevada, Colorado, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, and Key West (a corruption of "Cayo Hueso").

This process was begun in 1810, when the United States annexed western Florida in order to have an outlet into the Gulf of Mexico—at that time truly the *Gulf of Mexico*—and by 1853 the new and expanding