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Orlando Espín. Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope

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Orlando Espín. *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014. 201 + xxx pp. \$34.00 Paper. ISBN: 978-1-62698-062-4.

Despite the burgeoning number of publications by U.S. Latinoa theologians, the number of monographs remains relatively small. Orlando Espín's latest book, *Idol and Grace*, is thus a very welcome addition to the literature. Yet this is much more than a book of "U.S. Latinoa theology," important as that is. Here Espín has given us a profound analysis of the nature of Christian faith, from the ground up.

At the heart of Espín's book, and resonating through its pages like a *cantus firmus*, is the assertion with which he begins his book: "The core of what Christians call God's revelation is the claim that God has begun to transform this world according to God's will and that this God is compassionate towards all, without limits, conditions, or exception. This was the center and anchor of the message announced by an insignificant Galilean Jewish peasant, executed as a subversive by Roman imperial authority two thousand years ago, and now standing at the dawn of Christianity" (xv). Simple enough, it would seem; these are words which, in one form or another, many Christians have heard and professed, but which have too often failed to truly engage and transform our lives and social structures. Espín's book dissects the profound meaning and radical implications of this "subversive hope" embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, at no point letting us off the hook. Sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, Espín traces with honesty and lucidity the source of that subversive hope in the encounter with Mystery and the implications of that encounter for our understanding of the very nature of faith.

The extraordinary methodological care and precision with which Espín develops his argument are not surprising to anyone familiar with his other work. He begins the book with a series of “Clarifications.” These are analyses of the epistemological presuppositions that will ground the book and that are implicit in the *cantus firmus* mentioned above. What are the implications, for instance, of God’s self-revelation in this “insignificant Galilean Jewish peasant” for our understanding of fundamental concepts such as grace, spirituality, theology, the *sensus fidelium*, and rationality? The second chapter examines further one of the implications of this Christian belief in the Incarnation, namely, the crucial and unavoidable importance of “Contexts” for theological method. How can we reconcile the revelation of God as Mystery with the historical particularity of that revelation? Here Espín focuses on the implications of globalization and culture for Christian theology, retrieving in fascinating ways the notion of “analogy” as helpful for addressing those implications. The third chapter on “Theological Elements” explores how the Jesus event transforms our notions of faith, revelation, hope, and doctrine. Given our epistemological presuppositions (chapter 1) and contemporary contexts (chapter 2), what might it mean to believe that, in Jesus Christ, “God has begun to transform this world according to God’s will and that this God is compassionate towards all, without limits, conditions, or exception” (xv)? Espín’s argument culminates in a chapter, on “Traditioning,” in which the earlier themes come together in a masterful demonstration of the practical ground of Christian theology in the “traditioning of revelation.” Espín thus challenges any conceptualist or rationalist understanding of Christian faith, theology, and tradition.

In the end, the logic of Espín’s argument is both relentless and compelling. From the book’s first sentence, he has taken the reader on a journey in which he or she has been invited to examine in depth the ramifications of Christian faith in Jesus Christ for theology and, even more,

for Christian life itself. The book is a superb example of how the insights of Latinoa theology can help not just Latinoa Christians but all Christians understand and live out their faith with greater authenticity. Espín has thus given us as solid an example of Christian fundamental theology as one is likely to encounter anywhere today, and one that deserves a wide readership.

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