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Nestor Medina, Christianity, Empire, and the Spirit: Reconfiguring Faith and Culture

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Néstor Medina. *Christianity, Empire, and the Spirit: Reconfiguring Faith and Culture*. Boston: Brill, 2018. 368 pp. \$77 Paper. ISBN 978-90-04-35736-5.

Medina's text is a powerful reflection on how religion is intrinsically experienced through cultures, or what he terms "the cultural" (10). Building on the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz and especially on the work of Latin American and U.S. Latinx theologians on popular religiosity, Medina articulates an inductive pursuit of the divine. In particular, he uses this cultural hermeneutical approach to critique attempts to place religious activity in a private sphere or to make spirituality wholly transcendent, ahistorical, or acultural. He repeatedly criticizes the interweaving of European Christian evangelization efforts with European imperialism and neo-imperialism. For Medina, this unfortunate nexus is very much part of the project of modernity, with all of its presumed superiority, that needs to be overcome.

The book has three sections, and readers, depending on their purpose, will find a given section more valuable than the others. In the initial chapter, Medina puts forth his notion of the cultural as "the complex and constantly changing processes of culturalization inherited from generation to generation which regulate human behavior and include all aspects of life including language, epistemology, rationality, interpretation of emotions, imagination, and the socialized ways in which people think and reflect about life" (13). Part of this process, Medina emphasizes, is the uneven power between cultural groups—hence the normative impact of the European conquest that needs to be deconstructed. Ultimately, for Medina, the cultural shapes theology and vice versa.

The next four chapters review the different historical periods of European hegemony in the promulgation of Christianity. Medina begins by recounting how early Christianity was influenced by the cultures of Israel, Greece, and Rome. He then dwells upon the distinction

between the so-called civilization of Western European peoples and the supposedly uncivilized cultures of the peoples conquered in imperialism. The next two chapters turn toward how mainline Protestant theologians perpetuate the above connection between Christian evangelization and cultural imperialism. Although he reviews a number of thinkers, Medina is particularly critical of Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* for rendering Christ as insensitive to the cultural hermeneutical bearing of spirituality and as wholly transcendent. These chapters would be very valuable to a course on the history of Christian thought.

The last three chapters cover contemporary Protestant, Catholic, and Medina's own presentation of the cultural in pneumatological terms. Readers less interested in the historical arguments could jump from the first chapter to these chapters and still receive the depth of Medina's own perspective. In both the Protestant and Catholic chapters, Medina is much more receptive to the perspective of his interlocutors than he is in the previous chapters. In the Protestant chapter, he covers thought by Kathryn Tanner, Michael P. Gallagher, Paul L. Metzger, Timothy Gorringer, and Joerg Rieger. In the Catholic chapter, he suggests that the insights of Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, and especially Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* are *simpatico* with the importance of popular religiosity and how the Spirit moves inductively in "the process of inculturation" (297).

In the final chapter, acknowledging his indebtedness to Latinx spirituality, Medina elaborates on how a cultural pneumatology recasts our understanding of incarnation, kenosis, and what it means to be Church. In the process, he provocatively suggests the possibilities of multiple revelations of the divine across the planet. One hopes that Medina will develop this interreligious argument in a future work.

Overall, this is an incisive text on the interrelation of culture and religion, and were it not for its price, I would recommend that graduate seminars on the history of Christianity, especially regarding inculturation, use it as a course text.

One shortcoming of the book is that Medina tends to overplay his hand. Building on the work of Dussel, Medina's indictment of how Christian missionaries are integral to the imposing of Western norms on the rest of the planet is right on target. However, Medina's constant repetition of this theme leads him to objectify the oppressor, which is contrary to his open-ended, "pluralvocal" (14) rendering of the cultural.

There are past examples and present and ongoing discourses that contradict Medina's objectification of the West. Nikolaus von Zinzendorf and the constructive interactions between the Moravian religious community and the indigenous tribes in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century are consonant with a discourse in which one heritage is not privileged over another. Other disciplines have explored alternatives in engaging Western thought and culture: for example, the work being done in comparative political theory over the past couple decades is well ahead of the path Medina proposes. Amartya Sen's articulation of justice through Asian Indian ideas both in response to and in dialogue with the seminal work of John Rawls comes to mind.

Medina's focus on "mutual interpellation" is clearly congenial to Merleau-Ponty's pursuit of a lateral universality. This connection needs more probing. On this score, in a previous work, Medina criticized theologians such as Virgilio Elizondo who render mestizaje in universal terms, yet in this book, where Medina dwells on how distinctive Latinx thinkers are in contextualizing theology, he reifies a particular heritage. To realize the cultural genuinely, he

needs to bring the insights of that heritage into conversation with other particular cultural pursuits of the divine.

Finally, although Medina's critique of the European imperial conquests is spot on, it is not just Europeans who have a copyright on such domination, both physically and normatively. Presently, China is increasingly exercising control across the globe through economic markets, and with this comes a set of authoritarian norms certainly contrary to the liberation ethos of Medina's work. The Niebuhr that Medina should have wrestled with in this text is not so much Richard, but Reinhold. In line with Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr's stress on how human plurality in an ontological sense sows discord into human relationships is a dimension that Medina's edifying deliberation on the cultural needs to engage.

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