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Introducing a Discussion on Jean-Pierre Ruiz's

Revelation in the Vernacular

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Revelation in the Vernacular is an award-winning and challenging work of theology, especially of theology done *latinamente*. Although its author, Jean-Pierre Ruiz (a former editor-in-chief of this distinguished journal), is particularly well known for the critical work he has offered to the study of the biblical Book of Revelation, this book is not about the Apocalypse of John, except in the loosest of senses, which Ruiz himself alludes to in the introduction by titling it “Revelation a long way from Patmos.” This book is about the theological category and problem of revelation, conceptualized as “divine self-disclosure.”¹ Such work does not necessarily exclude the Apocalypse, but it certainly does not center it. In this important book, grounded in Latina/o/e theological commitments but also argued robustly through recourse to the dominant theological discourses of conciliar documents, Ruiz argues that “revelation is always particular, that divine self-disclosure takes place in the vernacular, even in the complex particularities of countless vernaculars.”² For many Latina/o/e theologians, this point will resonate with the epistemological turns to *lo cotidiano*, to popular religion, and to *teología de y en conjunto* that have shaped so many works: Ruiz himself draws these points of connection throughout the book, especially in the introduction and chapter four.

On the one hand, Ruiz's brilliant book makes the case on Catholic theological terms for the revelatory nature of *lo cotidiano* and for the affirmation of particularity (countless vernaculars) as the means by which the divine may be encountered and where such encounters are ongoing and unfolding. As he asserts, and a number of our authors cite, “we can say not only that the Word became culture but that the Word continues to *become* culture, revealed in

¹ Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021), xxvi.

² Ruiz, *Revelation*, xxvi.

countless vernaculars.”³ Although Ruiz himself remarks that his book may not neatly fit within the bounds of biblical studies in its narrowest of construals, it is a text that speaks to the grounds upon which we make claims about, with, around, and for the “scriptural,” broadly construed.⁴

Because I am a student of scriptures as human social projects, I also find something profound arcing across the chapters of this book. Examining historical snapshots that take us from caves in Mona Island in early modernity to the banks of the Tiber and our most current papacy, Ruiz’s work charts the conditions under which we know, perceive, and receive revelation, even as he always directs our attention to the significant particularity of each and every revelatory *encuentro*. He also consistently draws our attention to under-examined theological threads, to paths of revelatory interpretation that have too often been ignored and elided in dominant church practices and with often horrifying consequences, especially for Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

As someone who has taken much revelatory knowledge over the years from my *encuentros* with Ruiz’s written scholarship and profoundly articulated thought at conference panels or in conversation (I have the honor of being among his family of Hispanic Theological Initiative mentees), it is truly my privilege to join the authors of this roundtable in celebrating Ruiz’s outstanding book and in using the particularities of this text to think about the nature of revelation with and from our own particularities. Each of these papers was presented at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meeting in Denver, Colorado in November of 2022, during a session that the Latina/o/e and Latin American Biblical Interpretation section facilitated in honor of Ruiz’s work, that is to say, both in honor of this specific, impressive book and in a broader sense, of all Ruiz has done to further the work of biblical interpretation done *latinamente*. Both the specifics of this book and the legacy of Ruiz’s approach to biblical studies and Latina/o/e theologies inform each of the responses offered below.

None of these scholars offers a narrow book review, and if you wish to seek a simple summary of the contents and arguments of *Revelation in the Vernacular*, you would be better served reading the final pages of Ruiz’s own introduction to his book. What each of these pieces offers instead is an opportunity to signify on the versions of revelation in the vernacular that Ruiz

³ Ruiz, *Revelation*, xxxiv.

⁴ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 153.

has charted for us. Each of these scholars openly comes from a particular context, encounters Ruiz's work in relationship to the context of their thinking, and then celebrates that work by thinking with it in directions that defy the boundaries of biblical studies or theology. More than that, they open up conversations across a number of vernaculars, even if their written form remains English-dominant. Because this roundtable encouraged scholars to engage with Ruiz's work from their specific context and approach, each piece responds in a way and format that is distinctive. They evidence the revelatory potential of a range of particularities, challenging the assumption that academic conversations should all look or sound the same.

Thus, I have arranged the pieces within the order of the SBL program, alphabetical by last name, so that you as a reader may choose to engage in the order that sparks your curiosity. The first piece from Rodolfo Galvan Estrada, III engages with Ruiz's work from a space of biblical studies as well as Christian theology inflected with a Latino Pentecostal experience. Galvan Estrada reflects on the importance of the divine expression in culture, but through a reading of Acts 14:8-18, he also wonders about when and how Christians determine what is distinctively Christian revelation. He suggests that Paul and Barnabas might offer a model of Christian toleration for difference that does not necessarily embrace all non-Christian traditions as revelatory.

Writing as "a native pastor in Tonga (in Pacifika)," Jione Havea finds ways to share in written form some of the distinctive power of his in-person response, a response that underscored relational, oral storytelling and modes of translating and relating to Indigenous vernaculars on their terms rather than on academic terms. He particularly draws our attention to native scriptures like those Taíno images in the caves of Mona island or the statue of an Indigenous Amazonian woman, scriptures that cannot be rendered with and should not be "trap[ped by] the world of written words."

Likewise, Jennifer Kaalund turns to *encuentros* not only of words but also of material objects, and she especially connects the crosses inscribed in Mona Island's Cave 18 with the crosses found on the busts of Augustus and Livia, crosses that were inscribed in the ancient world but now sit on display in a contemporary museum in Turkey. Kaalund asks about the meanings and the power dynamics at work in both crosses, and she raises the question of hybridity—of the scholarly need to delimit and straighten the more complicated and mixed practices of daily life. Yet, even as she thinks with hybridity, she redirects our attention to Mona

island and points out that there is a kind of violence and desecration in inscribing crosses onto an Indigenous sacred site when so done under the power dynamics of colonization.

This interface of the scriptural and the revelatory amid the uneven *encuentros* of modernity also draws Richard Newton's attention. Signifying on Plato's cave through Ruiz's reading of Mona Island, Newton re-describes revelation as an ongoing process, as Ruiz would have it, an ever unfolding one, one that is not so simply rooted but also about routing, about movement. At the same time, Newton reminds us that revelatory *encuentros* often exist on an uneven edge where we might make the most of them but we might also take advantage of or get taken advantage of, depending on the power dynamics at hand.

In the last response published here, Jonathan Tan converses with Ruiz's work through the lens of specifically Asian Roman Catholic thought. A bridge between these perspectives is critical because, as Tan underscores, we live in a globalized world of mass movement and many uneven *encuentros*. Tan interprets Ruiz's work, particularly his readings of CELAM's use of "seeds of the word," alongside the writings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) where, because of the context of Asia, where we must read with attention to "diversity and pluralism"—of religions, cultures, languages, and philosophical views. Although the order of the essays is alphabetical, Tan's essay provides a fitting conclusion to these reflections, precisely because he examines a set of particularities that further witness to Ruiz's argument about the ongoing, unfolding ways the Word manifests in a plurality of vernaculars.