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**The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology**
Edited by Orlando O. Espín
The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology

Edited by

Orlando O. Espín
Para Ricardo, compañero y amigo.

Y para quienes nos hicieron ver:

Edgar Beltrán         Orlando Costas
Virgilio Elizondo    Alejandro García-Rivera
Justo L. González    Ada M. Isasi-Díaz
Luis Rivera Pagán    Otto Maduro

+++  

Podrán cortar todas las flores, pero no podrán detener la primavera.

Pablo Neruda

No va para ningún lado quien no sabe dónde está.

Gilberto Santa Rosa
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Introduction

Orlando O. Espín

Since the late 1970s there has developed among Latino/a scholars of religion a manner of theologizing that has become known as Latino/a theology. The chapters in this volume will offer the reader a panoramic view of this theological approach. This Introduction will attempt to generally describe Latino/a theology, as well as clarify a few terms and methodological approaches.

Latinos and Latinas

Latinos and Latinas – also referred to as Latinos/as or Latinas/os or Latin@s or Latin@́s or Hispanics – are the US communities and persons whose cultural and historical roots are to be found in Latin America.1 As we begin this volume, a few very important clarifications on the term or expression “Latinos/as” are in order, in order to help the reader understand its usage, and to begin delving into the contexts that begat Latino/a theologies.

1. The reader must remember that what today we call “Latin America” is a smaller geographic version of what for several centuries were the Spanish and Portuguese empires. At least half of today’s US territory was part of the Spanish colonial world. With military actions that led to the seizure of large territories not originally its own, the US geographically grew to most of its current size.2 The territories forcibly incorporated, however, were not empty or without history – their populations were also forced to join the US, but as conquered peoples.3
2. There are now (2015) approximately 60 million Latinos/as in the US, most of whom were born in the US; of those who were born elsewhere the majority are naturalized US citizens or permanent residents. Latinos/as, consequently, are not identical with “Latin Americans” any more than Irish Americans or German Americans can be thought of as identical to today’s Irish or Germans. Most Latinos/as today are not immigrants. They constitute today the largest “minority” and the fastest-growing group of ethnic/cultural communities in the country.

3. Today in the US there is no one Latino/a culture or community. There are at least 20 Latino/a cultural communities, all internally diverse, and all historically and ethnically very distinct. Some of the diversity results from the differences in ancestral lands of origin of each of the communities, but the diversity must also be explained as due to the US locations where these communities developed (e.g., a Latino/a of Dominican roots is not a Latino/a of Guatemalan roots, nor is a Mexican American from East Los Angeles the same as a Mexican American from Homestead, Florida). Depending on the US geographic location, one or another of these Latino/a communities will be the local or regional majority, but never to the exclusion of others. For example, in the states of Florida, Rhode Island and New York, Latinos/as of Antillean origins (i.e., Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans) are the demographic majorities, but not to the exclusion of Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Colombians, and so on. In the District of Columbia to be Latino/a is very likely to be of Salvadoran origin, while in New Orleans it’s to have Honduran roots.

4. Denominational demographics have also been significantly impacted by the growing Latino/a presence. For example, the majority of the members of the largest US denomination (the Roman Catholic Church) are now Latinos/as; and in some Roman Catholic dioceses the Latino/a presence is overwhelming (e.g., Miami, Los Angeles, and New York, but also Anchorage, St Cloud, and Atlanta). The growth of the Episcopal Church in the US since the year 2000 has been mostly due to Latinos/as, and the same can be said – mutatis mutandis – in many other denominations (e.g., United Methodist Church, American Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God).

5. Although it is evident that the majority of Latinos/as identify themselves as Christian (regardless of denominational affiliation), one cannot ignore the fact that there are Latino/a Jews, Muslims, Lukumí, Buddhists, and so on, as proud of their ethnicity as any other Latino/a, making latinidad a more diverse reality than is popularly assumed. Of growing importance, furthermore, is the increasing number of Latinos/as who do not identify with any religious tradition or denomination – not “secularized” in the North Atlantic sense of the term, but “unaffiliated” in the ways of silent protests against denominational orthodoxies.

6. Despite the evident diversity, Latino/a communities still have much in common. The extended family and a popular religious cosmovision are the two strongest pillars of Latino/a cultures across all differences, serving as the interpretive, organizing “grids” for most people’s daily reality and understanding. Also shared
by Latino/a communities is the defining role(s) of older women in the families – especially (but not exclusively) in matters ethical and/or religious. Bilingualism remains the norm, helping shape much of the inclusive understanding of Latino/a cultures, as well as the preservation of cultural elements molded during the Spanish colonial centuries. Depending on the communities, or groups thereof, the contributions of Africans remain strong, or the still-living legacy of the First Peoples of the Americas.

**Latino/a theology**

This is a volume on *Latino/a theology*. But what is that? As mentioned earlier, religion has been and remains a hugely important component of all Latino/a cultures, and so any attempt at understanding the latter requires an equally serious understanding of the former. The same is true about Christian theological traditions in the US. The reader should beware, however, of identifying “religion” only or mainly with its institutional expressions, or with its orthodoxies – among Latinos/as, “religion” is familial before it’s institutional, and inclusive more than orthodox. The language and categories of North Atlantic social scientific, philosophical, and theological thought tend to be blind to, or marginalize, what does not “fit” their self-proclaimed normativity and universal validity (i.e., their culturally constructed “orthodoxies”).

Consequently, the study of Latino/a religion, if methodologically done *latinamente*, must not fall prey to approaches that would force foreign or colonializing analytical categories onto Latino/a realities. This does not obstruct dialogue, but it prevents it from becoming a subtle way of continued colonization. It is one thing to dialogue with and engage someone else’s categories, and another to not see that the categories are someone else’s, reflecting the interests and perspectives of their creators.

Latino/a theology was born as a methodological approach to the study of Latino/a religious reality, as much as a contributor to the overall study of Latino/a communities and realities that also interpret themselves through inescapably religious lenses. Latino/a theology was born in a Christian context and till this day remains a (Catholic/Protestant/Evangelical) ecumenical enterprise, although sooner rather than later it will have to engage other Latino/a religious dialogue partners who – because they *are* Latino/a – will need to enter the conversation on the most grounding of Latino/a cultural elements.

I am not aware of any one definition of Latino/a theology (Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical) that might have become broadly standard among those of us who work in the field. A few authors or commentators have proposed one or another descriptive definition – but other commentators (also Latino/a) have invariably offered improvements to the attempted definitions or descriptions (cf. Espín and Díaz 1999; Fernández 2000; Aponte and De La Torre 2006; Espín 2007; Nanko-Fernández 2010).

Latino/a theology now has a long enough history, a “critical mass” of qualified practitioners, and a large body of published literature. The chapters in this volume will acquaint the reader with much that Latino/a theologians have already offered the
academy. Latino/a theology was born at the intersection of European and European American theologies, on the one hand, and of Latin American liberation theologies, on the other – an intersection which did not occur in either Europe or Latin America, but did in the US, and here within the extraordinarily diverse contexts and realities of the Latino/a communities. \textit{Lo cotidiano} was and remains the birthing place of our theology.

From its inception, Latino/a theology has always understood itself as being neither a copy, nor a translation, nor an adaptation of other intellectual traditions. Latino/a theologians began their work critiquing the universalizing and colonizing pretensions of European and European American theologies, as well as recognizing that we were not in Latin America (thereby questioning as well the temptation to simply translate or adapt Latin American theologies to our US context, although at first we borrowed much from Latin American liberation theology).

I don’t think that in the late 1970s and early 1980s we had read postcolonial theory, but postmodern thought was beginning to raise questions in some of us. In any case, when the Latino/a theological critique of dominant theologies started, with the tools we had then (mostly borrowed from the Latin American critique of ideologies), it began by insisting that, theologically, “we are we” and therefore “we are not they.” This led to a number of publications on the significance of culture, particularity, and ethnicity for theology – and this is the first characteristic of Latino/a theology: our emphatic rejection of universalizing and marginalizing European and European American thought, coupled with the equally adamant affirmation of Latino/a cultural and religious identity.

We needed to open “our” space, speak with “our” voice, discuss “our” issues, and very insistently announce that we were not someone else’s “pastoral problem” or “bibliographic footnote.” We insisted on being included as equals in the theological conversation – consequently, particularity and culture, the critique of dominance and white privilege, and their implications for theology and for the defense of our people in a social and ecclesial reality adverse to them, became and remain the grounding characteristic of our theologizing.

In a quest for the sources of a distinctly Latino/a theology, we turned to Latinos/as themselves – to their faith, their Christian experience, their cultural expressions, and the broader Latino/a intellectual tradition. And it is in this quest that many of us began to work through such issues as “the popular,” epistemology, praxis, spirituality, \textit{lo cotidiano}, and so on. Any Latino/a theologian can readily confess that work in these and other areas has been far from sufficient – new answers raise many more questions which in turn lead to newer areas and further questions and answers.

There is no question in my mind but that Latino/a theology has always tried to be sensitive and responsive to the social, economic, and political realities of Latinos/as. Our theology has also been just as sensitive to popular expressions of the Christian faith. We have frequently included data and analyses on Latinos/as made available to us by the social sciences, and attempted to theologize from the human reality described by the data and analyzed by colleagues in the social disciplines. We have tried to step behind the external expressions of faith (some of which might not coincide with dominant understandings of Christianity) and there listen to the faith of everyday Latinos/
as, not by pretending that Christianity could somehow exist without expression, but by not equating the former with the latter, or the dominant with the orthodox norm. “Why and how do Latinos/as believe?” are not idle questions in and for theology. Indeed, to understand how Latinos/as “construct” what they hold to be real and good and important is crucial to the Latino/a theological movement. The last three or so decades have begun the process of theological study of popular (Catholic and Protestant) Christianities, and the incorporation of social scientific interlocutors into our theological dialogue – both in a clear and conscious attempt to listen to our people, and to recognize in our communities’ life and faith a source for our theology. How could one conceivably do theology (any theology) today while disregarding the social reality or the faith expressions of the very Christian communities one claims to be serving and understanding through theology – indeed, of the very People of God whom we doctrinally claim to be “the Church”? How can anyone do theology today (any theology) and not consider the believing people’s real, daily faith and life as pre-eminent theological source – thereby critiquing the contemporary theological fixation of (in practice) regarding biblical, ecclesiastical, or theological texts as more important sources for theology than the living faith of the real People of God?

Latino/a theology was born within various Christian denominations. Although Latino/a Catholic theologians as a group, perhaps, had an earlier impact, it is transparently clear that Latino/a theology and theologians have been insistently ecumenical. Four names very frequently appear at the origins of the movement: Virgilio Elizondo and Edgard Beltrán (Catholics) and Justo González and Orlando Costas (Protestants) – they are jointly regarded as “founders” of a way of theologizing (beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s) that soon thereafter became known as Latino/a (or US Hispanic) theology. Others followed, taking up the challenge of developing the methodologies, identifying the sources, and so on, and all else that we now assume as part of this theological movement.

From the start, and I don’t think I exaggerate, Latino/a theologians have been sensitive to the ecumenical needs of our communities, as well as respectful of intra-Latino/a denominational differences. The truly sororal and fraternal spirit evident among most Latino/a theologians (which, unfortunately, is not always paralleled at the congregational level) opened within our movement not only the opportunity for excellent trans-denominational friendships, but also for such trans-denominational programs as the Hispanic Summer Program, the Hispanic Theological Initiative, and our two theological journals (Apuntes and the Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology). This in turn has contributed to the birth and development of a theology ecumenically respectful and sensitive. This shared respect and this shared interest in each other’s traditions have impacted Latino/a theology over the last three decades, and increasingly more so.

Latino/a Catholic and Protestant theologies, consequently, have been ecumenically sensitive and ecumenically cooperative – Catholics did not discover Protestants, or vice versa, after we began to theologize: we have always theologized together, even when writing from within our respective ecclesial traditions, and we can’t understand our respective theologies without each other. This is a gain that our denominations and local congregations will do well to emulate.
But just as I have emphasized the ecumenical spirit among most Latino/a Catholic and Protestant theologians, I want to also underline that most of our published works bear the mark of our denominational affiliations: we write from within our traditions, and this (at least in my mind) is both a “plus” and a “minus.” We are familiar with the work of the European, European American, and Latin American theologians of our denominations. Catholics know their Catholic theologies. Protestants know their Protestant theologies. And no one is embarrassed to engage their own theological traditions in dialogue and mutual critique. We do not hide who we are. Yet we clearly assume all of our denominational traditions to be limited, always contextual human efforts at understanding what is often beyond all understanding, just as we also assume our distinct theological traditions to be bearers of much wisdom and insight.

The same honesty that led us to demand our voice and our space as Latinos/as in society and academy has also made us appreciate the denominational traditions which nourished us as Latinos/as and announced the Gospel to us. Most Latino/a Catholic and Protestant theology, over the last three decades or so, has been denominational as well as ecumenically respectful – but the next step will have to be the construction of a truly ecumenical, Latino/a theology which can be received as reflective of shared faith and of common heritage. There is a growing need to show that the ecumenical spirit can be translated into actual theological works.

There is no question in my mind but that one significant dynamic within Latino/a theology, over the last three decades, has been the ever-increasing reception and incorporation of methodological concerns and issues raised by feminist critical theory – from the growing interest in \textit{lo cotidiano} to the critique of gender roles, to a whole other set of critical issues originally raised by Latina feminists outside theology (think, for example, of Gloria Anzaldúa, Milagros Peña, and many others). Latina feminists have begun to impact Latino/a theology (and not just that theology done by women), with particular emphases on \textit{lo cotidiano} and on epistemological critique, on the protagonism of women and gender/sexual minorities, on the critique of Latino/a cultural sexism, and so on.

As Latino/a theology continues to develop after thirty or more years, it remains crucially important to ask, \textit{Who validates our theology?} Who says and confirms that we are theologically doing what we should be doing? These are questions intimately connected with an inescapable one: \textit{Who benefits from our theology?} These are not just theoretical questions – they are eminently ethical issues. Theology (all theology) is ethical or it is not “theology.”

Latino/a theologians work under the same pressures and demands as all other theologians: we have to publish and teach, go through tenure and promotion review processes, seek the highest professorial ranks, deal with university administrators and deans and publishers and students. And so on, and so forth. We all know what academic life is like and what are its exigencies, because we are part of it. The point I am making is that Latino/a theologians are also responsible to the theological academy, and we are judged by the standards of that academy. Our work must be scholarly, rigorous, self-legitimizing, publishable (and published), and so on – like everyone else’s. We,
Latinos/as in the academy, have exactly the same things required of us as do our colleagues, and so does our scholarship ... although we know that this is not really true. Why? Because we often face, in our various institutions, the biases of colleagues and administrators who consistently demand more of us than they would demand of themselves, as if requiring us to “prove” that we are their equals.

However, and this is an extremely important “however,” even when granting that we do need to have our theology validated by the academy, that is not the real and most important validation we require and seek. Indeed, there is another validation that is the key to our not being co-opted by the dominant academy’s acceptance or applause (or by the dominant academy’s politically correct need to convince itself of its own openness while remaining factually deaf to all who are not part of the dominant). I am speaking of the validation which comes from our own Latino/a communities. The question for Latino/a theologians is whether our work in fact furthers the goals of our people – their struggles for equality and dignity, for decent housing, education and health care. An equally necessary question is whether our theology prophetically challenges our people to grow beyond our biases, our idols, and our sins. If the social, political, economic, and religious reality and understanding of Latinos/as are not positively affected by our theological work, then the applause or acceptance of the (dominant) academy means nothing – or perhaps it means that we have betrayed our communities’ trust. The requirement of validation by the people remains.

Teología de conjunto (or teología en conjunto) has been identified as a manner of doing theology frequently identified with Latino/a theologizing. A group of theologians (i.e., a conjunto) gather – sometimes with pastoral agents, or with scholars from other fields – and, together, “create” theology – each bringing his or her own expertise to the group, but all working together for the same purpose and on the same topic. There are a few models of teología de conjunto, but they all emphasize the communal, conversational, shared style of doing theology as a conjunto. It is needless to say that since the late 1970s or early 1980s much has been written by theologians individually; therefore it would be inaccurate to assume that all Latino/a theology has been created as teología en conjunto. But even the individual works have involved and been built upon a great deal of consultation and conversation.

So, what is Latino/a theology? I’d suggest that it is a movement, a contextual perspective, and a methodological approach to theologizing within (academic) Christian theology.

1. It is distinguished by a cultural, critical, contextual, justice-seeking, and non-innocent interpretation of Scripture and doctrine, society and church, and history. It is intent on understanding these in order to impact and empower the daily reality, daily faith, and daily struggles for justice of Latino/a communities, while acknowledging and honoring Latino/a cultures, histories and stories, daily reality and popular faith as legitimate and necessary sources of for Christian theology.

2. Consequently, Latino/a theologizing can and does focus on either traditional or contemporary topics within Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation.
Hence, there is no “topic” typical of, or unimportant to, Latino/a theology – what is unique are the sources, the methodological approaches, the starting point and perspective, the contexts, and the intent.

3. In explicit dialogue with other theologies and other scholarly disciplines and fields of learning, and ecumenically sensitive (with growing inter-religious awareness too), Latino/a theology is distinct in its *en conjunto* methodological approach and in its reverent passion for the real life, faith, and cultures of Latino/a communities, extended families, and persons.

4. If all theology is “faith in search of understanding,” then Latino/a theology assumes, honors, and incorporates the faith of Latino/a Christian communities, their manner(s) of searching, and theological understanding(s) that explain(s) real life and further empower(s) the Latino/a people.

5. Latino/a theology is a contributor to the broader theological academy because it methodologically demonstrates that theology is not and ethically cannot be “books speaking with books.” It models a scholarly pursuit that is a committed, reasoned understanding of the lives, struggles, and faith of real people in real sociocultural situations that cry out for justice.

If any definition is supposed to state and describe the meaning and reality of that which it defines, then the preceding paragraphs might be regarded as a valid definition of Latino/a theology.

However, there is an issue still raised among Latino/a theologians: does the theologian have to be personally Latino/a in order for her or his theological production to be Latino/a? How much *latinidad* is needed in order to identify a theologian or a theological work as “Latino/a”? It seems consensually settled that the theologian (Latino/a or not) has to be personally involved with Latino/a communities to such a degree that his or her theology be truly and unquestionably born from “the heart of our people” (i.e., from within, and consciously reflective of, Latino/a people’s lives, reality, faith, cultures, and so on) – a perspective and knowledge had not through books or journals or occasional encounters but only through daily (personal, committed, and prolonged) engagement.

Latino/a theology is important for the non-Latino/a for the same reasons feminist theology is important for those who are not women – both are necessary for the construction of a more just and inclusive world. Both are reasoned and prophetic discourses calling us all to build together that just and inclusive world. If a man or a non-Latino/a were to think that such a world is not urgently important, or that it could be built regardless of the continued marginalization of much of the human race, then – for that man or that non-Latino/a – both feminist and Latino/a theologies would be unimportant. And just as there are women who reject any association with feminism and feminist theology, so there are Latinos/as who would rather ignore or reject any identification or association with Latino/a theologies.

Hans U. von Balthasar did not write anything on US Latino/a theology, but he did say that many of today’s theologians could be accused of a cowardly passing by of our world’s anguish and pain, deaf to the cries of their fellow humans, while
continuing to develop their theories and theologies, detached from the real present (von Balthasar 2000: 27). All US theologians, Latino/a and European American, Native, Black, and Asian American, Catholic and Protestant, women and men, should pay heed.

Diversity

The present volume reflects and expresses the diversity of Latino/a theology and theologians: women and men, young and old, heterosexual and LGBTQI, from Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic ecclesial backgrounds, from different social classes and several racial configurations, from a variety of Latino/a cultural communities and from different regions, yet all sharing the passion and learning that characterize Latino/a theology.

The Companion is divided into three unequal collections of chapters. Part I gathers four chapters that will serve as contextualization for the rest, and especially as contextualizing texts for the study of all Latino/a theology. The chapters in Part II reflect, latinamente, on some of the topics most frequent in any Christian theological tradition. And Part III theologically discusses issues of very significant interest and importance for US Latino/a communities and churches today.

Evidently not every single issue has been, or could have been, included in this book. Not all Latino/a theologians found a space herein, and some could not participate, for reasons beyond their or our control. This volume is intended to initiate the reader into the study of Latino/a theology and theologians, but not to limit the reader to its contents or mislead the user into assuming that “this is it.” Think of this Companion as the launching pad where a journey begins, but not as the landing strip where it ends.

The contributors and this editor hope that you, the reader, will come to greater understanding and appreciation of Latino/a theology, its methodological approaches, and its contributions to Christian theologizing. And its potential.

Notes

1 I prefer “Latino/a” (sometimes pronounced as the single word “Latinoa”) because it reflects the more common pronunciation and usage, but I by no means claim that this is the more “correct” or only possible spelling or pronunciation. Each author in this volume has been free to use the identity term they choose, as long as it reflects actual usage. Furthermore, each author has been free to use the spelling they choose of certain terms, as well as to choose italicization or not of Spanish words or expressions or of “Espanglish” terms. This editor has not attempted a standardization of spellings and usage because either none exists or because some of the authors have chosen to make a theoretical point by their defiance of rules.
2 In 1819 (the US invasion of Florida), 1846-8 (the US invasion and seizure of Mexico’s northern half), and 1898 (the US conquest and occupation of Puerto Rico and Guam). In 1898, the US also seized Cuba and the Philippines, but in 1902 Cuba became independent, as the Philippines did in 1947. Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867, and Hawaii was illegally “deeded” to the US in 1893.

3 The later granting of citizenship to these populations did not change, and still has not changed, their treatment and perception as “second-class” US citizens. And as in many other situations of coloniality, there will always be those of the conquered who will support the colonizer.


5 By “popular” I do not merely mean that this cosmovisión (broader and deeper than a worldview) is widespread, although it certainly is. By “popular” I more precisely want to underline that it is the people’s – “popular,” we recall, is the adjective derived from the noun “people.” On inescapable Latino/a popular religious cosmovision, cf. the chapters in this volume by Berrú-Davis and Aponte on “Theologizing Popular Catholicism” and “Theologizing Popular Protestantism,” respectively; and also, cf. Espín (1997) and Aponte (2012).

6 Throughout most of the colonial period, the enslavement of Africans was commonplace in what were the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Few Latin American countries kept the slavery system after independence (Brazil being the most conspicuous, finally abolishing slavery in 1888). Although Africans of many ethnic backgrounds were captured and enslaved between 1497 and 1888 (the centuries of Black slavery in Latin America), the Yoruba, Igbo, and Fon seem to have suffered enslavement more frequently – like no other African ethnic community – in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. The Yoruba and Igbo today are mostly in present-day Nigeria, and the Fon in present-day Benin. The Yoruba’s and Igbo’s descendants are, in greater or lesser numbers, in most Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, as well as in Brazil. The Fon’s descendants are mostly in Haiti and Brazil, but also in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Darién region between Panama and Colombia. Mulataje has been a very important historical avenue for the preservation of Africa’s influence among many Latinos/as. We cannot assume that every Latino/a community bears an African people’s influence, although more do than many Latinos/as would admit. Racism is also a Latino/a reality.

7 The First Peoples of Latin America were and remain numerous, despite the terrible genocides that occurred during and after the colonial period. The presence or absence of a First People’s cultural influence will depend on the Latino/a community’. More influential (because of the root countries of the more numerous Latino/a communities) have been the Nahua of south central Mexico, and the Maya of southern Mexico and northern Central America. Mestizaje has been a very important historical avenue for the continued importance of First Peoples’ influence among Latinos/as. Parallel to what has been said in n. 6 of the African presence, we cannot assume that every Latino/a community bears a First People’s influence. Racism is, again, also a Latino/a reality.

8 No one can credibly claim to reflect Christian theologies or churches in the US while factually disregarding (and thereby factually marginalizing) the largest ethnic/racial minority in the country.

9 Orthodoxies seem to be defined by exclusions, because the affirmation of an orthodoxy requires the affirmation of heresy and heterodoxy.
References


Further Reading


