The Grass is Browner on Our Side of the Fence

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A few weeks ago, in a conversation over Skype with some of the members of *La Comunidad* at Yale Divinity School (YDS), I was asked how many Latino students there were at YDS when I first was here. I said "three." But I was wrong. There were none. We were not "Latino" in the sense in which we now use the word. We were foreign students from Latin America. I did not see the United States as the context for the rest of my life, nor YDS as part of a system with which I would have to deal for the rest of my life. I was here to study, learn, get my degree, and return to Latin America. I was not invested here —neither in this school nor in this nation. Therefore, whatever racism or ethnocentrism there was, I would simply let slide. When, the week after I arrived in New Haven, a professor told me that Spanish was not a theological language, and that therefore for my PhD I needed two other modern languages, I didn't argue. I simply scheduled my French and German exams for the next week. When I was told that the history Christitanity in Latin America was not part of Church History, but of the History of Missions, I simply filed it away as an odd comment.

The place was quite foreign to me, I must admit. The buildings had names of saints about whom I had scarcely heard: Bacon, Beecher, Taylor, Seabury, Stuart… They were not part of my history. But, even though the place was foreign to me, I didn't mind, for I too was a foreigner.

My years at Yale were a fairly happy time. But it was a happiness of detachment, or perhaps of

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obliviousness. This was not my home, and therefore I did not mind how the furniture was arranged, as long as I had a bed to sleep in.

That's who I was when I was here at YDS almost six decades ago. As I was finishing my dissertation, my future was all planned. I was to return to Cuba immediately after graduation, and eventually to teach there, at the seminary where I had studied earlier.

But, as the old Spanish saying goes, "uno propone, y Dios dispone"— "one proposes and God disposes." Just as I was beginning to pack, President Kennedy and the CIA decided to invade Cuba. I could not return, and thus began a fairly long process whereby that foreign student who I was became a U.S. Latino —or, in other words, the process whereby I came to experience that there was indeed a fence, and that our side of the fence is brown.

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What is it that makes it possible for us to call ourselves Latinos and Latinas, or Hispanics? This is not an easy question, for our identity is in a combination of elements which jointly form a certain profile, even though they are not always true of all of us. We are often defined in terms of race; but the truth is that most of us are a mixture of various races. We are also defined in terms of language, and there is a measure of truth in this; but the truth is that many of us prefer English, and others prefer one of the indigenous languages of the Americas. We are defined in terms of culture, and yet we eat different foods and sing different songs. We are defined in terms of origin, as people coming from south of the border, and yet there are some among us

whose ancestors were in these lands long before the arrival of the Mayflower pilgrims.

Now here, in the United States, in spite of all these differences, we are becoming one in a way that was not true in Latin America. A Mexican in Chicago is more likely to have quite a few Puerto Rican friends than a Mexican in Mexico. A Dominican in New York is likely to have more dealings with Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and Cubans than would ever be the case in the Dominican Republic. Our Spanish is being changed and enriched by the Spanish of various lands, and by words borrowed and adapted from English. Our rhythms are intermingling. Our children are marrying children of other Latino subcultures. In brief, a new people is being formed in the United States that has traits and traditions from all over the Hemisphere, but is also unique. And this new people is so numerous that in all of Spanish America there are only two or perhaps three countries that surpass it in numbers.

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Allow me then to return to what I was saying about the process of becoming a Latino or a Hispanic. Along that process, I soon came to the conclusion that, as we look at the entire field of theological, historical, and biblical studies from the perspective of our side of the fence, we may see things that others miss.

This took place through many stages, and I need not bore you with a chronological account. Rather, allow me to pick up on a few themes and examples.

Since it was mostly history that I studied here at Yale, I shall begin with some examples from history, and will then be moving to some examples in biblical hermeneutics, as time permits. When I first came to Yale, I had read many of the ancient Christian writers. Here at Yale, I read them once again, now under the guidance of very distinguished patristic scholars. They taught me much, and by the time I left I could tell you what those ancient writers said about subjects such as the presence of Christ in communion, the character of God, the relationships among the three persons in the Trinity, and the use of philosophy in the field of theology. This I learned, and this I taught for many years—and still do. It was mostly the knowledge derived from those sources, and from that reading of the sources, that I set down on paper in the book *A History of Christian Thought*.

But then Latin American theologians drew my attention to issues of poverty and to the manner in which our modern understanding of property rights promotes and sustains injustice. The Black Theology movement was raising similar questions. My participation in the life of Latino churches and communities in the United States led me to the conviction that quite often, perhaps even unwittingly, people teach and learn an understanding of the gospel that promotes quiescent acceptance in the face of injustice. And when some tried to show a different way they were dubbed unfaithful innovators. So I went back and read those ancient texts once again—not asking now what they said about the Trinity or about the eucharistic presence, but rather asking …

1. First, what do they say about issues such as the relationship between wealth and

poverty, the care for widows and orphans, and the sharing of resources?

2. Second, how does this relate to what they say about the Trinity, about baptism, or about any other theological subject?
3. And, third, how can we communicate such matters to the community of faith in such a way that they are taken into serious consideration, and not simply discounted as modern and radical innovations?

The answers to these set of questions surprised me. Even though I had read these texts before, now I noticed and had to ponder passages that were quite radical, and I discovered that there are literally hundreds of them—hundreds of passages seldom quoted or analyzed in standard textbooks.

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Furthermore, the answers to these questions gave me greater appreciation for the actual implications of theology for daily life and the ordering of society. Now I understood why, as Gregory Nazianzen commented, during the Arian controversy one could not go to get one's shoes mended without getting involved in a discussion as to whether the Son is of the same substance of the Father or not. Now I understood how his Antiochene Christohn led John Chrysostom to his radical preaching and eventually to death in exile.

And lastly, the answers to these questions led to a questioning of my own work. As I now look back at it, I realized that for the most part that big three-volume book, *A History of Christian*

Thought was mostly an expansion of what I had been taught here at Yale, bringing in other theologians and new sources. In general, it did not reflect my own Latino culture and condition—except in some places where it happened without me even noticing it.

In short, I came to the conviction that it was necessary both to re-read and to re-write much of what I had read as well as much of what I had written.

I now began looking at ancient Christian theology and realizing not only that there were different types of theology or different theological emphases, but also that as the church grew powerful and became more connected with power and prestige the Western church, of which most of us are heirs, opted or the least liberating and the least subversive of those types of theology —a type of theology that makes of law and order its basic theological paradigm, where God is a ruler, legislator, and judge, and which therefore soon was used to justify the existing order as willed and set by God.

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This is the great task before us from the brown side of the fence. It is a side where the grass looks brown because we have been told that the other side is better, where fences are being built, both metaphorically and literally, that sever us from our roots; that keep people away from schools and medical services; that encourage those who speak only English to look down on those who also speak other languages, and therefore speak English with an accent; that praise Henry Ford for his entrepreneurial spirit, and consider María Quesada, who walked three

days in the desert with a child in arms, an inferior human being lacking courage and initiative. And to make matters worse, these fences shift in dehumanizing ways.

My recently deceased friend Virgilio Elizondo, who may well be considered the father of Latino theology in the US, picked up on this subject for his dissertation at the Institute Catholique de Paris, and he later produced a more popular version of his argument in this book *Galilean Journey*. He pointed out that Galileans were "in between" people. They were Jews; but the "true" Jews of Judea did not consider them quite as Jewish as they considered themselves to be. Their land and their way of life were too polluted by their contact with Gentiles. So, their land was "Galilee of the Gentiles." But, while the Jews did not consider them true Jews, the Gentiles did. So, they were both Jews and Gentiles, and at the same time neither Jews nor Gentiles. In other words, they were "mestizos."

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In the former colonies of Spain, the word "mestizo" meant a person of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. Being called a "mestizo," and the very notion of "mestizaje," had pejorative connotations. For the pureblooded Spaniards and their creole descendants, a mestizo was little better than an Indian. And for the Indians, a mestizo was little better than a Spaniard. So, a mestizo is both Indian and Spanish, and at the same time neither Indian nor Spanish.

But, first in Mexico and then in other Latin American lands, the notion of mestizaje began losing its pejorative quality. In Mexico in 1925, philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos published

the book *La raza cósima*—The Cosmic Race. Although he spent most of his life in Mexico, Vasconcelos grew up in Eagle Pass, Texas, and therefore had experienced the consequences of notions of white supremacy and of being called a “half-breed.” In his book he refuted the theory of white supremacists who tried to base their opinions on a sort of Darwinianism, claiming that the “superior” races were the bearers of the future. Over against that, Vasconcelos argues that, just as inbreeding produces decline in the field of biology, so does racial and cultural inbreeding produce decline, not only biologically, but also culturally. He thus claimed that what was happening in Mexico, the mestizaje that so many bemoaned, was in fact the birth of a new race, a race that includes all of humanity, and which he called “la raza cósmica.” This is symbolized in one of Mexico’s most cherished monuments, *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas*—the plaza of three cultures. It stands in Tlatelolco, which was the emporium of the Aztec empire when the Spanish arrived. There, on August 13, 1521—at the same time when Luther was in hiding and translating Scripture in Wartburg—in what some called a battle and others a massacre, Hernán Cortés finally subdued the Mexica. According to some estimates, on that day 40,000 Indians were killed. Now, there is in that plaza an inscription that says: “There was neither victory nor defeat, but the painful birth of the mestizo people that is now Mexico.”

While much of the work of Vasconcelos falls into categories of racial stereotyping that are similar to those he abhors, his understanding of mestizaje struck a chord in people such as Elizondo, for it seemed to reflect much of their experience. Elizondo grew up in Texas–in his case, in San Antonio—and was repeatedly told that he was a Mexican. But when he was finally

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able to visit Mexico, he discovered that there he was considered a foreigner. So, out of the experience of being a mestizo, combined with his studies on the social and cultural conditions of first-century Galileans, he proposed the notion of mestizaje as a fundamental hermeneutical paradigm for understanding, first, Scripture, then, all of theology, and finally all of human history.

Latinas and Latinos resonate to Elizondo's experience of mestizaje. Many use that very term. Others speak of living in the hyphen—in the hyphen between Mexican and American, Cuban and American, and so on. Others use the Nahuatl word Nepantla, which means "the land in between." But whatever word one might use, and in spite of their various nuances, these various approaches acknowledge that we are a mixed people, and in-between people, a mestizo people.

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As a historian, I must begin by affirming that when one looks at my own field of the history of Christianity from this perspective there are many questions that might be asked. To begin with, why is it that we devote so much attention—and deservedly so—to Luther's stance at the Diet of Worms, and yet seldom hear of the massacre of Tlatelolco, just a few months later? Is it not true that the jury is still out as to which of the two will have more far-reaching consequences? Why is it that in so many theological curricula the adiaphoristic controversy among Lutherans is part of church history, while the controversy over the Chinese rites in the Catholic Church is generally ignored? Could it be because the latter is on the wrong side of the fence?

Or look at Augustine and his theology. There are literally thousands of books on Augustine. All you need to do is visit the YDS library to see quite a few of them. Many tell us about his early life, his mother Monica and his father Patricius. A few mention the fact that Patricius was a minor Roman official, and Monica was a Punic or African. But you will have difficulty finding many that analyze how the interplay and at times conflict between the Roman heritage and the African are reflected in Augustine's own life and theology. Monica herself, firmly convinced of the faith she had probably received from her African ancestors, wanted her son to be a Christian as she understood that faith; but, as so often happens in a context of mestizaje where one culture is dominant, she also wanted her son to be as much of a Roman as possible. To what degree was the role of Ambrose in Augustine's conversation that Ambrose allowed Augustine to see that it was possible to be a Christian like his African mother and still be also a Latin thinker and rhetorician in the best of Roman tradition? When it comes to the Donatist controversy, can one see the interplay between Roman and Punic views on authority and its source? And in the Pelagian controversy, when his opponents called Augustine the "African Aristotle," was this pure senseless invective, or was there a reason for it? What in Augustine's anti-Pelagian view reflects his African heritage? In other words, even though we seldom hear of it, Augustine was a mestizo theologian, and his theology is a mestizo theology.

Why is it that seldom—if ever—do we hear or read about all of this, and that it is not used as a hermeneutical tool to read Augustine's works? Could it be that most interpretations of Augustine are written from a side of the fence where the interpreter's culture is dominant, and

where therefore the nuances of mestizaje are easily overlooked? What would Augustine and his theology look like if they were interpreted through the lens of mestizaje?

Or take the experience of being severed from your roots by a fence, an impassable border—in other words, the experience of exile, be it political, economic, or, most likely, both. Obviously, the experience of exile was crucial in the formation of the faith of the Hebrew people, and became a paradigm for many early Christians as they sought to understand their life and role in an alien and inhospitable society. We know this, and we write about it. And yet, when it comes to the history of theology we tend to ignore it.

Take John Calvin, for instance. We all know about his exile. But do we? If you do a search in the internet for “Calvin” and “exile,” you will find thousands of references to the period when he had to leave Geneva, and which he spent mostly in Strasbourg. Certainly, Calvin’s sojourn in Strasbourg, and the impact of Martin Bucer while he was there, are an important chapter in Calvin’s theological development. He actually tells us that this was a happy time—partly because it was there that he met his wife, and partly because he dreaded returning to Geneva.

But what authors generally tend to forget, or to mention only in passing, is that in Geneva itself Calvin was an exile. He was never at home in Geneva, and did not become a Genevan citizen until quite late in his life, five years before his death. His French was not exactly the same as that of Geneva. (Actually, one could even say that he had to learn how to count, for the names

of numbers were and still are different in Genevan French). Some of the most influential people in Geneva felt that the main reason why they had to suffer him was that this was politically correct in their relationship with other Swiss Protestants. People in Geneva complained bitterly about the influx of immigrants from all over Europe, but particularly from France. We have records in which Clavin is pejoratively called "that Frenchman."

How is his condition of exile reflected in Calvin's theology? In response to that question, the first possible example that comes to mind is Calvin's insistence on the role of the Law of God for the ordering of society. Historians and theologians have long pointed to the difference between Luther and Calvin in this regard. Obviously, what we have here is a matter of different emphases, and not one of absolute disagreement. Calvin agrees with Luther that the Law has been given also for the proper ordering of society. LIke Luther, he would say that Christians ought to obey civil authority. Even tyrants ought to be obeyed, for their authority comes from God. But then this lawyer, this heir of a type of theology where law and order were supreme, makes a notable exception. In the very last paragraph of the *Institutes* he wrote words that would change the course of human history:

> But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will all desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commandments ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted … And how absurd would it be that in satisfying men you should incur the displeasure of him for whose pleasure you obey men themselves! The Lord, therefore, is the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed.

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These words would soon make royal scepter falls, crowned heads topple, and new nations be born. Even though often forgotten when Calvinists were actually in power, these words resounded throughout much of the history of the Reformed tradition. Their echoes would still be heard in Germany in the Barmen Declaration of 1934, and to this day in the United States in the sanctuary movement.

On the other hand, the insistence that there is a Law of God above every human law means that there is no place for anarchy. Even when a human government has been toppled for good reason, there is still the Law of God that must be obeyed. (One wonders if Calvin would have said that revolutions are sometimes necessary, but that they must always be conducted decently and in order!).

Obviously, there are many reasons why Calivn took his well-known stance in relation to the Law of God and its function in the civil order, and those reasons must be taken into account in any fuller discussion of Calvin’s view regarding the Law. But I would suggest that one of those many reasons was precisely the fact that he was an exile.

This may be clearly seen in his *Commentary on Daniel*, which begins with a dedication to believers in France in which Calvin expresses both his condition as an exile and the responsibility he feels for his native country. He says:

> Although I have been absent these six-and–twenty years … from that native land which I own in common with yourselves, and whose agreeable climate attracts many foreigners

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> … yet it would in no way be pleasing or desirable to me to dwell in a region from which the Truth of God, pure Religion, and the doctrine of eternal salvation are banished, and the very kingdom of Christ laid prostrate! Hence I have no desire to return to it; yet it would be neither in accordance with human nor divine obligation to forget the people from which I am sprung, and to put away all regard for their welfare. (*Comm. on Daniel*, Dedicatory epistle)

And then, commenting on Daniel's refusal to obey the king, Calvin goes on to say:

> Since, therefore, Daniel could not obey the king's edict without denying God, … he did not transgress against the king … The fear of God ought to precede, that kings may obtain their authority. For if any one begins his reverence of an earthly prince by rejecting that of God, he will act preposterously, since it is a complete perversion of the order of nature. Then let God be feared in the first place, and earthly princes will obtain their authority if only God shines forth … For earthly princes lay aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. (*Comm. on Daniel*)

Calvin knew by experience that kings could be tyrants, and that the church could also fall into the hands of tyrants, that the Genevan Council served other interests than the Law of God. This was the reason why he began developing what eventually became the Presbyterian form of government. On the political side, that was the reason why he left France. In Geneva, he constantly fought with a civil government of which he and other exiles like him could never be part. In such circumstances, the law of the land is relativized. In France, Francis I cannot have the last word. And in Geneva, the Small Council cannot have the last word. The last word belongs to God alone, and the exile and the excluded can always have recourse to its authority.

Quite often theologians and other academicians cannot understand why the Latino Christian community puts so much store on Scripture. I would suggest that, as in the case of Calvin, one reason is that the authority of Scripture, reaching beyond the authority of local governments

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and local customs and prejudices, provides a point of support for those who must live as aliens in an alien land —or, even worse, as aliens in their own land.

It is also for this reason that biblical hermeneutics is so central to Latino and Latina theology. Here again, what we are trying to do is to learn to read Scripture, not just as we were told to read it from the green side of the fence, but also as it looks from our side of the fence. In so doing, we are convinced that we can enrich the understanding of Scripture not only for ourselves, but also for people of good will at the other side of the fence.

On this point, dozens of examples could be given. Allow me to offer a few, as time permits.

1. Bronx. Sabbath commandment.
2. Saul/Paul. Acts 13. Mission and mestizaje. Hellenistic Jewish Christians.
3. Members of the body. 1 Corinthians.

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All of this, and much more, is seen from the brown side of the fence. And so, as a good Methodist, I close with an invitation: Will you come and look with us? You may learn something from the brown side of the fence!