
IDENTITY, GOD-TALK, AND SELF-CRITICAL REFLECTION IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM A LATINO/A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Latino/a theology and experience have contributed rich resources about our relationship with God and one another. Examination of these resources across and within diverse racial ethnicities helps us examine the universally accepted claims on God. In this essay, I will offer from my particular Latina perspective ways I believe Latinas/os contribute to a dialogue about effective religious leadership in our current multiracial and multilingual society. My focus is on identity in relation to how we define and know God, and how this in turn shapes our relationships with God and one another in ways that inform our faith practices.

Identity, God-talk, and Self-Critical Reflection in Religious Leadership

What makes a good leader and good leadership? Most of us know a good leader when we experience one but find it difficult to articulate how to gain that same ability. Leadership is about experience—we learn by doing. However, experience that is not critiqued is unable to teach and correct bad habits. For this reason, seminaries with theological field education programs such as the one where I teach provide several layers of feedback sessions with laity and clergy to help students gain the most from their experience.

Religious leadership, in its assessment of ministry relationships and contexts, must self-reflect about how it embraces the Divine. Hidden from our conversations

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about religious leadership is how our early theological understanding of the Divine's nature and relationship to Creation is shaping and informing our leadership practices. I propose that religious leadership is effective to the degree that it can engage the community in a collective, self-critical theological reflection as a spiritual discipline, from which emerges an ongoing discernment of our theological assumptions of God. These assumptions shape our relationships and our Christian ethics.¹

Since religious leadership is distilled within the chaos of our lives together, it is important for leaders to understand how identity shapes the faith questions we ask and how we answer them. These questions evoke a re-examination of values, beliefs, and practices. To that end, each challenge before a congregation or community should be guided by these questions: "Who is God? How do I come to this knowledge of God? What is suppressing the reign of God that Jesus taught?" Our identity, context and experience shape our responses. For example, I respond to these questions from the lens of a Latina low-income immigrant, navigating two cultures while experiencing power and powerlessness simultaneously within social realities. Yet I am also shaped by the evolution from that initial label to other identities, never having lost sight of the original lens. I am also Protestant, clergywoman, and middle class, with various levels of power and powerlessness in my current socio-religio-economic relationships. This self-description implies multiple identities and relationships that no doubt inform how I may respond to these questions. The same is true for all of us.

Each group uses its particular identity lens to construct answers to the questions, "Who/where is God?" Awareness of our particular identity lens, however, is insufficient to allow us to understand how we

¹ Mayra Rivera, "God and Difference," in *Building Bridges, Doing Justice*, ed. Orlando O. Espin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 41.

come to know God. We must intersect knowledge of power dynamics inherent in these identity relationships and lenses. Awareness of the Caucasian ethnic/racial identity's powerful status as the privileged "universal" or "objective" lens of the God questions is critical. This awareness illuminates how our conceptual notions about God are interrelated historically as a result of the colonization and missionary movements, regardless of whether we claim them.

Religious leadership in a multiracial world, therefore, needs to understand how the historical theology of the evangelical missionary movements and its pervasive dominance shapes and forms the identity of the mainline denominations as well as the faith cultures they evangelized. Even when we do not bring this reality into focus, we are affected by one another. Since identity is defined within the context of relationships with others and God, religious leaders must take note of how "identity is always constructed in relation to others. We cannot understand ourselves without listening to others, especially those we have oppressed or have the potential to oppress."² Power relationships within identity formation, including faith identity, inform how we come to understand God and shape the leadership we offer.

Without attention to power in identity formation and in relationships, religious leaders will be unable to reveal what is in need of transformation. Instead, the universal acceptance of the dominant, Eurocentric God-talk as unchangeable, pure, and unaffected by our own multiple identities and hybridity as a human race will make us unable to identify *kyriarchy* (interconnected, interacting, and multiplicative systems of domination and submission), and its practices. My childhood church (1960–1978), *Primera Iglesia*, began with a mission church's identity of "daughter congregation" to a very large, "silk-stocking," southern U.S., Caucasian

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Feminist Theology and Imagination* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2005), 60.

congregation, not far from us geographically but very far from us socioeconomically. The church's theological identity was formed by the theology of its founding pastor and his successor, who established the church in his eleven-year tenure. These leaders were both Cuban pastors trained in the mainline Protestant denomination seminary funded by the U.S. church in Havana and mentored in the evangelistic theology that characterized the Protestant missionary movement. They did not critique how their brand of Christianity was infused with Western values and cultures. They accepted the Eurocentric evangelism that suppressed indigenous expressions of faith and made no effort to discover God through the Caribbean and Central American approach to life with humor, ingenuity, dance, and music. These two formative pastors taught the colonized expression of God as unchanging, pure, and androcentric. The church's Latin American indigenous faith expressions were conformed to fit into the U.S. denominational forms if they were allowed at all. More often than not, worship order was a translation of its U.S. church's style and hymnody, as was our polity, doctrine, and Sunday School teaching. *Testimonios, coritos, vigili*as (testimonies, choruses, prayer vigils), were fit into this overall Eurocentric theological framework of God.

This expression of God was the unifying force to a membership, a multiracial Central American diaspora living in the southern United States. Such expression was helpful in that it unified people, but it did not challenge the economic, cultural, and political institutions that pressed our daily lives, nor did it question women's subservience to men. It was not transformative. Instead, this expression of God flattened these institutional forces pressing on our lives and placed them out of reach of the Gospel's interrogation. Even though this expression unified us in the world of the *Americano*, and brought us together as one family, *hermana/o*, it prevented us from seeing ourselves and our experiences as legitimate contributions to the knowledge of God. Yet, in spite of

this limited theological framework, our congregation implicitly and subversively began to offer new God-talk.

How do we Latinos/as come to new understandings of God and practices? De la Torre and Aponte offer “the process of discovering truth,” as the Latinos/as’ definition for epistemology.³ They go on to say that our process for discovering truth is based in doing theology, *orthopraxis*, rather than developing abstract philosophical principles. For Latinas/os, the “starting point for praxis is found in the location, time, and experience of a particular people,” and, for them, “doing theology as changing the structures of oppression.”⁴

A good example is my childhood congregation’s evolution. As we as a church grappled with our identity in relationship to the social and economic shifts in the 1960s and 1970s (the Vietnam War, the War Against Poverty, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Equal Rights Amendment), we began to see God at work differently. Our collective theological reflection through the piety of *vigilias* and *testimonios* began to voice the pain of our boys in the Vietnam War and to ask for justice for people of color. This voicing led to new practices such as ordaining women, standing in solidarity with our Afro-Latino/a members, and embracing indigenous art and music forms as legitimate centers of worship. Our new faith practices ran counter to our sister Caucasian Baptist churches’ position. We knew that God was not only among us in our travails—in the words of Isasi-Diaz’s women, “*la lucha es la vida*,”⁵ documented in her book *Mujerista Theology*—but also that God’s love/freedom was found in our multiple and complex relations with one another. We intuited God in the freedom from restrictions and labels that we experienced, moving us

³ Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 72.

⁴ De La Torre and Aponte, 73.

⁵ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

forward and inward, closer to God and to one another. Our church at this moment in its history was a good example of Aponte and de la Torre's understanding of epistemology and doing theology.

Michelle Gonzalez correctly points out that Latinas also emphasize location, time, and experience.⁶ Their starting point is the location, time, and experience of Latina women. Latinas, like Aponte and de la Torre, are also concerned about right practice and transformation. Latinas, both in ministry and in the academy, self-identify differently. On the whole, as Mayra Rivera asserts, "Like Latin American liberation theology, Latino/a theology affirms that God-talk has direct implications for sociopolitical realities and seeks not merely to describe those realities, but also to transform them."⁷

As Gonzalez summarizes, some Latinas identify themselves as feminists, others as *evangélicas* and others as *mujeristas*.⁸ In my childhood congregation we were simply *mujeres Cristianas*, having no other words that seemed to fit. This varied self-identification reflects the diversity that exists among all Latinas who, together, create a fuller understanding of God's identity in relationship with humanity. These different identities, however, share a methodology that begins with the daily life, struggle, and faith of women. It is in the day-to-day toil of living and trying to make sense of that life that Latina feminists, *evangélicas*, and *mujeristas* begin their theological thought. They all assert that our day-to-day experience (daily living), by definition includes the private and public realms,⁹ as well as all of our institutional relations—social, religious, political and economic. By beginning with the Latina women's experiences, they attempt to

⁶ Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Latina Feminist Theology: Past, Present and Future" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25 (1) (2009): 152–153.

⁷ Rivera, 30.

⁸ Gonzalez.

⁹ Gonzales, 153.

liberate the Christian faith from the limitations of the power dynamics that oppress women.

Embedded in the larger story of my Latino/a congregation's theological and ministerial discernment is my congregation's women's story that in some ways reflects Gonzalez' description of the Latinas' work in the academy. The women of our church were (are) a strong force of creative energy for the church and our families. We raised money for missions and our church building and staffed the educational program while we navigated two cultures and languages to provide for our families here and abroad. We advanced ourselves educationally through English classes and/or higher education at great sacrifice economically. God was our daily companion and our source of hope and courage. God was the one who was *abriendo camino* (trailblazing a path), of hope for a future beyond homemaking and poverty, so a hierarchal God that placed husbands (sometimes abusive), brothers, and uncles over us did not make common sense. The God we knew was a God who opened doors of possibilities and who spoke to us directly in our prayers and through worship. We believed what our church taught—that God created us in the Divine's image and called us to surrender our lives to Christian ministry. My mother's generation claimed the power of their Christian faith to serve and to lead in new ways. Supported by a male pastor and leaders who also were discerning new God-talk, my mother's generation became ordained deacons who were unanimously accepted and joyfully received without any hint of resistance. Growing up in the United States and in this church, my generation of young women was encouraged to lead in Christian education, youth ministry, and other roles often given to young males. Two of us were supported to enter seminary for ordination. In so doing, our Latino/a church was out of step from its Caucasian denomination when it moved to embrace a God whose strength was not diluted by the female preacher.

In spite of this collective spiritual discernment that God among us was creating a new understanding of how

men and women relate to each other and how God relates to men and women, our faith and culture held on to some aspects of androcentric religion. For example, the role of the pastor was clearly the male role, even if women were ordained and allowed to preach from the pulpit occasionally. The role of the male as head of the household as God-ordained was also conceptually unchanged, even while it was significantly softened in practice and no longer explicitly preached. Women were expected to continue with all the regular caregiving duties while the men's role in the household remained the same. The word *feminista* was unacceptable in spite of the embrace of women in leadership—we were *mujeres Cristianas empoderadas* (empowered Christian women), within an overall male-led hierarchy, headed by God.

The tenuous theological shift towards a new God-talk collapsed when, several years later, the church called a new male pastor. His agenda was to “set the church straight” by eliminating all women from prominent leadership roles and demanding complete obedience to him, the God-ordained leader. The congregation was unable to differentiate itself from his powerful voice in order to continue to think self-critically about his imposed theological change. While there was resistance, it ultimately succumbed to his patriarchal (and *machista*), God-talk that privileged males. His religious leadership de-valued collective theological discernment. In spite of this disappointment, many women, girls, and men who were part of the congregation at this time experienced a shift in their own God-talk, and some sought other places where women and men could serve equally. Out of this group, some chose congregations that were not as strict in defining gender roles yet retained the God-talk that privileged males along with a God that remained distant, “pure,” and unconcerned with the power dynamics of human relations. Others simply gave up on the church.

God-talk is rooted in the relationship we have with God, and our relationship with God is perceived through the lenses, experiences, and contexts that form our identity. The question, then, is what type of relationship

do we have with a God whose nature/essence cannot relate to our own complex identities? And how does our God-talk influence our religious leadership?

The work of Virgilio Elizondo and other Latino/a theologians on *mestizaje* has allowed Latinos/as to embrace our mixed-race identity (*criollo*, *mestizo*, *mestizaje*, *mulatto*), and offers other racial, ethnic groups the opportunity to do the same. Such work allows us to understand our hybridity as a gift and, thanks to the recent work of Mayra Rivera, weakens the myth of purity. It liberates all of humanity to experience God as intimately connected to our multiple identities and eliminates socially constructed racial and ethnic boundaries from our human relations. It allows us to understand that to be Caucasian is to have mixed ethnicities and linkages to the African continent and exposes the fault lines of the dominant, Western God-talk of purity that keep us distant and apart from the Divine. The Latino/a contribution that embraces this hybridity can help us see how the embodied God—Jesus—is a hybrid between the Divine and the human in all its rich multiple identities. It challenges the belief that the Divine seeks to be separated from our human, complex identities.

God-talk—how we approach and know God—is at the center of my perspective on religious leadership because it is based on our relationship to God and to others. Our rich Christian faith teaches us that God’s power is revealed in the Divine love that embodied the human form to be in relationship with creation. Ironically, the most difficult thing for humanity is to be in relationship, because individually and collectively, we are not at peace with our multiple identities and relationships. Our ability to know ourselves is bound to how well we are in relationship with one another; and our ability to know God is affected by the shape of our relationships with one another. It is impossible to “choose” to know God outside of our identity context or outside of the web of our relationships, even when we are blinded to their influence.

The danger of identifying God as a deity that is unchangeable, sees secular as profane, and is out-of-reach in purity is that this God makes room for humanity to justify dominance over ethnic racial groups in the search for a pure race in emulation of this Divine. This God allows for the justification of dominance over women or “female-gendered” persons and perpetuates the preeminence of the male and of a pure racial identity that does not exist. Why, then, are we quick to negate the presence of God within our multiple, complex identities and relationships and, instead, cling to an approach to God as pure, unchanging, and separate from our human experience? Theologian Kwok Pui-lan describes this lure to bring difference into a new “whole” well:

...the drive to “imagine the whole”—a unified country, an undefiled nation, an intact cultural tradition—is strong and often irresistible. It is a longing for what one has never possessed and a mourning of a loss one cannot easily name. It may also be a quest for certainty that one knows is not there! While I do not wish to undermine anyone’s desire for a meaningful whole, I want to caution against the enormous power of that desire—the lure to shape things into one, unified, seemingly seamless whole. While such a desire may have the positive effect of resisting the fragmented and disjointed experience imposed by colonialism, it may also lead to the danger of reification of the past and the collapse of difference from within.¹⁰

Latinos/as, in spite of our enormous contribution to the rich flavor of mixed races and identities, are also caught up in the lure for unity that Pui-lan describes and, at times, tend to “privilege unity...and reproduce exclusivist paradigms.”¹¹ Rivera’s challenge that “God-talk shall thus be faithful to and reflect the interhuman relationality from which it arises, respecting the

¹⁰ Kwok Pui Lan, 39.

¹¹ Rivera, 34.

heterogeneity and irreducibility of the divine and the human,”¹² releases us from the seductive grip for unity that has never existed in God nor in Creation. Rivera correctly critiques Elizondo’s “new race” as keeping in place a God who is absolute and beyond the human experience—a pure, distant God. By doing so, Elizondo fails to dislodge “the privilege given to pure origin, oneness...”¹³ Her question ricochets in my ministerial experience:

...can we subvert the privilege given to pure origin, absolute (but knowable), differences, oneness, and so forth, while claiming these to be the characteristics that define God? Doesn’t anything that we claim about God immediately become our greatest value and, if so, wouldn’t that reinscribe *mestizaje* as a fallen state rather than as the basic principle of reality?¹⁴

Privileging unity in God reinforces religious leadership that leads to exclusively separate faith practices under one church, privileges Eurocentric worship style over other optional “styles” that do not reveal God legitimately. This problem relegates our imagination for creating new faith practices to the label of “diversity” and does not change our God-talk; it strips away ethical imperatives for questioning how we construct our lives together in society.

Latinos/as’ theology and practices have the resources for God-talk that match what we intuitively experience when we embrace our *mestizaje* and hybridity, intra- and interpersonally; that experience bears witness that God is not outside of Creation. God is within Creation, including its historical, relational, political, and organic realities, while transforming them. God impels us to move beyond ourselves because God is not limited to one identity. A relational understanding of God’s

¹² Rivera, 37.

¹³ Rivera.

¹⁴ Rivera.

transcendence makes sense given our experiences of life. Mayra Rivera holds out the promise that Latinos/as offer:

...when Latina/o theologies' constructive project embraces images of a world infused by God and always open to that which is beyond (but not outside), itself, they may reclaim the complexity and dynamism subordinated by dominant depictions of the world. Indeed a relational theological anthropology—one that is embodied, relational, and unfinished—calls for a thoroughly incarnate theological vision that does not shy away from its irreducible multiplicity, where the divine embraces the particularity of bodies.¹⁵

We know intuitively that life is always changing. As human beings individually, and as part of Creation collectively, we are always becoming. Life is a process that is always interrogating our presuppositions and shaking the ground beneath us. The theology of God within humanity and Creation in relationship with each other affirms the root of our own transcendence beyond any imposed identities, socio-economic and political forces, and physical challenges that form our context. Sojourner Truth, Julian of Norwich, Oscar Romero, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and Martin Luther King, Jr., are good examples of religious leaders, lay and clergy, who have guided communities to God-talk and faith practices consistent with this theological understanding.

As religious leaders, it is important that we recognize how our Christian identity is inseparable from the shape we give to the reign of God, our witness. God-talk that inherently links all persons and Creation with the Divine affirms that we are neighbors, and *how* we are neighbors has already set in motion a dynamic process that is moving us collectively in a certain direction. Our religious and ethical leadership question is, "Will we participate with God to discover God's regenerative love in this

¹⁵ Rivera.

process to transform powers that work against life?" The greatest and second commandments of Matthew 22:37–40 come into sharper focus under this light. Love for/of God is bounded to the love for/of our neighbor and for/of self; this love is transformative and dynamic. God's incarnation in Jesus reveals that the Divine chose an identity as secular, human, earthy, and hybrid, intersecting with patriarchy, imperialism, religious androcentrism, and economic class strata. In this form, God brought transformation. We, then, can become a part of God's transformation precisely because of our multiple identities and relationships.

Religious Leadership within Latino/a Congregations in the United States and Abroad

In spite of these contributions to identity, epistemology, and orthopraxis, many Latino/a congregations within the United States and abroad continue to embrace a theology that negates these contributions; congregations keep in place androcentric and *kyriarchal* understandings of God and of faith practices. I see various power dynamics at work within our identities and relationships. Both U.S. and Latin American churches cannot deny the historical evangelical missionary movements that infused Christian beliefs with U.S. cultural values as well as the influence of U.S.-Latin American political and economic relationships. Latino/a congregations also navigate their mainline denominations' powerful resources and accompanying ambivalence between celebrated diversity and subtle institutional racism. Additionally, Latino/a congregations are bound by how U.S. socio-political-economic realities separate them (and other racial, ethnic groups), into exclusivist identity labels.

These challenges, however, do not have the last word. The hope for transformation, in my ministry experience, thankfully resides in God's love *for* and relationship *with* humanity that beckons us to transcend these power dynamics. An example is my experience with *La*

Fraternidad de Bautistas de Cuba, a new Baptist denomination that was formed in the 1990s in Cuba. This group was able to engage in self-critical theological reflection on their ministry context and on how God was working among them during and after the Cold War. They articulated a new understanding of God that embraced their indigenous concepts for life, art, the *criollo*, the *mulatto*, women, and men. They separated themselves from the historical Cuban Baptist denomination that was fused theologically, historically, politically, and culturally with its U.S. “mother” denomination. They desired an indigenous identity and created a fellowship that sought to equalize relations between women and men, *mulatto*, *negro*, socialist, communist, and Christian. In the 1990s, this fellowship recruited women for seminary and ordained them as pastors. New hymns and worship expressions were written that allowed for Cuban faith expressions. This group, influenced by the work of liberation theologians from Brazil and Peru, began community Bible studies that welcomed the people’s interpretation instead of top-down, doctrinal instruction. These grass-roots Bible studies breathed in a fresh understanding of God among the Cubans that included their hybridity, namely, multiple relations within their complex political and social context. I observed how their God-talk bypassed the desire for a false unity and strove instead to make a sacred space for the complexity of race, power, class, and gender that mirrored their own daily life and relationships.

The fellowship’s relationship with a progressive U.S. Baptist group is grounded in mutuality and partnership. Today in 2012, the fellowship faces many challenges to hold on to its theology and vision, in particular when it comes to maintaining equality for its women pastors within a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, it is a good example of religious leadership that explicitly engages its faith community in ongoing self-critical reflection of its theology and ministry practices with outcomes that have created an extraordinary ministry. Visiting and learning from this fellowship changed my own God-talk, allowing

me to embrace my bicultural Cuban-American lenses and perspectives that are forged *on the margin* to be *on the mark*.

My experience with the Cuban Baptist Fellowship contrasts that of my childhood Latino/a church in the United States. The absence of leadership sustaining collective self-critical conversations on the popular piety in my local congregation created a bifurcation between how we do theology (orthopraxis), and how we know God (epistemology). However, in the period during which our religious leadership opened us to discernment, we asked important questions and committed courageous acts of ministry that opened the space for a fresh revelation of God to breathe into our community. While we were unable as a community of faith to enact complete self-critique, we opened a door for many of us to think differently about how God was working among us and what Rivera describes as a “relational theology that is embodied, relational, and unfinished.”¹⁶

Postcolonial liberation theologians invite Latinos/as into a new form of theological reflection helpful to the Latino/a orthopraxis. For example, Joerg Rieger asks, “What if theology is understood as the *self-critical* reflection on the witness of the church...that creates room for an awareness of the respective blind spots, cover-ups and repressions of each of the modes without giving up the critical task of theology?”¹⁷ Self-critical theological reflection on the Christian witness opens the door to assess our Latino/a orthopraxis and our process for discovering truth as defined for us by Isasi-Diaz, Aquino, Martell-Otero, Gonzalez, De la Torre, and Aponte. This task requires discipline and mindfulness because it challenges us to question continually our comfortable assumptions about God and one another. We often fall short, even with our best intentions. I think of it as a spiritual discipline that we must diligently and

¹⁶ Rivera, 35.

¹⁷ Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 167.

patiently practice because our ability to discover God anew in our relationships happens organically. Most often, it is in retrospect or at the edges of extremely painful socioeconomic events that we find new eyes with which to see God as redeeming, guiding, evolving, and present/embodied in us. As I myself reflect on my own Latino/a church experience, I see how our collective discernment allowed me to see God with new eyes even when our collective self-critical theological reflection was painfully short-lived.

Wonderfully hopeful and shamefully painful is how I see God's transformative power at work *beyond the local congregation*. It reminds me that a blind religious leadership does not impede the work of the Divine. Immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala organizing in Dallas with whom I sometimes work do not relate to a particular Christian church, yet they have revealed to me and other religious leaders a clear historical analysis of the intersection of power, culture, and religion that has wrought havoc with the poor. Their fresh reading of our Christian texts regarding Jesus' ministry readily recognizes the collusion of the state's power and economic system to silence life-giving religion. Fresh from the power of El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero and Roman Catholic base communities in Central America, these immigrants see the weakness of our U.S. churches to enact change in spite of our financial wealth. They easily can tease out the influence of money, politics, and culture in faith communities that strips their power to enact true social change. Their assessment of our Christian congregations capture Jesus' indignation with the hypocritical Pharisees in Matthew 15:7, "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'" These immigrants fiercely claim that God relates with them, guides their work, and seeks mercy/justice for them. They speak loudly against sexism and other forms of oppression. God speaks through these voices found

outside of our traditional Christian communities to challenge us to engage in God's work for justice. As religious leaders they give us their eyesight from which to experience God and reach out to others.

Contributions to Religious Leadership

The Latino/a approach to theology as orthopraxis and the Latino/a comfort with multiple identities that impact God-talk are contributions to developing effective religious leadership in a multiracial world. The foundation for religious leadership must be rooted in guiding the faith community to tend to a *collective spirituality through self-critical theological reflection on identity, God-talk, faith, and ethical practices*. This self-critical work is a spiritual discipline and, like all disciplines, requires regular practice to bear fruit. In other words, religious leadership requires care for the soul that engages in this self-critical theological reflection. We must enter into this practice of self-critical reflection as a dynamic, spiritual discipline. Since God's Spirit is continually challenging, changing, and maturing us, "...remaining faithful involves a journey of continual conversion,"¹⁸ writes Marjorie Thompson in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. It seems to me that self-critical theological reflection makes sense as a spiritual discipline because to engage in theological reflection is to trust what the mystics long ago trusted: we are *capax Dei*, "capable of receiving and embodying divine life."¹⁹ Religious leaders must balance solitary and collective reflection carefully. Jesus went to the other side of the lake with his disciples to rest and to pray, and he also had some time alone. He also engaged the Samaritan woman and Syrophenician woman in heated debate that revealed God's *relationship* of grace *with* non-Jews.

¹⁸ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2005), 7.

¹⁹ Thompson, 8.

This type of self-critical theological reflection on our identity is countercultural because our churches have accepted the myth of unity. This acceptance occurs in spite of the reality that the United States is home to many faiths, races, and ethnic groups of diverse classes and political power, depending on each other socially, economically, and politically. Religious leaders of mainline denominations have been slow to look critically at their denominational identity to assess how it is informed by the “other,” those to whom they seek so zealously to minister: people who make up the lower economic and poverty classes of all races and ethnicities, and people who live on the streets. They have been slow to reflect self-critically on the imbalance of power and resources that keeps leadership from authentic mutuality despite years of cross-racial dialogue and cultural diversity celebration. They keep in place Eurocentric faith practices under the guise of democratic power sharing. Also, Latinos/as in denominational leadership roles likewise have been slow to self-critique about how our own identity is related to those with vulnerable economic and political power. We too have been slow to move away from androcentric religion, leaving Latina leaders as expendable in the struggle for a place at the table. This problematic lens demonstrates how androcentric God-talk of absolute oneness has not been transformed; what has been achieved is an optional racial/ethnic category that is easily marginalized. This situation begs many questions about how power, politics, and resources block our good intentions to listen attentively to the other—including women—so that we can learn how we still oppress and have the potential to oppress. This “blindspot,” as Rieger would phrase it, keeps us from the spiritual agility we need to recognize God’s transformation at work in groups who resist our denominations’ justification of the *status quo*. Challenging the blindspot also reminds us that as a spiritual discipline, collective self-critical theological reflection on identity takes root over time and after much practice. Hope abounds as long as the practice is faithful.

My own bicultural, bilingual lens and experience have taught me a great deal about how difficult it is to explore, embrace, and live into an identity that is complex, hybrid, and brought into multiple relationships all at once. I am not totally at home in Cuban nor in Latin American cultures when I have visited. Neither am I totally at home in the United States when I find myself in a completely Caucasian environment. I fit, but not quite. I am a hybrid of southern (U.S.), culture, and my Cuban orientation is fused with its relationship to my childhood Latin American cultural context. I have eyes and intuition about faith and social realities that are uniquely hybrid, and my dual language brings me closer to both. This hybrid orientation to life, identity, and faith helped me navigate, with a great deal of aid from mentors, family, and friends, the jarring external negation of who I was when I came face to face with an androcentric denomination at age twenty-nine. Since then, I have dealt with both wonderful affirmations and damning rejections from both Caucasian and Hispanic faith communities (outside of those who ordained me). Since I am a hybrid, people see me through their lens—I am Latino/a, I am Caucasian, I am middle class, I am feminist, I am *mujerista*—I can weave in and out of these identities. Yet, I feel always not truly known, and my value is relative. An example is the shocking experience I had when I encountered the anger of Caucasian feminists in a particular organization. We had a diversity workshop of sorts, and at their request, I risked offering the isolation that I experienced among them as I tried to articulate my hybridity/bicultural identity. I tried to honestly express how I had accented the American in order to feel acceptable, to the detriment of my Cuban and/or Latina identity. This disclosure was not well received, and I quickly learned how fragile my power (non-existent), was in those relationships. Since this occurrence was not my universal experience with Caucasian feminists, I was able to assess the power dynamics that were at play. I quickly realized that for these feminists, my critique touched at the heart of their self-identity as open, welcoming, and

inclusive. I challenged that self-identity in my exploration of my own self-negation in response to the culture's forces to subsume my biculturality as equal. Interestingly enough, I was quickly silenced and avoided. The same has been true on occasions when I have tried to articulate my experience of chauvinism or paternalism with both Caucasian and Latino males.

In my more recent work with interfaith dialogue between Muslim and Christian women, I see similar dynamics at work. Muslim women are being perpetually "saved" from or "labeled" about their own culture, out of a well-meaning intent from non-Muslim feminists. Yet, they are not allowed to articulate who they really are and how they might save themselves, nor how they have multiple identities among them. I have found that my leadership of the dialogue group has been helped by my own hybrid self-identity because I can more easily invite them to name themselves. I identify with them because of my experience with having labels ascribed to me. I can see how my current status/power in this culture shapes our relationship, and therefore our identities. I am sometimes viewed as suspect for embracing Muslim women, and my own identity status/power is made vulnerable. At the same time, I am acutely aware that I also gain status from my relationship with Muslims in certain circles and have the power to disabuse my interfaith relationships. Collective, self-critical theological reflection on these issues with the women in the dialogue group has been very helpful in this process of relationship, identity formation, and most important, transforming fears into friendships.

As a bicultural Christian Latina Protestant clergy, I have had varied experiences in ministry that include congregations, ministry with those involved in domestic violence, ministry with elders, interfaith dialogue, and emergency assistance to families. I have also ministered with Latino/a immigrants and African, Vietnamese, and Cambodian refugees. In these ministries I have had to assess how my identity is shaped by each of these groups. I have also had to step back to ask how my identity has

been shaped by U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean and in Central and South America. In stepping back, I have come to grips with the knowledge that my middle class comes with a great cost to sisters and brothers within and outside my country. That fact means I must ask how my current identity as a middle-aged, middle-class woman is also shaped by financial centers and my country's public policy. How is it shaped by the ministerial students I teach and the colleagues with whom I work and the expectations of a mainline denominational seminary? Most important, how is it shaped by my relationship with and understanding of the Divine and how the Divine is to be discovered?

Summary

I have made the case that religious leadership takes place within the context of identity and that we know ourselves only in relationship to one another and to God. I have also pointed out the importance of self-critical theological reflection for discovering our multiple identities in light of our human relationships and our relationships with God. Our ability to know ourselves and one another and to engage in self-critique of our identities shapes and forms our God-talk, how we know God, and consequently, how we then engage in faith practices and ethical decision-making. I have also attempted to show that a Latino/a process of discovering God and of engaging in orthopraxis contributes to how we may begin this work. Latino/a exploration of multiple, hybrid, and complex identities liberates us from seeking an elusive, pure identity for ourselves and for God. I have proposed that religious leadership is best approached as a spiritual discipline of self-critical theological reflection that is done collectively within faith communities.

I hope that the church where I am a member might dialogue with a Latino/a approach to relating with God and doing theology that transforms oppressive structures. This church is a long way from my childhood Latino/a

church in that it reflects the multiplicity of identities of our society in its membership instead of one (Latino/a), identity. In the early 1980s, this 108-year-old, Caucasian-founded mainline denominational congregation opened its doors to Cambodian refugees. It also created an ecumenical parish cooperative to provide social justice services such as a medical clinic and ministries to refugees, and welcome for multiracial and GLBT communities and, more recently, African refugee families.

Our pastoral leaders are three women of varying ages—a Caucasian senior pastor, an African associate pastor, and a Caucasian children and youth minister who has lived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We are exploring our complex relationships together, seeking to strive for mutuality as we acknowledge our different resources, power, and needs. We fear being misunderstood and defined by simple labels of white, African, gay, straight, lesbian, Latino/a, African American, wealthy, and poor. As we move forward together will we dare ask these questions of ourselves individually and in community: “Who benefits from a God who is unable to embody/incarnate our multiple identities and who remains reduced to one, simplistic, unchanging form? Are we suppressing God’s love embodied in humanity when we suppress God’s ability to be as complex as we are? Will we be able to move towards “the truth in the African proverb, ‘A person is a person through other persons?’”²⁰

A Latino/a approach for doing theology may help us to see God embodied in each of us in our trial-and-error attempts to create a community that transforms institutions (including how we think about God). Also, the Latino/a embrace of mixed identities—*mulatto*, *mestizaje*, *criollo*—within individuals and collectively may make it easier to embrace our identity as a collective

²⁰ Desmond Tutu, “Allies of God,” in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* 5 (1) (1990): 40.

global *mestizaje* united by faith in a relational, dynamic God. Finally, a Latino/a approach to religious leadership may help us move towards the dialogical task needed to help us create an authentic worshipping community and give us spiritual courage to self-critique unequal power dynamics in our democratic approaches to change. It also will help us resist the impulse to create unity at the expense of losing God revealed within our multiple identities. Most wonderfully, this dialogical task may help us claim God as heterogeneous and therefore authentically accessible to us as we create heterogeneous worship and leadership practices.