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# Dis-covering Latina/o Reality: A Question of *conciencia*

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Through this collaboration with Elizabeth Martínez and the remarkably efficient staff of the Center for Latino Research, we have invited the readers of *Diálogo* into an ongoing conversation about the intersections of art, religion, culture, literature, poetry, and sacrament in Latina/o Catholicism. Many voices have contributed to this conversation. Through the two issues of volume 16, we hope that many more will accept the invitation to enter the conversation.

In introducing *Diálogo* 16:2, I think of certain groundbreaking works in the late twentieth century that opened up new conversations, e.g., Leopoldo Zea's *América como conciencia* (1953), Virgilio Elizondo's *The Future is Mestizo* (1988), Enrique Dussel's *1492: El encubrimiento del otro* (1992), Ada María Isasi-Díaz's *En la lucha* (1993), and Roberto Goizueta's *Caminemos con Jesús* (1995). These works remapped Latina/o reality in creative ways. They are works that forced us to look at the frontiers of what we knew or thought we knew and to reconsider where we draw the boundary lines.

Zea, for example, was a Mexican philosopher who initially worked on positivism and the perspectivalism of Ortega y Gasset. He wished to extend the Latin American philosophical legacy of Simón Bolívar and José Vasconcelos in order to forge an idiom that would bridge the divide between North and South. The language of *conciencia* in Zea's 1953 work is truly fascinating and timely. This Spanish word can be translated into English as either awareness or conscience. *Conciencia* is a far broader category than "conscience." If the latter signifies the primary abode of a universalizable moral imperative (as in Immanuel Kant), then the former is also a mode of consciousness and reflection that struggles with personal and cultural memory.

Zea's dialectical view of progress is thoroughly modern, but not in the sense of the icons of European modernity such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Like Hegel, he recognizes that the struggle of opposing forces is what moves history. Unlike Hegel, he sees no resolution of this struggle into a higher conceptual synthesis. The fight for cultural memory is full of paradoxes, and the playing

out of the struggle has been brutal in the history of the Americas. Zea sees conquest (*conquista*) and haggling (*regateo*) as the forces that move history. The treatment of the other as "other" (a point later taken up brilliantly by Dussel) will be violent without an authentic awareness of the historical process. Zea saw "American" (continental) culture as offering the spectacle of a patent and external *desgarramiento* (pain, anguish, tear). Different layers of culture had been superimposed on top of one another, starting with the colonial conquest of the indigenous cultures. Unlike European culture, which has the pretense of being a unified culture, the process of *superposición* does not allow for integration:

Superponer es poner sin alteración, una cosa sobre otra, aunque éstas sean distintas y contradictorias, o una cosa al lado de la otra; en cambio, asimilar es igualar, hacer de cosas distintas una sola. La superposición mantiene los conflictos propios de lo diversamente superpuesto, la asimilación los elimina.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot find an easy synthesis when the layers of faith and culture are simply placed on top of one another. This process of disorientation can lead to a personality disorder in the mind of the person who fails to recognize the burden of multiple layers. *Conciencia* is thus a difficult process that all residents of *América* need to undergo.

This issue unpeels the layers of consciousness that have accumulated in our *América*. Adrian Bautista presents a fascinating insight into the consciousness of the borderland that is growing among Latino Catholic permanent deacons in the Midwest. Maria Clara Bingemer, one of the leading voices for feminist theology and theology of liberation in Latin America, issues a plea for a new reading of Dorothy Day, a powerful witness to faith and social action whose teenage years were spent in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago. The excerpt from Theresa Delgadillo's *Spiritual Mestizaje* bespeaks multiple modes of articulation of a new

*mestiza* consciousness that allows race, material culture, and gender equality to be thematized more successfully than Zea and other Mexican defenders of national identity were able to achieve. What the readers do with the exposed layers is a matter for thought and reflection.

Our book reviews and interviews also speak of a new multiform consciousness. *Mestizo* theologian Ángel Méndez Montoya shows how hunger and eating apply equally to spiritual and cultural paths toward a new *mestizaje*. Historian Julia Young starts with a commentary on the film *For Greater Glory*, and carries us from there back to the migration of *Cristeros* to Chicago. The journey is illuminating and will uncover many personal connections for our readers.

At the center of this issue is our *homenaje* to the theological aesthetics of the late Alejandro García-Rivera (1951-2010). *Homenaje*, like the French term *homage*, is a way of connecting to the past. These words derive etymologically from an oath-taking ceremony in the Middle Ages in which a vassal would formally pledge loyalty to a feudal Lord. Alex was a theologian of liberation who unshackled us from feudal, colonial, and Americanist bonds to exercise a new kind of Latino/a creativity. But our *homenaje* does retain the desire to bind ourselves in a lasting way with the rich legacy of our friend and teacher. These essays therefore contain a celebration of praise as well as sharp criticism. The contributors include mentors like Robert Schreiter, a colleague from Berkeley; Eduardo C. Fernández, S.J.; and a student, Michelle Maldonado González.

The essays in tribute recount the story of his work as a physicist who worked on an atomic bomb for Boeing, his training as a Lutheran pastor and subsequent calling to serve Puerto Ricans in Allentown PA, his return to the Catholic Church, and his reflections on art, beauty, and social justice. His monographs include:

- *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995.
- *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999.
- *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.
- (with Thomas Scirghi, S.J.) *Living Beauty: The Art of*

*Liturgy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.

- *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009.
- (with Mia M. Mochizuki) *Encounters of Faith: Art and Devotion in Latin America*. Santa Clara, CA: Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, 2010.

A great theologian is known by more than his works, as these essays amply testify. But the readers of our *homenaje* may be called to enter into a conversation with these works and thereby share a taste of the banquet to which Alex invited us.

Finally, I would like to express my delight at the beauty of this issue, above all, the artwork of Fr. Arthur Poulin, a monk at the Incarnation Monastery in Big Sur. The art, the artist, and even the Big Sur Hermitage were all admired deeply by Alejandro García-Rivera. More importantly, the bond between the theologian and the painter is evident in works depicted in this issue. My last face-to-face encounter with Alex was at a conference that he organized in 2008 in Berkeley, CA with his Buddhist colleague, Ron Nakasone. The title of the conference was "Beauty: The Color of Truth," and it included theologians and artists. The subtle portrayal of color and light in Poulin's images reminded me of this connection and my experience in 2008 of the art displayed at Berkeley, and the quality of light at the Pacific Rim. The vision of Latina/o theological aesthetics is filled with such multiform wonder by virtue of the hope that this interplay of hues and shapes speaks to a new realm of thought and action. I see that vision taking shape in the pages of this issue and am deeply grateful to the Center for Latino Research for bringing it to light so radiantly.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Leopoldo Zea, *América como conciencia* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983 [reprint of second edition of 1972]), 65: "To superimpose is to put one thing on top of another without any change even though these are distinct and contradictory, or one thing side-by-side with another. Assimilation, on the other hand, is to level out the differences, to make one thing out of distinct things. Superimposition maintains diversity within the conflicts being superimposed; assimilation erases these conflicts."