'Nuevos Odres para el Vino': A Critical Contribution to Latino/a Theological Construction

Benjamín Valentín

Drew University

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Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matthew 9:17).1

We must not be afraid to engage in critical dialogue with our partners in our mestizo journey.2

We stand at a new point of opportunity. Our past and our history have been given to us; our future is for us to envision and to shape.3

Even with the recent increase in the articulations of Latino/a theologies, it is necessary to keep in mind that Latino/a theology in the United States is still in its nascent stages. Thus, it may initially seem out of place to critique such a developing theological voice. Nevertheless, I believe that if Latino/a theological construction is to be taken seriously, both intellectually and practically, and both within and outside the Latino/a community, it will be necessary for its theologians to consistently assess and reassess the direction of its articulation. As I see it, Latino/a theology, and for that matter any kind of theology because of its nature as a kind of second-order and third-order reflective discourse,4 must always remain a work in progress. To put it simply, a

1 Quoted from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
4 Theology is second-order reflection because it attempts to interpret and analyze lived experience. It is also second-order reflection because it purports to reinterpolate our generations the significance of the writings of a selected and inherited religious and cultural past. In both cases theology involves a secondary moment of interpretation that, in varying ways, critically focuses on past and present sedimentations of experience. Theology is also third-order reflection to the extent that it is a human imaginative activity that attempts to construct a creative picture of the self, humanity, the world, and God, with the ultimate goal of providing overarching frameworks that may offer enhancing self-images and intelligible, moving, and enabling collective images and narratives for justice-centered living. In this case, theology is not only an interpretative endeavor, but also an imaginative-constructive endeavor. For a helpful explication of theology as a second-order interpretative reflective praxis see Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976) esp. 75-90. For an insightful explication of theology as third-order imaginative reflection see Gordon D. Kaufmann, An Essay on Theological Method (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979) esp. 21-41; and Sally McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) esp. 21-57.

I am distinguishing here, simply for matters of chronological assessment, between what I would call a first tier of Latino/a theological articulation, presented by pioneering voices such as Virgilio Elizondo, Justo González, Orlando Costas, Marina Herrera, María Pilar Aquino, Ada María Isaí-Díaz, and Yolanda Tarango, that serves as a formative and foundational analogue for a recent second tier of U.S. Latino/a theologians that has joined the task of constructing a distinctive Latino/a theology. This second tier is composed of thinkers such as Roberto Goizueta, Harold RECINTS, Allan Fugues DECK, Ana María Pineda, Jeanette Rodriguez-Holguín, Orlando ISPÍN, Arturo BAHUODAS, David TRAVEROZ, Eldin Villafañe, and other up and coming Latino/a theological voices. I note, however, that most of the pioneering voices are still with us and still contributing to the shape of U.S. Latino/a theology.
foundations upon which our theological discursive practices stand now need to be reexamined so as to insure the further maturation and public pertinence of our theological voice in the United States. In this sense, to use the language of the scriptural excerpt above, we should be open to the realization that *nuevos órdenes,* “new wineskins” (i.e., new theological programs and methods that harness, interpret, and orient our people’s religious practices within our current sociohistorical situation in the United States), must constantly be sought.

In this essay I hope to contribute to the development of Latino/a theologies in the United States by way of three critiques. First, I will suggest that a debilitating ecclesiocentrism that restricts theological discourse to the language of the institutional church seems to permeate many of our Latino/a theologies. Second, I will suggest that Latino/a theologians have tended to over-stress the inherent authority of the Bible, over and against the revelatory significance of the lived moment, within their theologies. Third, I suggest that our theological articulation, in large part, demonstrates a failure to engage in a socially binding discourse that connects the Latino/a sociopolitical struggles with those of other marginalized groups within the United States. My ultimate intention is to invite my fellow Latino/a theologians to further the pursuit of theological maturity by taking into consideration the arguments and critiques I propose in the following pages.

**Balancing Latino/a Theology’s Ecclesiocentrism: A Theological Critique**

As I see it, present and future Latino/a theologies will need to avoid the trap of a type of theological parochialism that has taken the form of a debilitating ecclesiocentrism: a tendency that can be described as a restriction of theological discourse to the language and internal concerns of the Church. That is to say, much of our theology operates under the misguided assumption that theology is solely and entirely the work of the Church and for the Church. As such, I have observed that much of our theological reflection becomes, in the end, a mere analysis and interpretation of the faith of those already existing within the theological circle of a particular institutionalized church. I am well aware that the Church plays an important role in our communities and I myself continue to hold on to the hope of a progressive Church as I seek to work in and through the Church. Thus, my argument should not be mistakenly construed as an attack on the Church and a mere call for academically geared theologies: I do not mean to identify Latino/a theology solely with academic discourse. As a proponent of organic intellectual activity I believe that theological reflection must begin in and even end in progressive social and pastoral praxis. Moreover, I certainly believe that the Church can, on occasion has, and should always strive to play an important formative role in the development of existentially meaningful, enhancing, enabling, and public orienting narratives. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that theological reflection and discourse should stand for more than just the discourse of a church. The ultimate intention of a theology that purports to take on some level of responsibility for the shaping of the world should be to serve not only the churches but also the greater society, and even the academy. Toward this aim, then, the central terms, categories, and concerns of theology should always be tied to the life of the larger sociocultural matrices that make up its reflective context. A failure to account for these wider public matrices will inevitably lead to theological thought and practice that lacks the intellectual and theological scope to respond adequately to our postmodern times. To put it bluntly, the restriction of theological reflection and theological discourse to mere church language amounts to a truncation of the true public character of theology.

I will suggest that in a certain sense Latino/a theologians have focused too much on one of the public realms of theology—the Church—at the expense of the other two possible publics of theological discourse: the academy and the society. Theologian David Tracy, in his influential treatise on the public character of theology entitled *The Analogical Imagination,7* notes that theology must account for these public realms: the public of the greater society, the public of the academy, and the public of the religious community (i.e., the Church). Tracy rightfully notes that although a particular theological program may center itself, intellectually and practically, on internal concerns endemic to one of these three publics, nevertheless, it is always necessary for the theologian to keep in mind that the scope of theology as a mode of inquiry always transcends the particular public sphere on which he or she may be focusing, be it the church, a social group, or the academy.

6My use of the terms “our,” “we,” and “us” throughout the essay allude to my own epistemological orientation to the emerging tradition of Latino/a theology. This is my way of inserting myself within the germinal thought process of that theology. By not using distancing, I wish to demonstrate that I do not speak independently of our Latino/a collective nor for the large and complex group of Latino/a communities, but that I understand my work as a contributing part of a larger process of theological reflection and articulation. As a Latino, I consciously consider myself as speaking and writing from within the Latino *realidad* and from within the Latino/a religious-theological movement in the United States.

As a critical and reflective act of human imaginative creativity, theology is founded upon our past and present creative responses to the world and our creative attempts to make a meaningful and justice-centered world through the interpretation of historical events and experiences. Theology is a human activity that is rooted in the experiences and history of the self within the context of a broader sociocultural and political milieu. In light of the broad intellectual and practical scope of this reflective endeavor, theology and its resulting terms, concepts, and over-arching narratives should never be understood and articulated as merely a reflection on the internal life, concerns, and interpretations of a given religious group.

To put it boldly, the attempt to articulate a meaningful theological discourse by reference only to church life will lead us toward a truncated and one-sided theological discourse. I firmly believe that a theological articulation that gives way to this sort of ecclesiocentrism will not be sufficiently appealing outside the parameters of the Church nor sufficiently critical and constructive for the Church’s own good. Furthermore, such theological constructions will be hard pressed to provide the critical and constructive spiritual voice that is necessary within the greater public debate. This is a realm of discourse about which we Latinos and Latinas should be especially concerned because it usually affects our particular communities in a negative manner.

If we Latino/a theologians wish to help fill the present void of public leadership within our communities, and wish to make a difference in our public milieu as true organic public intellectuals, an aspiration that is central to our liberation theology orientation, then it is necessary for us to engage in broad social analysis. This should examine the compounding effect of race, gender, and class and promote imaginative remedies that will serve to reverse the conditions of inequality, injustice, and the delimitation of hope and life opportunities that our Latino/a communities too often face in the United States. To achieve this goal it is necessary to broaden our theological discourse beyond the parameters of ecclesiastical concerns, even when these concerns may include the important task of defining the public mission of the Church. In short, I believe that a discourse that restricts theological reflection to the life, concerns, and language of the Church will inevitably fall short in its attempt to provide the guiding justice-centered spiritual and moral support needed by our Latino/a communities and indeed by society as a whole. As I see it, the viability of our theological discourse in the greater sociocultural matrices should be a central concern, especially if our goal is the development of guiding, enhancing, and enabling narratives driven by an over-arching vision of a greater social common good.

In my observation, the tendency to restrict theological language to church-talk can be found within many of our Latino/a theologies. It occurs, for instance, in David Traverzo’s attempt to develop a Latino/a theology of mission. In his appealing and powerful essay entitled “Towards a Theology of Mission in the U.S.,”10 Traverzo sheds important light on the challenges that Latinos/as, and Puerto Ricans in particular, often face within the United States. After accurately describing these harsh social realities, Traverzo ends with a bold proposition for a pragmatic faith response that seeks to counteract the harmful realities of Latino/a life in the United States. According to Traverzo, this faith response, whose vision is one of social reconstruction and restoration, is rooted “in what Costas refers to as ‘an ecclesiology of liberation.’” This particular theological vision is further explicated by Traverzo when he states that “a theology of mission in a context of such captivity announces a new presence of the church in solidarity with the aspirations for a day of national reconstruction and integral liberation.”10

For our purposes, it is necessary to note that in these statements and others like it, Traverzo’s ultimate aim is not only the description of a particular kind of ecclesiology but, even more, the description of a socially inclined liberation theology. Although I agree with many of Traverzo’s concerns and arguments, I also note that his definition of theology is too narrow and that, as a result, his ecclesiology succumbs to a narrow churchism. In his proposal for a theology of mission, for example, Traverzo gives the impression that the Church is the only viable means for progressive, countercultural, liberative action. I certainly agree that the Church must strive to be, and can be, a liberative source in society, but I believe that it is also necessary to curtail the idea that the church offers the one and only means for progressive social action and change in our society. In reality, a socially progressive mission will always require the involvement of “secular” channels. Furthermore, and most important for the purposes of this essay, we should note that for Traverzo theological discourse ultimately equates to the life and discourse of the Church. There is no attempt by Traverzo to account for the tripartite nature of theology as a practice that can address the discourses of the greater society and the academy as well as the discourse of the Church. In sum, Traverzo’s failure is twofold: first, he oversimplifies the task of social reconstruction by presenting a

2Ibid., 56.
3Ibid., 57.
simplistic one-sided picture of the Church as the social liberator; second, in his interpretation of the nature and task of theology, he ends up restricting theological discourse to the discourse of the Church.

This pattern of restricting theological reflection to the language of the Church can also be detected in the constructions of other Latino/a theologians. Orlando Costas, whose work deserves acclaim and recognition not only within the annals of Latino/a theology but also within the mainstream United States, falls into a similar theological parochialism when in his most influential work he states:

Contemporary Christianity is increasingly concerned about contextualization. It stems from the growing awareness of the importance of context in the church's understanding of itself, its faith, and its mission in the world. The long-range universal formulations of the older theologies have had to give way to shorter-range, situation-oriented discourses which, though shorter in life span, are more relevant to the life-in-mission of the church.  

Although this statement provides us with an important reminder of the need to account for the implications of a greater sensitivity to the immediate sociohistorical contexts of our theological reflections, it is necessary to note that Costas' description of the nature and task of theology also serves to restrict theological discourse to the language of the Church. Theology, in this sense, seems to be relevant only for the theological circle of the Church and seems possible only as a discursive practice that originates from the Church. Yet, as I have argued above, theology, and perhaps especially the theology that emanates from the perspective of a marginalized people, should be concerned with the greater public significance of its discourse rather than just with the parochial concerns of a particular Church.

Costas repeats this theological ecclesiocentrism in some of his later works. For instance, in attempting to explain the nature of theological discourse and the role of evangelization in his final published work, he states:

Theology and evangelization are two interrelated aspects of the life and mission of the Christian faith. Theology studies the faith; evangelization is the process by which it is communicated. Theology plumbs the depth of the Christian faith; evangelization enables the church to extend it to the ends of the earth and the depth of human life. Theology reflects criti-

In this statement we again observe that Costas' definition of theology confines theological discourse to the exclusive work of the Christian Church and that, in this sense, the ultimate goal of theology is to serve the Christian Church. Thus, following Costas' line of argument, the critical task of theology is restricted to that of critical reflection on the Christian Church's practice of faith. The constructive task of theology, then, becomes that of spreading this particular faith to the whole world.

Because Costas, like many other Latino/a theologians, is a theologian with explicit pastoral concerns, it is understandable that he opts to focus his work on concerns that are central to the public of the Church. Certainly, every theologian must inevitably focus on, and emphasize, one of the three possible publics of theology. My critique, therefore, is not directed at Costas' emphasis on the public of the Church; rather, it is directed at Costas' reductionist account of theological reflection. Costas' reductionist definition of the nature and task of theology ends up restricting all theological discourse to the discourse of a church, without accounting for the possibility of its significance beyond the parameters of church life. No room is left in Costas' theological program for the larger public significance of theology outside of the Church.

Although these two examples derive from the perspective of two male Protestant Latino theologians, I suggest that this general reductionism of theology to church-talk can be found within much of Latino/a theology, whether Protestant, Catholic, Latina, or Latino. As a particular kind of second- and third-order reflection on the wide experience of a whole culture, theology should attend to the broader

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10 All in all, I believe that the tendentious practice of viewing theology as a reflective endeavor that can only legitimately emanate from the Church, and exists only with the Church's sanctioning, and whose purpose is only to reflect on the
cultural experience of a people. The life of the Latino church in the United States must certainly be studied and analyzed within our Latino theologies, and this aspect of study, in turn, can further contribute to the formation of a distinctive critical and constructive theological discourse. However, it behooves us Latino theologians, for the sake of the wider pertinence of our theological discourse, to broaden our discursive practice so as to include the greater social, political, and cultural experience of our people. If we wish to be true to the experiential and contextual thrust that grounds our liberation theological method, then we must deal with the wider experience of our people within the United States. This appeal for a widening of our theological vision must be grounded on the fact that we all live out our lives not just in the setting of a selected faith community but also in a wider existential, social, and political context. By withdrawing from the task of constructing theologies that reflect on the wider public conditions that our people face, and on the ordering of public life in the United States, we unknowingly separate our theological dis-

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courses from their historical social purpose. Theological reflection and construction should contribute to the well being of society, church, and academy. To ensure that our scholarship contributes positively to this task, we must come to the realization that theology is not a reflective endeavor that is limited to the Church and originates only from the Church. I believe that the liberationist methodology that we Latinos uphold in our theologies implicitly requires that we leave behind the parochialism that has characterized many of our efforts, a parochialism that has restricted our theological discourse to the concerns, language, and practice of the Church.

Life as Text: A Hermenutical Critique

A second critique that can be made of many Latino theologies is hermeneutic in nature. The exploration of biblical interpretative models within Latino theology has been extremely myopic. That is to say, Latino theologians have mostly tended to over-stress the inherent authority of the biblical text without sufficiently accounting for the role of the readers' response to the text as a crucial element in the understanding of revelatory significance. To put it bluntly, some of our theologies still display an unbalanced over-dependence on the inscribed authority of the biblical text. My aim in this portion of this essay is to encourage Latino theologians toward a more radical and salutary hermeneutical stance that understands our present lived experience of struggle for freedom to be the "text" and views the biblical material as a referential "context" for theological reflection.14

To present my hermeneutical critique of Latino theologies I will focus on the hermeneutical stance adopted by Virgilio Elizondo, as it is especially exemplified in his Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise15 and Harold Recinos's reading strategy, as it is exposed in Hear the Cry: A Latino Pastor Challenges the Church.16

Following the methodology of liberation theology, both of these authors accentuate three points: first, an emphasis on the formative role of social location in intellectual construction and interpretation; second, the epistemological validity of the experience of the poor and margin-

14I am here adopting the hermeneutical stance presented by the feminist Asian theologian Chung Hyun Kyung in her very creative book entitled Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990) 109-14.


alized in history; and third, the necessity of a subversive sociopolitical reading of the Bible. Hence, both Elizondo and Recinos call for a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” and a hermeneutics of suspicion. However, like earlier liberation theologians, Elizondo and Recinos limit this hermeneutics of suspicion to the rhetorical practice of the biblical interpreter and do not apply it to the built-in rhetorical framework of the biblical text itself. Thus, an uncritical appeal to the regulative authority and liberative capacity of the biblical text is found in both. I would like to argue, however, that the locus of revelatory significance, epistemological validity, and liberative promise is not to be found isolated within the biblical narrative itself but, instead, is found when the textual narrative is reenacted in the lived narrative of those who struggle for freedom and liberation in the present historical moment.

As a Catholic theologian Elizondo understands that there are three sources for theological reflection: Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and the complementarity of human reason. The Bible, then, is central to Elizondo’s theological program. Moreover, Elizondo’s hermeneutical stance adheres to a sort of intercanonical authority (i.e., a canon within the biblical canon). To Elizondo, the whole Bible is authoritative, but the historical praxis of Jesus as revealed in the biblical Gospels takes on a special revelatory significance. Therefore, the Jesus narrative of the Gospels becomes, for Elizondo, a sort of canon within the biblical canon that provides the liberative principle for the construction of a Latino theology.

Elizondo’s dependence on a sort of biblically preinscribed liberating messianic principle is exemplified in his comments:

It is my firm conviction that the identity and mission of the Mexican-American people will not only continue but will be purified, ennobled, and strengthened by the discovery of its fundamental identity and mission in its acceptance and following of Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord of history and life.

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We should note that the recognition, acceptance, and following of Jesus’ messianic example is dependent on a reading or rereading of the biblical Gospel narratives. Thus Elizondo concludes that “we need to do a serious rereading of the gospels to discover how Jesus of Nazareth functioned in relation to his history and culture. By discovering how he functioned then, we will discover how he functions today.” These statements illustrate two central components of Elizondo’s hermeneutical principle and, therefore, of his theological program: first, that the historically liberating dynamics narrated in the biblical stories of Jesus carry in them a universal principle of liberation that could and should be appealed to as the basic authoritative criterion for all Christian theology across time and cultures; and second, it follows that the present Latino struggles for sociopolitical emancipation in the United States have been anticipated in the biblical stories of liberation. These two features are summarized by Elizondo himself in the following manner:

It is in the light of our faith that we discover our ultimate identity as God’s chosen people. It is in the very cultural identity of Jesus the Galilean and in his way from Galilee to Jerusalem that the real ultimate meaning of our own cultural identity and mission to society become clear.

In other words, Elizondo believes that certain historically limited experiences, as they appear narrated in the biblical gospels, can be posited as universal, authoritative, and normative interpretative principles.

As I see it, this mode of biblical interpretation fails to do justice both to the biblical narrative and to the lived reality of Latinos in the United States. It fails to do justice to the biblical narrative because it separates the dynamics of liberation exemplified in the text from their concrete historical context. It fails to do justice to the lived reality of existential, social, political, and cultural crisis experienced by Latinos in the United States because it seeks to validate this reality by appealing to the revelatory meaningfulness of biblical stories. In sum, through his appeal for an intertextual normative and evaluative criterion of liberation Elizondo unknowingly makes the present heroic Latino-American struggles for personal, communal, social, cultural, and political transformation less significant than those of the biblical characters of a time past.

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18 This same one-sided employment of a hermeneutics of suspicion is perhaps best captured in Juan Luis Segundo’s interpretation of the method of liberation theology in Liberation of Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976) 7–39.

19 See Fernando Segovia’s description of Elizondo’s hermeneutical method as one of “a canon within the canon from the inside” in his article entitled “Reading the Bible as Hispanic Americans,” The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 1:168–9.

20 Elizondo, Galilian Journey, 1.
Harold Recinos displays a similar hermeneutical tendency in his Latino "barrio" theology. Recinos, like Elizondo, makes use of a correlative method of interpretation where the narrative of the Bible is related to the present lived experience of the Latino communities in the United States. For Recinos, however, the Bible in its entirety is deemed as liberating. That is to say, rather than subscribing to a notion that an authoritative principle exists within the Bible, a canon within a canon, Recinos accepts the Bible as a whole to be authoritative. Furthermore, he assumes that through a contextual reading of the Bible, carried out from the perspective of Latinos living in the inner cities, a much needed sense of Latino identity and dignity could be achieved. Thus, Recinos suggests that the Bible can be the locus of a transformative "recovery of God's special relationship" and "real empowerment." In short, once again we find an appeal to a hermeneutical criterion of authority enclosed within the text and an assumption that the narrative will always, in some way, correspond positively to any lived reality across time and cultures.

I would submit that these hermeneutical systems unknowingly undermine the liberationist epistemology that these theologians wish to uphold because they depreciate the revelatory significance of present lived experience, a principle that is central to a hermeneutics of liberation. It behooves Latino theologians to allow for the possibility that the biblical material becomes meaningful and transformative only when it is reenacted in our people's present struggles for self-affirmation and self-determination. Thus, the locus of divine revelation does not exist preinscribed in the text but is always a product of a dialogical encounter between the text and the reader's life.

In this sense, Latino theologians should keep in mind two helpful hermeneutical suggestions made by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: first, that the Bible should be understood as a historical prototype instead of as a mythical archetype; second, that the Bible should function as a resource rather than as an authoritative source for theological reflection. I believe that such a hermeneutical stance still allows for the Bible's possible role as a revelatory and active dialogical partner that could inform our cultural symbols, our myths, our world-views, and our value systems. Unlike Elizondo's and Recinos's hermeneutical strategies, such a stance allows for the uninhibited authority of the lived moment. Instead of seeking to validate the present moment by appealing to the special significance of a past historical moment, an ascription that we ourselves construct theologically, it allows for the revelatory significance of our people's present stories. It is necessary for us to keep in mind, for the benefit of our future theological constructions, that in the end the locus of God's revelation is our life itself. To put it in the insightful words of the feminist Asian theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, we must continue to remind ourselves that "our life is our text, and the Bible and church tradition are the context which sometimes becomes the reference for our own ongoing search for God."

Toward a Socially Binding Latino Theology:
A Sociopolitical Critique

A retrospective analysis will demonstrate that, in many ways, Latino theologians have achieved success in establishing the particular identity of U.S. Latino theological discourse. As M. Shawn Copeland correctly notes, "From its beginning, U.S. Hispanic/Latino theology has had to struggle to establish its own identity over against subordination to Latin American theologies of liberation." Furthermore, because of the bipolar "White or Black" orientation of U.S. political ideologies and cultural life, Latino/a theology has also struggled to establish its own identity, and to provide a forum of awareness for the communal identity and the plight of U.S. Hispanic-American people within the greater society, over against subordination to African-American theologies of liberation and the African-American experience in the United States. I will suggest that it is now the proper time to place attention on the shared social and political conditions that delimit Latino people, African-American people, and other marginalized groups in the United States, in order to encourage transformative dialogues and coalitions.

Latino theology past and present has failed to develop and support a socially binding discourse that can connect the sociopolitical struggles of our communities to the similar struggles of other marginalized groups in the United States. The move toward this kind of socially binding theological discourse should ground itself in the

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23 See Recinos, Hear the Cry, esp. 65–72.
24 Ibid., 106.
25 Justo González has recently made a similar argument in Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) esp. 11–30.
27 Chung Hyun Kyung, Struggle to be the Sun Again, 111.
awareness that social transformation usually occurs through the development of effective political coalitions. On the one hand, social change requires the building and nourishment of particular communities and communal identities. On the other hand, social change, especially in the United States today, requires the building and nourishment of wider communal bonds among the subordinated groups of a given society. In this sense, to use the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha, we need to realize that to counteract the exclusionary politics of the United States, our theologies should travel "transculturally while engaging in the local 'habitus' (collective practices that link habit with inhabitation) of one's immediate concern." That is to say, we need to link our local community issues, concerns, reflections, and activity to the broader sociocultural matrices of U.S. public life. The challenge we presently face is that of placing our own experiences and consciousness at the center of our theological reflection while not allowing these local narratives to become separatist and exclusionary. We must face this challenge with a key factor in mind: the realization that institutional transformation is only possible through broad-based political coalitions. Without a commitment to a wider sense of human solidarity across racial, cultural, and ideological lines, our emancipatory discursive praxis will fail to accomplish any significant changes in the sociopolitical arena. Toward this goal our U.S. Hispanic-American theologies need to become discourses that offer constructed knowledge of the self, community, and world that can empower women and men to actualize an integral and inclusive vision of human community and solidarity.

Moving beyond the contours of self-communal identity formation does not mean that we need to ignore questions of identity within our theologies. The question of who I am, and who we are as an ethnic group, should always be pertinent to our theological construction. The task of self-definition is especially pertinent and critical within a context that consistently works to deny one's selfhood and the formation of a collective-communal identity. Moreover, the placement of the self and of one's communal identity at the center of reflective activity is very important for the understanding of a host of other relationships. However, identity formation also requires a high level of attention to the broader matrices of location that form one's self-communal context. In the light of our struggle against limiting forces and the common struggle of other subordinated groups in the United States, it is necessary for our theological discourses to reflect on the continuity of our U.S. Hispanic American struggle with that of the larger community of subordinated people, with African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and so forth. If our goal is not only to understand our world context and our place within it, but to transform our contextual world, then our reflective discourses need to attend to the connection of our particular concerns with the similar concerns of others in order to build practical and transformative social coalitions with other subordinated groups.

As individuals and particular ethnic communities living in the United States we all certainly have differences and we must account for these in order to keep at bay harmful notions of homogenization that undermine particular self-defining narratives. However, as subordinated groups within the United States we must also acknowledge that we share some common stories, struggles, hopes, visions, and journeys. In order to allow for social change through coalition building we need to acknowledge the commonalities between our struggles and the struggles of other subordinated groups. To use David Abalos's poignant and insightful words, Latino theology must always remind itself that "the most authentic Latina women and Latino men who are creating a new Latino story and culture in this country are those who live and practice life in the service of transformation by caring deeply about others, about Latinos, as well as members of all other groups." This concern for our well-being and the well-being of other subordinated people should be theologically grounded in our faith conviction that as God's creatures we should all have equal access to self-communal determinacy and that justice is an all-inclusive concept. In short, our vision and goal should be that of a more humane and just world for all: a humanist vision of community.

Because of the real human proclivity toward corrupt use of power, the construction of a more justice-centered world always requires struggle. This struggle is often best confronted through the building of solidarity and through practical coalitions. Ultimately, the success of our struggle for liberation and for substantive institutional change hinges on our capabilities to forge solidarity and the building and maintenance of meta-ethnic coalitions. In a very real sense the future of our well-being as a people in the United States lies in our ability to transcend parochial boundaries and enclaves in order to sustain strategic coalitions with others and allow for inclusive human community.

As we construct, articulate, and do theology we should keep in mind Cornel West’s profound sociocultural insight:

To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americaness of each of us. And we must acknowledge that as a people—E Pluribus Unum—we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together. . . . The paradox of race in America is that our common destiny is more pronounced and imperiled precisely when our divisions are deeper.31

In a very real sense all who have chosen or have been forced to make out of this nation a home, for whatever reason, share a common social destiny. It is up to all of us to make the best collective effort to better our social conditions.

Our Latino theological discourse should guard itself against simply re-creating the divisive practices of the dominant Euro-American culture whose racist, elitist practices we seek to oppose. Our theological constructions, therefore, should avoid an intellectual parochialism that serves to separate rather than to unite collective praxis. I believe that the task of our theology should include, in large measure, the development of a socially binding discourse that sustains persons for collective political struggle and against despair and disappointment endemic to the structures of the present U.S. social establishment. The building of effective coalitions, however, always depends on internal dialogue and dialogue with other groups. This task is always difficult and filled with perils, but it is always a necessary one. Toward this end I call on mestizo theologians to attend to the construction of a new rhetorical framework that binds the sociopolitical narratives of our communities to those of other subjugated ethnic groups within the present U.S. society. As Cornel West rightly notes, "We are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation—and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately."32 If as subordinated people in the United States we choose to "hang separately," we will only be choosing to weaken the potential for change within our present social reality. Let us choose to hang together in the face of struggle!

Conclusions

I submit that Latino theologies in the United States should seek, first, to widen their discursive practices beyond the parameters of the

32 Ibid., 159.