

6-2023

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Recommended Citation

Kaalund, Jennifer T. "Reading the Writing on the Wall: Cultural Encounters and their Possibilities," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 9. (2023) :80-87
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol25/iss1/9>

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**Reading the Writing on the Wall:
Cultural Encounters and Their Possibilities**

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I began reading Jean-Pierre Ruiz’s recent book on my very long flight to Monrovia, Liberia, for a conference entitled “The Afterlives of Slavery: Colonization, Christianity, and Commerce.” I was presenting a paper about the transatlantic journey of words and the Word—various versions of the Bible and papal decrees. I soon realized that Ruiz’s book would take me on a similar expedition traversing the Atlantic ocean. There are many resonances between these journeys. Examining the transatlantic journey from Spain to Puerto Rico, we can recognize that not only did a cultural encounter occur, but also a cartography was charted, one that disrupts and interrupts how we may understand the revelation of God. I must confess that when I received Ruiz’s book, I assumed it was about the Revelation of John—a notion of which Ruiz disabuses others like me at the very start of his introduction. Ruiz unveils and illuminates how such cultural encounters are spaces of enunciation, meaning-making, and sites of encountering the divine.

Significantly, Ruiz begins with material culture—the drawings and writings in a cave. Cave 18 on Mona Island is described as an “indigenous subterranean sacred space [that] was repurposed as a Christian shrine, and yet without defacing or erasing the indigenous images that were already there.”¹ This cave contained both Indigenous markings, and later, Christian

¹ Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021), 16.

symbols and phrases were added. While it is noteworthy that those who inscribed Christian symbols did not erase what was already there, their markings changed what was in the cave. This cave is an example of a cultural encounter. It is possible that the Spanish experienced the Divine in this space and wanted to mark this experience.

However, these markings can also be seen as an imposition, a need for the conquerors to express this experience in their own language; it can be read as a violation, indeed even a defilement or desecration. Among the findings in the cave, researchers found “‘a series of 17 crosses’ in the cave, ‘ranging from simple Latin crosses to more complex Calvary crucifixes,’ and that these are located ‘most often close to indigenous figure-fluting and iconography. The placement of these crosses is significant.’”² The placement of the crosses indicates a hierarchy of sorts. “Yet,” Ruiz writes, “it is equally significant that the crosses were not superimposed over the indigenous iconography, nor is there evidence that any of the indigenous iconography were defaced or erased by those responsible for making the crosses.”³

Cultural encounters are not solely about exchanges between people; they can also be about places and how these spaces make people feel. Cultural encounters create spaces where one can better understand their identity even as one encounters an/other. While the crosses and writing may have indicated that the outsiders had encountered God in this space, the communication of this encounter was unnecessary. The Indigenous iconography had already made it clear that this was holy ground. These markings seem to translate the iconography, to express the markings in their own vernacular, their own language. At the same time, the marking

² Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, 12.

³ Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, 12.

of space often accompanies colonization, and this context further complicates how these Christian symbols can be understood.

These images of crosses carved in the cave reminded me of other inscribed crosses. In the Archaeological Museum in Selcuk, Turkey, there are busts of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, and his wife, Livia. These busts are the remains of statues that would have been part of the civic center in Ephesus. The heads of these statues were inscribed with crosses. What does it mean for a Roman emperor and his wife to bear these religious symbols? What might these crosses tell us about how early Christian communities in Ephesus perceived Roman imperial power? Richard Rothaus provides a detailed description of the images. He writes:

The Prytaneum was, evidently, cleansed by a Christian or group of Christians; along with the defacement of the two heads, there is a cross on one of the figures of the monumental façade and the name of Artemis has been erased from the porticos in front of the Prytaneum. Unfortunately, the till in which these heads were found has not been published and it is not possible to assign a date to the mutilations. The crosses carved into the foreheads of Augustus and Livia are discolored, perhaps by burning but the smoothly polished edges of the cutting more probably indicate rubbing ... Its inscription is an obvious part of the de-paganization of the Prytaneum.⁴

The carving of crosses onto symbols of Roman imperial power can have a variety of meanings. Rothaus suggests these reasons are “all related to disempowering the statue or *daimon* within.”⁵

⁴ Richard M. Rothaus, *Corinth, The First City of Greece: An Urban History of Late Antique Cult and Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 113.

⁵ Rothaus, *Corinth, The First City of Greece*, 113.

However, it is not clear to me what purpose the crosses on the heads of Livia and Augustus served.

In fact, it is likely that the crosses had various meanings for various people. Again, it is important to note that the statues were not utterly destroyed; they were vandalized. Though the statues of Augustus and Livia remained, they were forever changed. In his book, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity*, Peter Brown suggests that the statues of Augustus and Livia are an example of “pagan monuments that no longer disturb Christians.” He writes:

The statues of Augustus and Livia continued to stand in the civic center of Ephesus, but they now had the sign of the cross discreetly carved on their foreheads. Thus “baptized” in retrospect, they looked down serenely on the Christian bishops assembled by Theodosius II, a most orthodox ruler, but also the direct successor of Augustus.⁶

Brown’s reading of these markings as “discreetly carved” and the images as “baptized” exposes one perspective on their meaning. Whether it was the emperor and his wife being blessed, or the Christian community that had received the blessing of the emperor, these crosses are open to interpretation. Do they signify the passing of power from one regime to another?

While these cross markings may have been a part of the “de-paganization of the Prytaneum,” the statues upon which they were carved were part of a larger cultural phenomenon, the presence of the imperial cult in Ephesus. Ephesus was a provincial capital, and “with the exception of three statues erected by Roman officials in Ephesus, the rest, which number around fifty, were put up by the residents of Ephesus.”⁷ There is evidence of the coexistence of multiple

⁶ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 149.

⁷ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus From Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2004), 35-36. Trebilco provides an example of this coexistence, writing: “The Kouretes, who were responsible for the mysteries of Artemis and whose members

(cultural, civic, cultic) identities in ancient Ephesus. The statues, therefore, were always already expressions of the people, not necessarily an imposition upon them. If the very presence of the statues spoke to a hybrid existence of sorts, why did people need to alter them?

My reading of the statues of Livia and Augustus is that while the crosses are an indication of Christian identity, this identity is not pure. All identities are interdependent and layered. An attempt to understand one layer reveals the possibility of others. The statues may represent a hybrid identity of the Christian cult in Ephesus, whose adherents perhaps held allegiance to both their Roman and their Christian identity. There was no need to distinguish between them. As opposed to seeing Livia and Augustus as “baptized” or as converted Christians, it is just as likely that the Christian cult sought the “blessing” of Livia and Augustus. The crosses represented approval of this new cult that could coexist, much like the cult of Artemis and the imperial cult. The idea of singularity is disrupted by the reality of multiple things being true simultaneously. The crosses from the early centuries of Christianity in the Mediterranean world and the crosses in the fifteenth-century Mona Island must be examined within the context of imperialization and colonization.

The journey across the sea from Spain to Mona Island was not an excursion for those searching for the revelation of God; it was likely a part of many trips that had been a part of a campaign for the promotion of Christian superiority and domination. Colonization is inextricably linked with Christianity. In the 1493 Papal Bull, *Inter Caetera*, Pope Alexander VI wrote:

With this proviso however that none of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, beyond that said line towards the west and south, be in

were part of the governing order of the city... not only made clear their piety to Artemis, but also paid their reverence to the Roman emperors.”

the actual possession of any Christian king or prince up to the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ just past from which the present year one thousand four hundred and ninety-three begins. And we make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind; with this proviso however, that by this our gift, grant, and assignment no right acquired by any Christian prince, who may be in actual possession of said islands and mainlands prior to the said birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ, is hereby to be understood to be withdrawn or taken away.⁸

Through his written words, the pope, an agent of God, creates a sacred text in its own right that consecrates these colonizing/Christianizing actions. The practice of colonization was inherently violent, and if we understand the markings in the cave as part of this context, those crosses are a part of this violence.

However, it is possible for one to resist such violence. Ada María Isasi-Díaz reminds us in her aptly named chapter in *Mujerista Theology*, “The Word of God in Us,” that

The mystification of the sacred is a control mechanism used by “religious professionals.” Wrestling control of the sacred from the grasp of such professionals gives Latinas the freedom and right to experience God on their own terms. If we believe God becomes human in the person of Jesus, all of us, not only priests and pastors, participate in the divine.⁹

⁸ Alexander VI, Papal Bull *Inter Caetera* (1493), <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Alex06/alex06inter.htm>.

⁹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 188-189.

Indeed, God continues to reveal Godself despite or perhaps because of human tendencies to identify the stranger as in need or in some way lacking.

Revelation in the Vernacular reminds us that speaking in our own words can in and of itself be a prophetic act, a way of speaking truth to power. This book also underscores the importance of images and how images can be as effective as words for constructing identity and for developing a better understanding of oneself and God. Ruiz presents dialogical models of teaching and learning that prove to be instructive. His teachers have taught him, and he teaches us—his readers—and these exchanges create the possibility of experiencing revelation. Pope Francis’s explanation of inculturation underscores the efficacy of this dialogical model. According to Ruiz, Francis “points out that inculturation—which is, in effect, the incarnation of the Word in specific cultural vernaculars—is not a one-way street.”¹⁰ Inculturation is a cultural encounter that moves beyond seeing differences through an evaluative lens, one that leads to comparison and hierarchical evaluations.

In a helpful framing, Ruiz highlights Efrain Agosto’s exposition of revelation and keeps his readers mindful of it throughout the book. Agosto writes: “Revelation must be described as a contextual act, not a matter of universality. God chooses to reveal God-self in particularities, not absolute abstraction.”¹¹ These particularities are manifested in how epistemologies differ: simply put, there are multiple ways of knowing. To center one language or one point of access is to occlude the various ways one might encounter the Holy. For these reasons, this book should be mandatory reading for those who study missiology and those who desire to engage in mission

¹⁰ Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, 150.

¹¹ Efrain Agosto, “Revelation,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espin (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 106, cited in Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular*, xviii.

work. *Revelation in the Vernacular* provides a framework for moving beyond models of judgment to modes of appreciation and openness, not simply to recognize but also to honor difference. Can we imagine a world in which we see the Divine in each other and in all living things, and we can acknowledge our interconnectedness?

Revelation in the Vernacular clarifies that cultural encounters are not limited to person-to-person contact. Nor are cultural encounters historical relics or actions of the past. They continue to occur in our contemporary moment. Thus, alongside the possibilities of inculturation, I must also acknowledge how the afterlives of colonization reverberate today. In fact, it seems that colonization continues to try to reinvent itself; the exploitation of people and land and its religious justification has never ended. Nevertheless, the Divine continues to reveal, underground in caves, in Scripture, in the world, and in us and each other.

What does it mean to read the writing on our walls? Though this statement no longer directs us to a literal object, it maintains a sense of warning and inevitability. This book serves as both a warning and an invitation: a warning not to be dismissive of the various contexts in which revelation can occur and, at the same time, an invitation to see God revealed all around us, all the time, in ways we may not always understand, but in ways we can at least honor. We will have read the writing on our walls when we have learned to see each person we encounter as a container of the Divine. We will have read the writing on the walls when we value the earth as a site and sight of revelation. We will have read the writings on our walls when we learn to listen to each other deeply as we speak in our own vernacular and seek an understanding that does not require translation.