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Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III

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Paul, Barnabas, and the Vernacular in Acts 14:8-18:

A Rereading with Jean-Pierre Ruiz's *Revelation in the Vernacular*

Rodolfo Galvan Estrada, III

Vanguard University

Religious traditions and theologies of Indigenous cultures have and have had a profound impact on a Christian understanding of divine revelation. There can be common languages, theological similarities, and rituals that make communication between religious traditions possible. But in what ways does a focus upon Indigenous vernacular, that is, the common language, culture, and traditions of the people, also provide new opportunities for reinterpreting familiar biblical stories? Jean-Pierre Ruiz's *Revelation in the Vernacular* provides answers to this question. His monograph demonstrates how the cultural can serve as a source of divine revelation and how revelation depends on the cultural. Indeed, Ruiz's *Revelation* helps scholars, practitioners, and theologians recognize the importance of culture.

This essay, therefore, desires to discuss the implications of Ruiz's *Revelation* by bringing into conversation a story of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:8-18. As I will argue, Ruiz's *Revelation* provides a new way of thinking about the encounter between early missionaries with the Indigenous people of Lystra (Acts 14:8-18). But, as I will examine, although the cultural is part of divine revelation, culture itself is limited and thus not always sufficient enough to understand the divine. This conclusion is motivated in part through an engagement with Ruiz's *Revelation* and a rereading of Acts 14:8-18. Thus, the first part of this essay will review a few aspects of Ruiz's main argument with attention to Tschugguel's protest video and the inscription

Dios Te Perdona in Cave 18. As we will notice, Ruiz makes an argument for a broader and inclusive understanding of revelation that must include space for culture. The second part of the essay will examine the benefits and limitations of this approach. Specifically, how a Protestant like me wrestles with the implications of Ruiz's argument in light of a similar situation in Acts 14:8-18 when the cultural was not adequate enough to reveal the divine.

Revelation in the Vernacular and Tschugguel

Ruiz's *Revelation in the Vernacular* is the second of the *Disruptive Cartographers* series (first with Orbis Books, now with Fordham University Press), in which the volumes aim to remap theology by retrieving sources from a spectrum of Latino/a/e lived experiences.¹ One main contention of Ruiz's book is that revelation always takes place in the vernacular. In fact, he insists, "We can say not only that the Word became culture but that the Word continues to become culture, revealed in the countless vernaculars."² The prime examples of revelation in the vernacular, which are discussed throughout the book, are the Latin inscriptions and petroglyphs of the Taíno Cave 18 located on Mona Island (Isla de Mona) of the Caribbean. Ruiz notes that the Latin inscriptions found in these caves date back to the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in 1494 CE. These Spanish colonizers left behind the phrases *Plura Fecit Deus* (God made many things), *Verbum Caro Factum Est* (the Word became flesh), and *Dios Te Perdona* (God forgive you). These inscriptions, as Ruiz states, were "all placed in visually dominant positions over cave entrances or on high walls, most being set vertically above indigenous iconography rather than superimposed."³ Although it is difficult to identify the purpose of these Latin writings,

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

² Ruiz, *Revelation*, xxxiv.

³ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 12.

which Ruiz does mention, they do attest to interactions between the Spanish colonizers and the Indigenous inhabitants of the island. They are early evidence of cross-cultural communication and interaction between the Indigenous people and the Spanish colonizers.

What do these Latin inscriptions, Indigenous petroglyphs, and encounters between the Spanish and the Indigenous communities at Mona Island have to do with revelation? For Ruiz, they point to a period when some Spanish visitors had a much broader view of divine revelation.⁴ They reflect a possible time when the culture of Indigenous traditions was affirmed as equally revelatory instead of viewed with suspicion. Ruiz supports his understanding of the petroglyphs by exploring the intellectual climate of the sixteenth century. As he argues, this sixteenth century context can aid our understanding of the petroglyphs and the encounter between the Spaniards and the Indigenous Taíno people of Mona Island.

Ruiz points out that the period during which the Latin inscriptions were written near the Indigenous petroglyphs was also the era of the famous debate between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda at Valladolid. He also notes that the Augustinian Fray Luis de Leon (1527-1591) began a “theology of vernacular” during this same period. As Ruiz notices, Fray Luis was an ardent advocate for knowing the Bible in the vernacular. He was motivated by “making the Bible accessible and understandable to those who could not read Latin.”⁵ Ruiz also quotes Fray Luis, saying that God “intended Scripture to be available for the use of all. To this end, [God] saw to it that it was written in the plainest language, the ordinary speech of those to whom revealed truth was directed.”⁶ In other words, Fray Luis understood that knowing God

⁴ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 29.

⁵ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 67.

⁶ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 70.

would require the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. This important point, that is, understanding God in the vernacular, undergirds Ruiz's argument throughout his monograph. As he demonstrates, God is known through the vernacular and this includes the religious traditions, culture, and language of Indigenous people.

Though Fray Luis insisted that revelation must be understood in the vernacular, Ruiz admits that Fray Luis was not "interested in interreligious dialogue with the indigenous people of the Americas."⁷ Indeed, this lack of interest in Indigenous traditions presents a serious limitation and contradiction, especially for Fray Luis, who believed that revelation must be understood in the ordinary speech and life of the people. Nonetheless, Ruiz believes that despite this failure, the broader intellectual climate of the period indirectly aids our understanding of the encounter between the Spaniards and the Indigenous people of Mona Island. As Ruiz notes, when the Spanish colonizers wrote in Cave 18 *Plura Fecit Deus* (God made many things), the phrase would not have been out of step with the Spanish intellectual climate of the sixteenth century.⁸ The inscription preserved in Cave 18, in a sense, communicates tolerance and an understanding that God is made known through culture.

Tolerance for one another's culture, however, has not always been historically evident. Ruiz highlights an example of intolerance by drawing attention to Alexander Tschugguel who, on October 21, 2019, threw into the Tiber River a presumed Pachamama carving of a nude pregnant woman that was given as a gift to Pope Francis.⁹ This incident, as Ruiz recognizes, echoes another Latin phrase, *Dios Te Perdona*, which was also written by an unnamed European

⁷ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 60.

⁸ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 76.

⁹ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 79.

visitor to Cave 18 on Mona Island.¹⁰ Ruiz connects the intolerance of Tschugguel with the intolerance of some Spanish visitors who left behind their mark in Cave 18. In other words, while some Spanish visitors could see in the petroglyphs of Mona Island the revelation of God and affirm that “God made many things,” others were not so open. Ruiz notices that the intolerance of difference and the violence against Indigenous Amazonian culture and artifacts expressed by Tschugguel are “painfully reminiscent” of “when Europeans first landed in the Americas.”¹¹

But how are we to make sense of both Tschugguel’s intolerance and the Latin inscription *Dios Te Perdona* that asks for forgiveness? Is this a false equivalency? Notice that inscriptions of both tolerance and intolerance were found in the same cave. We do not have one without the other. Was Tschugguel also motivated by an extreme hatred toward Indigenous people and culture? Should he be placed among the same group of people who were motivated by greed, money, power, and plain cruelty during the Spanish conquest of the Americas? I would be hesitant to equate Tschugguel’s protest and disrespect of Indigenous culture with the inhuman cruelty that Bartolome de Las Casas depicted among many Spanish *conquistadores*. Many of the Spanish conquistadores used the name of God to justify their inhuman treatment of the Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, Tschugguel explains his motivations in an interview with Edward Pentin of the *National Catholic Register* on November 5, 2019.¹² His motivations are different from those of the *conquistadores*. As he explains, what motivated him was an incident

¹⁰ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 85.

¹¹ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 85.

¹² Edward Pentin, “Austrian Catholic: Why I threw Pachamama statues into the Tiber,” *National Catholic Register*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/austrian-catholic-why-i-threw-pachamama-statues-into-the-tiber>.

at the Vatican Garden, where people, he claims, were bowing down to the statues. He interpreted this act of bowing down to the statues as an act of displacing Christ, who should be at the center of faith. Tschugguel cites the First Commandment and his conviction that Christ ought to be central to the faith as reasons for his protest, not hatred toward Indigenous people.

However, Tschugguel is not totally exempt from criticism. Tschugguel naïvely takes it upon himself to become the arbiter of what is theologically appropriate to understand the divine. No Catholic Indigenous believer asked him to mediate and intervene in an Indigenous understanding of the divine. His action, which he thought was justified, actually exemplified the continual colonial mindset that attempts to dictate to Indigenous people what can and cannot be included in an Indigenous understanding of the divine.

Although Ruiz's *Revelation* helps us to recognize that God can be found in Indigenous cultures, we must also admit that not all Spanish visitors to the Mona Island were so affirming. But how hostile is the Latin inscription *Dios Te Perdona*? Is Tschugguel's removal of the Indigenous statues an intolerant act comparable to the Spanish *conquistadores*' violence against Indigenous peoples? It is dangerous to equate the theft of a statue with historical acts of violence that caused much death. This does not suggest that language, protest, or religious text do not have the potential to stir violence or echo memories of violence, but we must step back and examine the motivations of people to understand why they act as they do. Fortunately, Tschugguel explains the reason for tossing the statues into the Tiber River, naïve and colonial as it may be. Unfortunately, with the Latin inscription *Dios Te Perdona* in Cave 18 of Mona Island, we are only left to conjectures.

This tension raises several questions: Does this move to see God's divine revelation in culture suggest that everything can be translated and appropriated? Are there some religious

traditions or cultural practices that remain incompatible with the Christian faith? And finally, how do we determine which religious customs and cultural practices are compatible with the Christian faith and which are not? I may not be able to fully answer these questions, nor do I intend to justify the inhumane treatment of Indigenous people and demonization of their cultures and traditions. However, I raise these questions because of the way Ruiz's *Revelation* portrays the incident involving Tschugguel and the Latin inscription *Dios Te Perdone*. I believe there may be something more going on than just intolerance or a failure to see the divine in culture.

For this reason, I want to turn to the incident between Paul and Barnabas and the people of Lystra in Acts 14:8-18 and reinterpret this encounter in light of Ruiz's *Revelation*. I focus specifically on this story because of its relevance to communicating the gospel, translating the gospel into the vernacular, and the early apostles' encounter with a different culture—especially when the people of Lystra attempt to sacrifice offerings to the apostles as if they were Greek deities. I also draw attention to this story because it not only reveals the difficulties of translation but can also serve as a guide for understanding differences, tolerance, and what to do when there are situations of religious incompatibility.

Before I begin a rereading of the text, I do want to point out that I am not presuming that religious traditions and culture can and should be separate entities. When we look at how people groups were defined in ancient Greece and Rome, there are a host of matrixes that defined group belonging, including clothing, food, religion, language, lineage, and geographical origins. For example, Herodotus outlines aspects of the Greek identity to include a common descent, language, religious observance, and way of life (8.144). Likewise, Tacitus also describes the transformation of the Britons to a Roman identity when they started to adopt Roman customs,

education, clothes, and food (*Agr.* 21.1). Religious traditions are part of the cultural identity of people groups. They were not separated as religion and cultural identity are today.

Rereading Acts 14:8-18 with *Revelation in the Vernacular*

The narrative in Acts 14:8-18 details Paul and Barnabas's preaching of the gospel in Lystra. During one occasion, Paul speaks to a disabled man who was listening and challenges him to stand up. As the man stands up and is healed, the crowds shout in their own Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form" (v. 11). The crowds immediately proclaim Barnabas as the Greek god "Zeus" and Paul "Hermes" (v. 12). Then the priest of Zeus and the crowds of Lystra further respond by making sacrifices. As Paul and Barnabas see what is happening, they "tear their robes" and seek to bring a halt to this religious activity. They speak to the crowds and urge them to "turn from these worthless things" and to the living God (v. 15). They also explain that God had indeed permitted past generations to follow their own ways and left upon all people a revelation of the divine self (vv. 16-17). But despite their intervention, they cannot restrain the crowds from offering sacrifices (v. 18).

Luke does not describe how this story concludes and whether it was a missionary failure. It may be that this encounter provided the initial seed for further missionaries who followed Paul and Barnabas's footsteps. Regardless, Paul and Barnabas were primarily understood through the people's knowledge of Greek deities, that is, through the vernacular. They reinterpreted Paul's healing practice in their own Lycaonian language. The people of Lystra claim, "The gods have come down to us in human form" (v. 11) and in response, Paul and Barnabas attempt to move the people of Lystra beyond their Greek religious traditions and into the new faith in God. They proclaim that God indeed has revealed Godself through creation, and thus affirms the role of the cultural in understanding the divine. But they also assert that this initial revelation through

creation was temporary. The people of Lystra now need to hear the gospel and make a decisive break with their religious tradition. Specifically, Paul and Barnabas exhort the people to “turn from these worthless things” and toward the living creator God (v. 15).

What are the “worthless things” that Paul and Barnabas are referring to? Would this include the people’s religious traditions and worship of Zeus and Hermes? Most likely. While knowledge of Greek deities may have prepared the people for the gospel, the knowledge of Zeus and Hermes was still insufficient in understanding the healing miracle and the message of the gospel. The communication of the gospel did occur, but it was only partially understood. The vernacular was vital for communication, but it was also limited in explanation. We can notice in the reaction of Paul and Barnabas that a decisive break with prior religious traditions needs to happen.

The challenge Paul and Barnabas experienced with the people of Lystra is one that we continue to have today. We can observe that the people of Lystra understood the miraculous in light of Greek deities. Truly, no one receives the gospel without a prior understanding of the divine, albeit limited and rooted in a cultural tradition. Ruiz certainly agrees with this. He states that culture is never an “empty box” or “blank slate” but contains also “seeds of the Word.”¹³ However, the demand of the gospel preached by Paul and Barnabas also propels adherents to move beyond non-Christian religious understanding and embrace, as they describe, “the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (14:15). While knowledge of Zeus may have helped some people of Lystra understand the possible significance of the miraculous activities and preaching of Paul and Barnabas, it was also a hindrance. The

¹³ Ruiz, *Revelation*, 106.

Greek religious tradition certainly paved the way for the gospel, yet it was still insufficient in helping witnesses to understand what had taken place through one man's miraculous healing.

Certainly, there are points of connection and understanding between religious traditions, but similarities do not mean equivalency. This is a very important aspect of the cultural climate of the second century, because some assumed that all religious traditions were the same but with a different name. For example, Marco Varro, a contemporary of Justin Martyr, once claimed that the God of the Jews is the same as Jupiter (Augustine, *Cons.* 1.22.30). Also in the second century, Celsus stated the following, "It makes no difference whether the God who is over all things be called by the name of Zeus, which is current among the Greeks" (Origen, *Cels.* 1.24). Both Varro and Celsus attempt to draw equivalences between religious traditions. Certainly, knowledge of the Greek pantheon may help one understand Christ. In fact, Justin Martyr attempts to bridge the gap between Greek deities and the Christian God. He points to the virgin birth of Persius and the healing activities of Aeschylus in order to find common ground, but there are still areas of difference and irreconcilable beliefs (*1 Apol.* 24). Christ and Aeschylus are not the same, even though they were both healers. Christ and Persius are no longer worshipped together by Christians, despite having virgin birth stories. In other words, while there may be early seeds of the gospel in Greek religious traditions, Justin Martyr insists that Christians are no longer offering reverence to these deities. He notices that Christians have learned to "despise" these gods even though they are "threatened with death" for doing so (*1 Apol.* 25).

Was Justin Martyr, therefore, an intolerant person for suggesting that the honor of Zeus was no longer compatible with the emerging Christian faith? It may be more accurate to understand Justin Martyr as one who attempted to find common ground while maintaining his conviction that the emerging Christian movement was distinct from Greek and Roman deities.

Although there are similarities between the religious traditions, these similarities are not equivalencies. There are fundamental differences that cannot be reconciled.

Returning to Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas attempt to halt the people of Lystra from offering sacrifices. They understand the people's response as an inappropriate reaction despite the fact that it would have been a proper response within their own cultural practices and beliefs. The vernacular, in this story, is important in communicating the gospel. It provides the elements of divine revelation and a framework to interpret the miraculous healing of the disabled man. However, it is also limited and causes Paul and Barnabas to protest the actions of the people from Lystra. Most importantly, we must observe that there are no acts of violence in the protest of Paul and Barnabas. They do not throw down the statues of Zeus or Hermes, nor do they assault the priests of Lystra who are leading the people. The only form of violence they commit is against their own clothing. As a result, and perhaps due to their failure to stop the crowds, they leave the people, and possibly fail in their mission.

There are notable differences between this story in Acts 14:8-18 and the historical actions of the Spanish *conquistadores*—and those of Tschugguel in Rome. The way Paul and Barnabas respond to the people of Lystra provide us with another way of looking at cultural encounters, the limitations of the vernacular, and how to respond to people with different religious traditions. The readers of this story can observe that although Indigenous beliefs and traditions are important in communicating the gospel and understanding the divine, non-Christian traditions may also be limited, and in some cases, irreconcilable with claims of Christian faith.

Conclusion: Revelation and Relation

I understand why someone may write in the Taíno Cave 18 “*Dios Te Perdona.*”
Understanding this desire to make a break with cultural traditions that are perceived to be

irreconcilable with the Christian faith is what prompts people like Tschugguel to take matters into their own hands by seizing the Pachamama statuettes and throwing them into the Tiber River. While we may understand these words *Dios Te Perdona* and Tschugguel's actions as a reflection of intolerance, others may see them as simply continuing the biblical tradition that demands a sharp divide between one's pagan past and the worship of Christ. I am not only thinking about the story of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14, but also those of Phineas (Num 25:10-13; Ps 106:28-31) and Mattathias who led the Maccabean revolt against Greek customs (1 Macc 2:15-39). But unlike Tschugguel, the encounter with the culturally other by Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:8-18 provides another way of responding to those whom we may have difficulties in translating the gospel into the vernacular. Instead of reacting with violence, perhaps it is best to leave, and in so doing, leave others be. The people of Lystra needed to figure out the gospel for themselves after the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. And likewise, the Indigenous people deserve the same. The Indigenous people do not need a "Tschugguel" to intervene and meddle in their understanding of the divine.

Nonetheless, Ruiz's *Revelation* has made me rethink the relationship between Christianity as inherited from the Western tradition, Indigenous cultures, and the challenges of communicating the gospel in a polytheistic Greek and Roman culture. If anything, the initial historic impulse to identify the "evils" within culture may blind us from the ways in which God is made manifest within culture. We may be better at finding idols than we are at finding God in culture. Additionally, there is something notable in Ruiz's *Revelation in the Vernacular*. The monograph helps us lay down our arrogance and hostility, presuming that God has only spoken or revealed the divine self to us and our culture. It challenges us to learn cultural traditions, not with the aim of changing or compelling others to assimilate or divest themselves of their cultural

identity markers but to appreciate how God has spoken to many people, in many ways, and in many ages. If the cultural can become a widely explored source of theology, it can lead us to charitable intercultural communication, dialogue between religious traditions, and one step toward the end of cultural colonialism. As Ruiz demonstrates, the cultural can help us see God in ways more different than we have ever seen God before. This stimulating text theologically maps out the way in which culture also contributes to divine self-disclosure, but it also presses us with questions about the limitations of the vernacular.