

11-27-2021

Robert Chao Romero, Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino/a Social Justice, Theology, and Identity

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Recommended Citation

Valentín, Eli "Robert Chao Romero, Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino/a Social Justice, Theology, and Identity," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 12. (2021) :273-276

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol23/iss2/12>

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Robert Chao Romero. *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino/a Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. 248 pp. \$30.00 Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8308-5285-7.

Robert Chao Romero's *Brown Church* is an ambitious project seeking to cover five hundred years of faith and justice work in what the author calls "the Brown Church." Lest this goal seem too ambitious, let me say from the outset that Chao Romero is clear that his book is not a text on the development of a Latino/a theology of the church. As someone who works in the fields of Latin American history and Chicano/a studies, he approaches this book from those vantage points. As I will note later, this methodological posture may be both the book's biggest advantage and its major drawback.

Chao Romero's overarching goal is to trace a long trajectory of social justice-inspired ecclesial work emanating from the Brown Church. For him, this term refers to an ecclesial tradition that has had at its roots a prophetic posture that has "contested racial and social injustice in Latin America and the United States for the past five hundred years" (11). While for the most part the term "Brown" has been used as a racial and ethnic identity marker for Latino/as in the United States, Chao Romero also uses the term to refer to Latin Americans. Thus the book refers to the work of people like Cesar Chavez (a U.S. Latino of Mexican descent) and of pioneering figures in U.S. Latino/a theology, but also to Oscar Romero (El Salvador) and C. Rene Padilla (Ecuador). As Chao Romero makes forcefully clear, "Brown" could serve as a descriptor for all those people who have long lived and been placed at the margins of society, those who can be deemed the "vanquished of the earth." Beyond race, the word evokes the plight of those who have been and are socially, economically, and politically marginalized.

Out of the harsh realities the marginalized have endured, prophetic ecclesial leaders and movements have arisen, seeking to critique and dismantle the structures that make such marginalization possible. In this lies the strength of Chao Romero's work. Taking Jesus' Galilean heritage as his starting point, Chao Romero sees in the locus of Jesus' life and work a similarity to and paradigm for how to think and work through the context of Brown folk today. Following the cues of Virgilio Elizondo, Chao Romero points to a "browning" of sorts when looking at the historical Galileanness of Jesus. In perhaps his most creative idea in the text, Chao Romero notes that the Hellenization the Galileans endured is similar to the effects of gentrification that Latino/as often face in neighborhoods throughout the U.S. today.

After setting the theological stage, Chao Romero begins his historical journey in 1511 on the island of Hispaniola with a sermon delivered by the Dominican priest Antonio de Montesinos. Chao Romero suggests that this occasion marks the beginning of the Brown Church, with its clear denunciation of the Spanish conquest as an act of horrendous evil. He then shifts his focus to Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose eventual prophetic work as a priest in the Caribbean paved the way for the type of social justice work Chao Romero advocates for the Brown Church today. Indeed, he identifies Las Casas as "the central founder of the Brown Church and progenitor of Brown theology in the Americas" (53). After identifying prophetic figures during the era of the *Conquista* and examining three pivotal figures during the colonial period (including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz), Chao Romero moves to the nineteenth-century United States and highlights the work of the Catholic priest Antonio José Martínez, whom he identifies as the initiator of the Brown Church in the United States. He devotes an entire chapter to Cesar Chavez, the well-known Latino civil rights leader and labor activist, delving into the impact of Chavez's religiosity on his activism. From there, Chao Romero explores the impact of the *Misión*

Integral movement in Latin America and the liberation theology movement that began there in the late 1960s and then lands in the U.S. with the rise of an explicit Latino/a theology. And it is here, after Chao Romero's creative tracing of five hundred years of faith and justice work in the Brown Americas, that I must make a critical remark.

Chao Romero discovered the vast world of Latino/a theology later in his still-young academic career, while teaching and writing in his area of expertise, the exploration of the Asian-Latino reality. This late entry into the world of Latino/a theology is evident in many sections of the book. For instance, Chao Romero refers to Jacqueline Hidalgo as one of the few Latina/o scholars working at the intersection of biblical studies and ethnic studies. While Hidalgo is certainly a prominent figure in recent biblical and cultural studies, she is not nor has she been one of the "few" working in this area. Fernando Segovia, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Efrain Agosto, Francisco García-Treto, the late David Sánchez, and many others come to mind.

Chao Romero's recent engagement with Latino/a theology is evident in other ways too, including specific declarations that misinterpret the development of the Latino/a theology movement. One such assertion is that a "distinct Latina/o Pentecostal theology and experience" and hence figures like "Juan L. Lugo, Francisco Olazabal, Leoncia Rosada, and Santos Elizondo . . . were important forerunners of the contemporary movement of Latina/o theology" (176). Aside from some Pentecostal Latino/a theologians and biblical scholars, most Latino/a theologians would consider these figures to be pivotal in the development of the Latino/a Pentecostal tradition but would certainly not consider them to be forerunners of what is mostly an academic enterprise. As someone reared in the Latino/a Pentecostal experience, even I would not make the bold assertion Chao Romero has made.

These limitations notwithstanding, Chao Romero's book provides a fascinating historical look at the development of a truly liberative application of the Christian tradition. The book will therefore be a worthwhile resource for academics and pastors alike.

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