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Miguel Díaz (ed.), *The Word Became Culture*

Allan Figueroa Deck SJ
Loyola Marymount University

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Miguel H. Díaz, ed. *The Word Became Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020. 121 pp. \$26 Paper. ISBN: 9781626983861.

In its brief 121 pages, *The Word Became Culture* packs a powerful punch as the inaugural publication in a new Orbis collection, *Disruptive Cartographers: Doing Theology Latinamente*. In the preface to this series, editors Miguel H. Díaz, Carmen Nanko-Fernández, and Gary Riebel-Estrella describe *Disruptive Cartographers* as “mapping theology from varying coordinates across a spectrum of *latinidad* as lived in the United States of America” (vii). This first volume is the product of Díaz’s deep familiarity with the rich, diverse trajectory of U.S. Latino/a theology together with his extraordinary experience of serving as former President Barack Obama’s Ambassador to the Holy See. On his return from Rome, Díaz, who now holds the John Courtney Murray University Chair in Public Service at Loyola University Chicago, organized a colloquium with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, an accomplished Vatican specialist in biblical studies and in the anthropological concept of culture whose work has inspired many Vatican II conciliar and post-conciliar texts. The colloquium took place in 2015 at Loyola University Chicago and included several Latino/a theologians, four of whom, in addition to Díaz, are authors of chapters to this volume, and Cardinal Ravasi, who provides an impressive foreword.

In the introduction, Díaz outlines the project and informs the reader about the methodological thread in much of U.S. Latino theology, namely, the preferential option for culture, which Orlando Espín and Miguel Díaz proposed in their edited volume *From the Heart of Our People* (Orbis, 1999). Now, in this volume, Díaz and his colleagues work to enhance our understanding of what doing theology *latinamente* means, bringing the preferential option for

culture into full focus. More discussion of this methodological thread is anticipated in future publications of this multivolume series.

In the foreword, Cardinal Ravasi provides an uncommon commentary from a European perspective on U.S. Latino/a Theology. The Cardinal has done his homework and reveals a keen awareness of *lo cotidiano* as *locus theologicus* and of our preferential option for culture. He engages some of the more neuralgic points of Pope Francis's ecclesiology of a church *siempre en salida* and of church as "field hospital." He links doing theology *latinamente* to the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of faith by noting how the chapters shed light on the way our Latino/a approach "dissipates the ideal of a universal human in the detail, the accidental, and the particularity of experience" (xxviii). The Cardinal hits the bull's-eye with this statement: "As theological reflections are shaped and conditioned by experience *en y de conjunto* (from within the community and belonging to the community), then the indigenous, African and Latin American intellectual reservoirs, which do not appeal to the Enlightenment, can offer new—and grounded—epistemologies for theology" (xxviii).

Each of the five chapters that constitute the core of this remarkable collection readily elicit the reader's curiosity. They provide fascinating examples of how making that preferential option for culture opens many doors of inquiry into the central mystery of the Incarnation. Miguel Díaz's chapter, for example, explores cultural crossings in Mark's Gospel and correlates them with the message of the *Nican Mopohua* and the Guadalupe event. In Chapter 2, Jean-Pierre Ruiz expands on Fernando Segovia's provocative claim that "*exegesis* is ultimately *eisegesis*" (25). Ruiz explores the biblical story of Ruth to demonstrate the "false construct of objectivity proposed by the historical critical paradigm" (26). The entire chapter is a cogent analysis of what doing biblical interpretation *latinamente* involves. María Teresa Dávila tackles a

truly perceptive point of contention between what the preferential option for culture, for humanity, and for the collectivity means and the de facto U.S. option for the isolated, free-floating individual. She rightly asserts that “the Catholic Church in the United States is hard-pressed to present a proper Christian anthropology of the human person in community, with full dignity before God and others, but also intimately interdependent in the human web of responsibility and care for others and for creation” (50). Dávila pairs the preferential option for culture with *lo cotidiano*, suggesting that action in real life is more effective than pious moralism. Dávila’s insightful treatment of the preferential option for culture deeply moved me in her statement that “Latino/a theology seeks to transform the idolatry of ‘my truth only’ to a tapestry of truths weaving a divine arc of truth and justice built in the messy holiness of the everyday” (68).

The final two chapters of *The Word Became Culture* do not disappoint. Néstor Medina builds on the wide-ranging conversations about *mestizaje* that have evolved from Virgil Elizondo’s landmark *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-America Promise* (Orbis, 1983). The chapter is a fine review of the *status questionis* and takes the conversation to new spaces. Perhaps more than anything, it puts flesh on the awareness that there is a dynamism and fluidity in how one thinks about *mestizaje*. Medina shows us how “*mestizaje* marks the point of redefinition of our understanding of human culture and identity boundaries. *Mestizaje* renders attempts to essentialize and racialize cultural and identity categories woefully insufficient!” (86). In the final chapter, Carmen Nanko-Fernández makes a stimulating case for the world of sport as a primary source of popular culture and a rich *locus theologicus*. She insists on the porousness of the sacred and the secular and the importance of the material world in the expression of faith. Nanko-Fernández illustrates her points with excerpts from the *Cantigas de Santa María*, some of

the most ancient poetry of our Ibero-American cultures. Her thesis and examples beautifully illustrate the overarching theme of this collection—that the Word of God really does penetrate and become culture and life, not just an external ecclesiastical veneer.

Finally, another striking aspect of this engaging collection is the way it takes seriously the faith dimension of Latino/a theology. It truly is comfortable with a dialogue with the “faith of the people” as well as with the magisterium of the institutional church as represented by Cardinal Ravasi’s emphasis on evangelization of cultures. To bridge the Latino/a academy with existential Latino/a communities of faith strikes me as a healthy approach. The footnotes in each chapter indicate the rigorous grounding of the arguments in excellent sources. However, more needs to be said about the development of Latino/a theology over the past forty years, a development that undergirds the rich and evocative examples of *teología de conjunto*, *lo cotidiano*, the option for culture and for the poor and marginal, and the option for a faith that does justice—all of which this collection illustrates so convincingly. Orbis’s exciting new series opens up new possibilities for a more robust and contextualized theology of and for the Latino/a faithful.

Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ

Loyola Marymount University

Los Angeles, California