Virgilio

Dr. Justo L. González

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As I reflect on the theme for this afternoon, and on what I know of Virgilio's theology, there are two points I would like to raise for our discussion and for our conversation with Virgilio.

First point: In the essay I wrote for *Beyond Borders*, I began by commending the framers of that volume for their insight into Virgilio's theology, in joining under a single heading “sin, forgiveness, and the experience of God.” I commended them, because it seemed to me that in putting these themes together they were being true to Virgilio's own insight that the clearest revelation of God comes to us in the experience of forgiveness. This is different from the more traditional approaches of Origen or Peter Lombard, who begin with the doctrine of God, supposedly quite apart from human experience…

I still think what I said in the essay in this regard is true.

But in rereading what I wrote, it seems to me that there is another aspect of Virgilio’s theology that must also be underscored. We have all heard Virgilio reminisce about his childhood, about his family’s store, about his daily life and daily chores as a child, about the religious dimensions of daily life, and in his own unique way tell us how he has experienced God in these.

I believe it is important to underscore this too, because part of what I find attractive in Virgilio's theology is the manner in which he relates creation and redemption.

Protestants, particularly ultra-Calvinistic Protestants, have often exaggerated the discontinuity between creation--emphatically fallen creation—and redemption. In contrast, Catholic theology has tended to emphasize the continuity between creation and redemption, perhaps to the point that the fallenness of creation is obscured.

Virgilio, however, exemplifies a different approach. For him, there is clearly a continuity between creation and redemption, between culture and gospel, between daily life and the experience of salvation. And yet, this does not mean that he underestimates the fallenness of creation, the sinfulness embedded in every culture, the abominations of the existing order.

So, the first point I would like to explore with Virgilio himself and with his friends gathered here is whether this may be part of what he means when he declares himself to be, as I quote in my essay, a “protestant Catholic.”

Secondly, I would like to explore further the connection between mestizaje and Virgilio's views on forgiveness.

One of the ways in which I have experienced my own mestizaje is the need for healing and forgiveness within myself. As I was growing up in Cuba, and studying the history of our country, we hardly ever spoke of mestizaje. We simply experienced an unspoken and undefined rift within ourselves.

I remember, for instance, studying the early history of the conquest, and being outraged, as we were intended to be, by the practices of the conquistadores. I was in second grade when we first studied the "matanza de Caonao," where Panfilo de Narvaez and his soldiers accepted the hospitality of a town, and in the middle of the celebration drew their swords and killed all the inhabitants. Our first great national hero was Hatuey, the brave chieftain from Hispaniola who crossed over to Cuba to organize resistance against the Spanish, and who was burnt at the stake as a heretic, even though he had never been baptized. For us, the "good guys" were the Indians.

And yet, we were also taught not to identify with these good guys. When my classmates wanted to insult me, they gave me nicknames having to do with my Indian features. When some foreign politician declared that Cubans were "indios con levita"–Indians wearing suit jackets–we were all incensed.

When we studied the history of Cuba, we identified with the Indians and did not want to be Spanish. When we studied literature and the history of "civilization," we identified with the Spanish and did not want to be Indian. Both of these within the same school day.

Then there were other, secondary “mestizajes.” I went to a bilingual school where in the morning we were taught, in English, about the wonders of the United States, about the values of democracy, and about how the economic progress of this country was the result of the hard work and the creativity of the American people. Then in the afternoon we were taught, in Spanish, about the repeated interventions of the United States in Cuban affairs, about the constant undermining of democracy in order to achieve better conditions for capital investment, about unequal and unfair trade practices. I would hurry up and do my homework during recess, so that after school I could stop at the movies. There I would see cowboys fighting Indians. At the time of my youth, still the cowboys were always the good guys, and the Indians usually bad or at least misguided. So, I cheered when the US cavalry appeared, even though a couple of hours before I felt like booing the US Marines!

Two or three evenings a week, I would go to church. On Wednesday nights we had a Bible study led by a North American missionary who spoke Spanish with a terrible accent and who slaughtered the grammar. But he spoke God's truth. And so God spoke to us in broken Spanish, and seemed to be telling us that it would be better to listen in English. On Friday nights, often after having seen one of those cowboy-and-Indian movies, we had our youth meeting, which we ourselves directed and controlled. There we complained among ourselves about the role of missionaries in the church, about the fact that practically all our hymns were translated, and many similar issues.

Thus, what Virgilio calls “mestizaje” was our daily experience. Except that we did not call it “mestizaje.” Using a typical Cuban phrase, we would call it “arroz con mango”—rice with mango, meaning a senseless and confusing mixture of things. Actually, perhaps “mestizaje” is too logical, too organized to serve as a sufficient description of our *arroz con mango*.

Such inner *arroz con mango* made it very difficult for us to be reconciled within ourselves. At different times and in different circumstances there was part of us that had to be denied.

As I read Virgilio, this is very close to the manner in which the experience of mestizaje relates with what he has to say about an experience of forgiveness so radical that it forces us—even while not forgetting—to forgive even the oppressor and the victimizer.

I would hope that part of our discussion centers around the issue of the relationship of mestizaje with the manner in which forgiveness is experienced, and what this means for our own capacity to forgive.