

Introduction

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On November of 2017, La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Religion gathered during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in Boston, Massachusetts. La Comunidad (literally, “the community”) is the oldest organization of Latinx scholars recognized by AAR/SBL, founded in 1989 by such eminent Latinx scholars as Drs. Fernando S. Segovia, Efrain Agosto, Benjamin Alicea, Francisco Garcia-Treto, Ada María Isasi-Diaz, and Eldin Villafañe. Villafañe also served as La Comunidad’s first President.¹ The 2018 gathering presented Villafañe with the Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his “lifetime of scholarship and service on behalf of the Latinx community.”² In light of this award, and to highlight Villafañe’s use of Scripture in the construction of his theological ethics, panelists were invited to speak on “Latinx Ethical and Theological Readings of Scripture,” from scholarly and grassroots perspectives, representing Christian and Muslim traditions.

Scripture is an important interlocuter in the elaboration of faith and practice in the Latinx community, and thus in the articulation of their theologies and ethical principles. Latinx scholars have long noted the way the community reads Scriptures in an organic way, becoming a “living” and a lived word. For example, in *Liberating News*

(1989), Orlando E. Costas noted that while Latinx Protestants (*evangélicxs*), under the influence of US and continental Protestant missionaries, considered the Bible the rule of faith and practice, for Latinx this meant it was the “rule of practical faith.”³ Over the years Catholic and Protestant scholars have reiterated this organic approach to Scripture. In 2013, Efrain Agosto published the findings from a comprehensive study that he, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Jacqueline Hidalgo and Brian Clark undertook, interviewing various Protestant (including Pentecostal), Catholic, and Muslim groups to determine how grassroots communities used and read Scripture. Their findings indicate that Scripture was invariably authoritative for these varied Latinx religious communities—however differently they might define “authoritative.” Its authority stemmed in part due to the resonance these writings had with Latinxs’ everyday experiences and relationships.⁴

Given the importance of Scripture for Latinx faith, and Villafañe’s hermeneutical approach in the elaboration of his theological ethics, the panel presentation had two goals: to demonstrate that there are particularities as well as commonalities in the way that Latinx scholars organically integrate Scriptures and texts into their daily lives that cross religious and educational borders such that one could claim a *hermeneutics of latinidad*; and to examine such methodologies at a time in which the authority of sacred texts is being questioned given the current socio-political ethos. The papers of the four panelists who spoke last November are published in this issue of *Lexington Theological Quarterly*.

The first essay is by Dr. Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, a Baptist biblical scholar and Associate Professor of Christian Scriptures at the School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle University.⁵ Fully aware of the varied

ways in which terminology (what she calls “ethnonyms”) such as “hispanic” or “Latina/o” can homogenize what Sixto J. García and Orlando O. Espín have called a “community of communities,” Guardiola-Sáenz begins with a brief overview of the histories that have given formation to the varied Latinx groups who currently reside in the United States.⁶ This varied history includes “violent imperial wars, invasions, oppressive regimes, and exclusionary labels,” that lead to a politicized identity. This identity denoted under the general rubric of *latinidad* becomes the hermeneutical lens through which Latinx scholars “reread the Bible” seeking to confront totalitarian and imperializing readings, advance liberating and inclusive interpretations, and promote social and political transformation” (p. 17). Guardiola-Sáenz reviews four paradigms that she believes exemplify the diverse ways that Latinx scholars interpret the Bible. These include Virgilio Elizondo’s “hermeneutics of *mestizaje*,” a method that reads Mexican American culture through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the gospel through the lens of Mexican American culture.⁷ Guardiola-Sáenz follows this by reviewing Ada María Isasi-Díaz’ “hermeneutics of *lucha* (struggle).” It is based on *mujerista* theological method, one that is rooted in grassroots Latinas’ experience of struggle for liberation. The third major paradigm that Guardiola-Sáenz reviews is Justo L. González’ hermeneutics of exile that arises from his *mañana* (tomorrow) theology. This is a reading of the Bible “in Spanish,” which means that is read from the perspective of the marginalized and attentive how the text is interpreted by the powerless and those with power. Guardiola-Sáenz fourth and final paradigm is Fernando S. Segovia’s “hermeneutics of diaspora,” with its corresponding methodology of intercultural criticism. Segovia has been an

important voice in the subsequent development of postcolonial readings of biblical texts, which Guardiola-Sáenz does not discuss fully here. Rather, she focuses on Segovia's earlier work in which he developed an interpretive methodology that arises from Latinx experiences of diaspora and sense of "otherness." Guardiola-Sáenz concludes her chapter with a brief overview of newer voices addressing issues of biblical interpretation from a Latinx perspective.

Dr. María Teresa Dávila, a Roman Catholic Christian Social ethicist, was formerly the Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Andover Newton Theological School and is currently Lecturer for the Department of Religious and Theological Studies at Merrimack College. She is also President of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS). Dávila's "'For a Time Such as This': Scripture and Theological Ethics" seeks to dispel myths that arise from the "idolatry of our certainties," which seem to reign among Christian leadership in the public square. She insists that reading of sacred texts must be organic to the life and critical issues of justice that arise not only out of the context of current events, but also in dialogue with difference; that is to say, in collaboration and dialogue with Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Humanist, as well as Christian interlocuters. Using sermonic texts of the late Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero and his use of Scripture to demonstrate a text within a text interpretive method, Dávila then argues that this leads to an organic reading of texts that is liberative, communal and faithful to the scriptural intent. In such a method, the suffering community and its search for salvation (experienced as liberation from oppression) is also a text that must be read and interpreted. Dávila closes by observing how Villafañe related the text

of the urban poor to the biblical witness of the liberating work of the Spirit. In observing the methods of Romero and Villafañe, we should be inspired to read texts with interlocuters outside of the boundaries of our disciplines to promote an ethic of unbounded grace.

Dr. Harold Morales is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Morgan State University. One of his areas of specialty is Latinx Religions and Islam. His essay, titled “Latino Engagements with Islamic Scriptures,” examines the role that the Qur’an plays in the life of Latinx Muslims, particularly the newly reverted. In this context, scripture plays a key role in ritual. Ritual is important for countering moral and religious amnesia, and thus helps adherents to remember (*zīkr*). Morales focuses in particular on the role of the *shahadah*, the public proclamation that “there is no god but God and Muhammed is the messenger of God,” as an important form of *zīkr* to aid against forgetting God in the face of material and worldly distractions, and to remember their former Christian ways of being Latinx. This proscription against “moral amnesia” also includes the five daily prayers, with their recitation of the Al-Fatiha (The Opening). These prayers further assist believers in remembering God’s attributes such as God’s mercy and graciousness. Morales points out that, notwithstanding God’s different attributes, Islam affirms the doctrine of Tawhid—the oneness of God. This doctrine, in turn, underscores that there is no separation between the so-called secular and the sacred, nor between activism and spirituality. Two key contributions of Morales’ discussion is the clarification of the meaning of *jihad* within the context of the core theme of Qur’an, which is the quest to bring about a just society through equity and charity, and the importance of the identification of *latinidad* with Islam.

The last essay in this issue of the *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, “Scripture and Liberating Ethics: Honoring Eldin Villafañe,” is provided by Dr. Efraín Agosto, a Protestant with Pentecostal roots, and Second Testament biblical scholar who is currently the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Academic Dean of New York Theological Seminary. As the title indicates, this essay is dedicated to the body of work carried out by the 2018 recipient of La Comunidad’s Lifetime Achievement Award, Dr. Eldin Villafañe. In addition to being a founding member of La Comunidad and its inaugural president, Villafañe is also known for his groundbreaking book, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic*. It was the first Latinx Pentecostal articulation of a social ethic from that perspective. Villafañe is also well known for developing a critical articulation of a theological praxis and ethics for urban ministry and urban ministerial education. In his essay, Agosto examines the key writings and works of Villafañe, and in particular how Villafañe uses Scripture as a foundational tool for the construction of his theology and ethics. Agosto begins by examining how Villafañe uses specific biblical texts and how he exegetes those texts to argue for a social ethical theology that challenges both individual and institutional actions. Agosto then reviews the key biblical themes in Villafañe’s writings including “the power of the powerless.” Villafañe’s insistence that scholarship had to be an engaged scholarship was expressed through three biblical metaphors: *sierva* (service), *santificadora* (sanctification against systemic sin) and *sanadora* (healing voice for the hurting). For Agosto, these themes and metaphors represent Villafañe’s distinctive hermeneutical method, an exegesis of the Bible in light of the city. He concludes the essay by challenging

scholars today to be prophetic and engaged scholars in light of the current social and political ethos, one which in particular has compromised evangelicalism and the Church.

Each of these essays provide important insights about Latinx approaches to Scripture and hermeneutics. First, they reaffirm the findings of previous studies that indicate that, for the most part, Latinx scholars are “organic intellectuals.” That is to say, their scholarly pursuits are in the service of the grassroots communities from which many emerge, and they are acutely attentive to issues of hegemony, poverty, colonialism, racism, gender oppression, and other issues that impact those communities.⁸ As a result, their reading of Scripture tends to be “organic” as well. Scripture must speak to the current realities facing the Latinx community, even as it spoke in its own context and time. Its authoritative role derives partly from this correlation of Word and life. It is further proof that God is not indifferent to the cries of the Latina community, or of the suffering. One can further assess that Scripture plays a profoundly sacramental role: it is read and studied to remember: to remember what God has done on behalf of the forgotten and vulnerable of the world, and to reaffirm that this is the God that continues to function on behalf of the poor, the rejected, the forgotten, and the vulnerable of our times. It is to remember that God is a God of justice, love, compassion, and mercy. As such, the reader (whether an individual or as community) is called upon to “go and do likewise.”⁹ Such readings are an important counterpoint to those who use Scripture to justify hate, violence, and injustice against the vulnerable. Scripture is not a god to be venerated, but a message to be heard. The reading of Scripture through the lenses of *latinidad* reaffirms our identity, our faith, and calls us to

accountability. We are grateful for the contributions and insights of each of our authors.

Endnotes

¹ For a synopsis of the history of La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars, go to <https://sites.google.com/site/lacomunidadonline/history>. I use the “x” ending rather than Latina or Latino to indicate inclusive language that transcends cis-gendered categories.

² <https://sites.google.com/site/lacomunidadonline/awards>

³ Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 11.

⁴ Efraín Agosto, “Reading the Word in America: US Latino/a Religious Communities and their Scriptures,” in *MisReading America: Scriptures and Difference*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

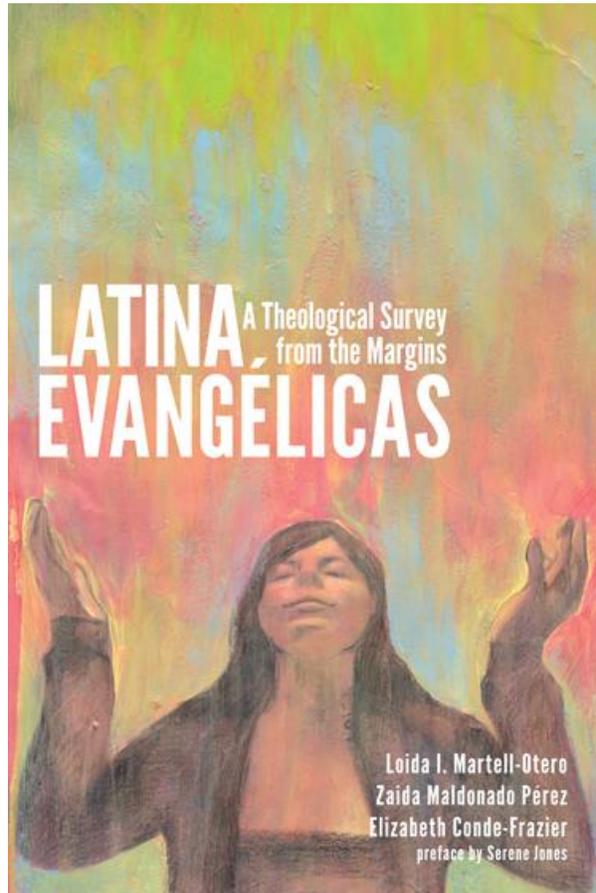
⁵ In recognition of the anti-Semitic bias inherent in our language about the Hebrew Scriptures being the *old testament* and the (partly) Greek Scriptures being the *newer testament*, I follow Lisa Davidson’s suggestion (personal communication) of referring to them as First and Second Testaments.

⁶ Sixto J. García and Orlando O. Espín, “‘Lilies of the Field’: A Hispanic Theology of Providence and Human Responsibility,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society* 44 (June 1989): 70. Guardiola-Sáenz notes that in many cases the population did not cross borders to the US (that is to say, emigrate) but rather the US crossed its borders into their geographical homes through invasion as in history of the Southwest (northern Mexico) and Puerto Rico.

⁷ Mestizaje refers to the biological and cultural mixing of largely mesoindigenous people with European invaders. Virgilio Elizondo’s early work used the term as a *theological* rather than simply a sociological category. For him, referred to the process in which two or more cultural, religious, and/ or biological groups give rise to a new entity while retaining the characteristics of the parent groups. See Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 5–7.

⁸ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). For a good discussion of Gramsci's notion of "organic intellectual" see I. John Mohan Razu, "Globalization and the Role of 'Organic' Intellectuals: Lessons from South Asia," *The Expository Times* 114, no. 10 (July 2003): 338–339.

⁹ Luke 10: 37.



Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins is a constructive and postcolonial examination of the theology of Protestant Latinas who reside in the United States. Written by three Latinas who have pastored and who teach in Latina/o communities, the book seeks to expand beyond Latina feminist and *mujerista* voices to include those whose perspectives have not yet been heard.

Cascade Books, 2013,

