Recognizing Diversity after Multiculturalism

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A new generation of Latino/a scholars is challenging older models of thinking about diversity, like multiculturalism, in order to promote a pastoral theology that recognizes the authentic witness of U.S. Latino/a Catholics as an intrinsic good in the church and addresses their daily needs more adequately.

¡Otra vez! ("Not this again!") That was my exasperated thought when I read John Allen's *reportage* on the treatment of cultural diversity at the 2007 annual meeting of The Catholic Theological Society of America:

> A spirited presentation on the first day by Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago . . . was worth the price of admission all by itself. Among other things, she argued that a decision by the bishops to consolidate ethnic minorities in the American church under the single heading of "cultural diversity" amounts to a "Hallmark card ecclesiology."

Allen seems to have gotten a real scoop on U.S. Hispanic Catholicism. Nanko-Fernández, an Hispanic theologian from the Bronx, had raised a seemingly new question. At another point in the same meeting, Nanko-Fernández intervened with

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this remark: "We are not your diversity!" Here her "spirited presentation" was targeted not just at a decision of the bishops but also at the CTSA membership. All in all, it seems that an exotic angle on the topic of Catholic diversity was being disclosed.

In fact, however, no new ground was being broken. In an article published in 2006, Nanko-Fernández cited a meeting convened five years earlier by the Hispanic Affairs Committee of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. There reservations were already voiced "about 'multicultural' models that would consolidate minorities under one umbrella thus diluting the particular identities and visions of the absorbed ethnic ministries" (2006b, 89). But the Latino/a critique of multiculturalism has an even earlier precedent than the intervention from 2001. Both Nanko-Fernández and the Latino bishops who raised initial objections to the multicultural approach were repeating a point made cogently by Orlando Espín in 1993. Espín was invited in 1993 by The Catholic University of America to speak at a conference on "The Multicultural Church." Espín set an agenda whose importance has increased due to the failure of Catholics to look critically *and* with a due sense of proportion at the model of multiculturality itself.

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At the 1993 event Espín was the only Latino academic asked to give a plenary. (The eloquent and now deceased bishop Enrique San Pedro, S.J., also made an important intervention.) Espín chose to challenge the premise upon which the conference was organized. Espín drew upon a plethora of social theorists including Antonio Gramsci and other Hispanic and Latin American theologians such as Virgilio Elizondo and Roberto Goizueta. He insisted that "multiculturality hides the fear of and inability to deal with cultural diversity" (63). Cultural diversity is a fact of Hispanic existence, he said. Espín then argued that the very idea of building a "multicultural church" is based upon a view of "equality" that inevitably seeks to dominate. He also noted that the Catholic Church had an older and still vibrant tradition of promoting diversity under the rubric of "catholicity," which is certainly a more traditional and arguably a more flexible starting point for dealing with the hardly new question of the rich presence of diversity in the church.

Nanko-Fernández's and Espín's points seem more relevant than ever. Latino/a theologians have for some time argued that multiculturalism can provide cover for anyone whose position of power would be severely restricted if authentic diversity were allowed to prevail. The opinions of Latino/a theologians on the matter vary,

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but it is clear that *some* significant Latino/a theologians and pastoral agents have pursued a critical analysis of the idea of multiculturalism.

In this essay, I will address three topics. In the first section, I explore a contemporary critique of multiculturalism and try to lay out the specific reasons why Latino/a theologians find themselves in solidarity with *certain* critics of multiculturalism. Second, I will argue that overcoming multiculturalism is not a return to a status quo in which the hegemony of a dominant group is reestablished. On the contrary, the critique preserves the ideal of diversity even while transforming the means for promoting it. The third part treats the question, "If not multiculturalism, then what?" Here I will lay out some practical steps that can be followed to preserve what is good and true in the multicultural agenda even while developing a new way to think about diversity in the Catholic Church.

Multiculturalism: A Philosophical Critique

The theory of multiculturalism is abstract and proliferates in environments shaped by impersonal forms of discourse and action. Even those who employ this discourse have noted its shortcomings. For example, the noted African American philosopher Cornel West expresses his ambivalence as follows:

> It's the language of bureaucrats. I recognize that I have to do battle at times under the banner of "multiculturalism" because of the nature of the attack and assaults on it from what we can call loosely "the Right." At the same time I don't want to accept "multiculturalism" because its seems to me to be an obscuring term, obscuring the deeper intellectual issues, such as what role professors play as cultural managers or cultural supervisors over the textual productions of any group. (127)

Multicultural agendas commonly use images that everyone can understand; the complexity of historical and cultural processes is not part and parcel of their standard idiom. Its critics commonly refer to this as its *proceduralism*. Simply put, this means that the theory places so high a regard on the processes to promote certain ends that the welfare of those whose identity is being promoted can get permanently lost in the shuffle (Appiah, 156–59).

The problem with multiculturalism can also be considered in terms of the origins of the idea. As a form of pedagogy, the idea is rightly seen as an essential by-product of the civil rights movement in the United States (McCarthy and Willis, 67–69). But key aspects of what became a form of political liberation in this country were forged in an earlier tradition of thought. Whether one sees the origins of the multicultural ideal against the background of recent U.S. political history or in the context of a European tradition is not the key point here. The main issue is

whether we can come to a better understanding of the intellectual origins of multi-culturalism so that it can be examined critically. The historical task has frequently been ignored by both the defenders and critics of the ideal.

According to Charles Taylor, the contemporary discussion of multiculturalism presupposes, often without an adequate definition, the emergence of a new politics of recognition. Taylor's analysis is rooted in the later stages of the European Enlightenment. He explains that in reaction to the concept of a rational individualism developed by mature Enlightenment thinkers in the mid- to late eighteenth century, a new understanding of authenticity emerged among idealist European philosophers of the nineteenth century. According to this development, we cannot fully become persons if our personhood is defined as that of an isolated rational agent. Rather, authentic personhood is engaged in dialogue, namely, entering into the struggle to define ourselves with and through others.

This dialogical ideal of personhood that Taylor develops—though not without its critics (see Bannerji)—presents a new way of facing genuine diversity of ethnic and racial groups. In the dialogical view, each group deserves recognition in the sense of being an authentic and *authentically recognized* participant in the wider conversation. From this initial impetus, one is not far from what is today called "multiculturalism." The logic of emotions introduced by European Romanticism is thus an ingredient in an unreconstructed account of multiculturalism precisely because the multiculturalist ethic appears not only to identify marginalized groups as participants but to invite them to *feel* a part of the total system or conversation. If Taylor is right in his study of the origins, then this would explain why multi-cultural agendas place so much emphasis on the self-expression of a group, sometimes behaving as if membership in the group automatically bestowed upon the individuals in the group a generic set of traits regardless of one's personal mode of participation in the collective identity. A good example of this latter phenomenon is the false assumption that blacks and Latinos/as have mutually exclusive agendas within a politics of identity even though a large portion of Latinos/as themselves belong to the African diaspora and vice versa. The agenda of multi-culturalism became associated with what is often derisively termed a politics of identity because a political case was being made for the rights of the group as such. If you were identified with the group, then you became the recipient of rights. The idea of a right being granted to a group is hardly illegitimate. What needs to be examined are the philosophical presuppositions behind the idea.

Two issues were never resolved in this transformation. The first concerned the problem of recognition, and the second has to do with the agency of the individuals in the underrepresented groups. In theory, multiculturalism was supposed to recognize the collective identity of underrepresented groups. But the theory was simply too vague on the details. For example, advocates of multicultural education and of similar forms of pastoral action in the domain of the church often speak about "making a place at the table" for groups that were ignored or suppressed.

The progress in terms of a discourse that acknowledges presence is undeniable. But recourse to metaphor and ineffective slogans is an inadequate substitute for the real recognition of achievements and a historically effective path to leadership. For this reason, Espín took the idea of a multicultural church to be an instrument of a false consciousness. In other words, the discourse of a multicultural church promotes real diversity only if it makes a difference in the everyday life of individuals in the communities being "brought to the table." What is meant by individual agency and identification with the community is a far more complex reality than the multicultural model seems to admit.

A comparable qualification of the politics of recognition is developed in the name of a Latino/a public theology by Benjamin Valentin. He foregrounds the local knowledge imbedded within popular religion and living discourse of communities that embody real *mestizaje*, a once-favored term by Hispanics to denote cultural diversity. For Valentin, popular religion is thus allowed to speak its own language. By arguing for "subaltern counterpublics of discourse" (drawing upon language forged by Gramsci), Valentin shows how Latino/a theologians can genuinely engage public discourse without having to reduce the struggle for justice as expressed in the highly symbolic language of Latino/a belief to the least common denominator of U.S. civil religion (117–40). Valentin recognizes that Latino/a theologians cannot retreat into the faith of our communities as if these were private enclaves. Nor can Latinos/as divine an impersonal set of abstract, collective rights and claim that these derive from the faith of the people without being able to say how we deduced these particular abstractions from the symbols that constitute popular religion.

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Valentin's proposal is provocative but should not be treated as the last word. One could still question the notion of a public theology defended by Valentin. I myself do not think that the category of the public by itself is necessarily a suitable antidote to the hidden language of privatizing faith in multicultural agendas; however, the critique of multicultural proceduralism in Valentin is certainly in line with the criticisms developed by Nanko-Fernández, Espín, and Taylor.

Besides the problem of recognition, the second issue concerns the question of agency. As a predominantly procedural strategy, multiculturalism puts more emphasis on processes than persons. As a product of a dominant form of discourse, the procedures are generally established by groups others than the underrepresented groups being recognized. Since persons in a multicultural ethics are

understood in terms of a collective rather than an individual identity, it is quite possible to develop a highly impersonal and abstract approach to the internally varied collectivities whose identity is being promoted. As already indicated, the problem here is not with the very idea of a collective identity (unless one wants to approach the question in terms of a strictly individualistic account of rights, as do conservative defenders of Latino/a assimilation like Gregory Rodriguez and Linda Chavez). The real problem lies in the separation of a model based on procedures (either multicultural ones or assimilationist ones) from history. The very logic of procedural multiculturalism is based upon a flight from history and, therefore, creates the illusion of remedies that can be solved by mutual support and good feeling about a fellow member of an organizational chart.

One obvious procedural solution to the Latino/a critique of multiculturalism is to put Latinos/as in charge of the administration of the procedural ideal. The Latinos/as put in charge of administering multicultural programs should not be stigmatized with the charge of being blind to the cultural processes that complicate the question of multiculturalism itself. In fact, they are often caught in a position not unlike that expressed in the quote from Cornel West cited above. They must defend the ideal even as they recognize its limitations. In the end, it matters little whether Latinos/as are put in charge of the processes if the processes themselves cannot be reviewed and evaluated in terms of their capacity to promote recognition and agency among Latinos/as (Nanko-Fernández 2006b, 95–96).

Real Diversity

Multiculturalism promoted the language of diversity but did not always succeed in dealing with the lived diversity of the Hispanic community. Several problems arise when Hispanic identity is reduced to an oppositional collectivity as that collectivity is understood in the multicultural model. Basically, multiculturalism extended the notion of an individual understood as a distinct bearer of a separate, isolated identity to a collectivity. The atomistic ideal of being separated and isolated—whether one is referring to the existence of an individual or a group—was never adequately questioned. The multicultural ideal thus tended to promote assumptions about Latino/a identity as monolithic and self-enclosed. Here I will treat just two of these issues that arise as a result of this shortsightedness: a failure to recognize the complex nature of Hispanic identity and a lack of attention to the emergent reality of Latino/a *mestizaje*.

The first problem concerns the issue of intra-Hispanic diversity and the liminal status of certain Hispanics once identity is treated as a self-evident, homogenous group. Many Hispanics, including myself, have surnames that come from European and other nationalities. From the standpoint of the bureaucracy of multiculturalism, this dynamic can be treated as a subclass of hidden Hispanics. Few people

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recognize that Raquel Welch and Martin Sheen are Hispanic. How many more "hidden Latinos/as" exist in this country? What about the countless Spanish-speaking *Caribeños* and *Caribeñas* of African descent? The size and character of the current Latino presence in the church may transcend categories that result from evidential processes such as polling data. Marriage and procreation are what change the visible shape of the church. In a certain real sense, what was once known as the "Hispanic presence" is a reality in constant flux. The only real certainty, ironically enough, seems to be its own persistence.

A second problem for Hispanics with regard to multicultural diversity has to do with the current tendency to treat Hispanic *mestizaje* or cultural blending as the basis for a multicultural model. In his 1993 talk at Catholic University, Espín contrasted the illusory construct of a multicultural church with the lived reality of *mestizaje*. The Spanish term refers to the unique mixture of colonial, indigenous, and new elements found in U.S. Latinos/as and has as one of its principal sources ideals of Mexican national identity that were forged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Virgilio Elizondo, a founder of U.S. Latino Catholic theology, popularized the term as a theological category in numerous publications that remain benchmarks of wisdom in Hispanic theology. The *mestizo* hopes of Latinos/as were regularly put forth as an alternative to the Euro-American notion of assimilation.

Now even that narrative has been subjected to severe criticism by a younger generation of Latinos/as. Without wanting to abandon the real and essential contribution of their predecessors, Jean-Pierre Ruiz and Carmen Nanko-Fernández have questioned the implicit assumption that cultural diversity be considered in isolation from racial diversity (Nanko-Fernández 2006b, 98–99). Others like the Canadian-Guatemalan Néstor Medina and the Cuban-American Michelle González Maldonado have confirmed that the older models of thinking based upon *mestizaje* fail to disclose implicit models of "whitening" the Latino/a population. The difference and relationship between Latino/a ethnicity and African American racial identity is a conversation well underway among the younger thinkers.

The criticism or even abandonment of a rhetoric of multiculturalism cannot lead to an abandonment of Latinos/as. On the contrary, individuals charged with the administration of academic and ecclesial entities need more than ever to recognize the authentic witness of the U.S. Latino/a experience of Christianity. Responsibility should be shifted to Latino/a leaders not just because of demographics as has

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been cogently agued by Nanko-Fernández (2006b) but also because of the intrinsic attractiveness of the Latino/a experience of God and the church. I turn in this final section to examine some reasons why the Latino/a presence might be recognized as an intrinsic good in a church and world that wants to promote real diversity.

After Multiculturalism

I conclude by stating three principles that the church and academy could foster to help Latino and Latina Catholics: leadership, agency, and cultural memory. These are just some of the building blocks needed to bring into being an emancipatory, and integral form of education for diversity that will serve multiple publics and avoid a narrow form of particularism (Valentin, 105–6). With these elements, I think it is possible to strive after what multiculturalism promised but failed to achieve. At the same time, the new vision that can be constructed out of these elements will represent a form of catholicity that finally put to rest the abstract proceduralism of the multicultural model. (While it is not essential to my argument to expunge the language of multiculturalism from the vocabulary of the church or world, I see no need to continue to use the term.)

The Latino/a approach integrates cultural values from within the community including the promotion of a culture of hospitality.

The first principle concerns *liderazgo*, which shares a root with the English term *leadership* even though it has a different, culturally defined meaning. As Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., has argued, *liderazgo* involves a broader dimension of pedagogy than "leadership training." The Latino/a approach integrates cultural values from within the community including the promotion of a culture of hospitality as well as the integration of popular devotions into the formation of the individual. Latinos/as from rural areas might not want to assimilate to the U.S. model of self-reliance. Latino/a participants in a communal ontology of leadership should not have to offer an excuse for seeking to embody Christian humility (Deck, 184–91). Pedagogies aimed at overcoming oppressive structures need to account for these genuine achievements of Latino/a culture without falsely assuming the individualism of North American models of leadership.

The question of agency is not resolved, I argued, by putting Latinos/as in charge of a multicultural system. The task of advancing a pastoral theology and/or educational model that promotes a Latino/a agency without falling prey to the twin dangers of multicultural proceduralism or the kind of particularism rightly ques-

tioned by Valentin thus becomes quite urgent. Roberto Goizueta has developed a Latino/a theory of praxis based upon a relative priority of the organic wholeness of the community over that of individual entities (see Deck, 186–87). Goizueta highlights the experience of accompanying Jesus, a corporate and symbolic act that displays an organic unity because of its startling, public particularity. Being part of the procession of a crucified Christ through the streets of San Antonio is a different mode of existence than that of being recognized as part of an abstract collectivity. Whatever system of thought emerges as the way to promote diversity after multiculturalism, it will have to be one that recognizes the freedom of Latinos/as to express their faith *and* their contribution to the wider society through symbolic action.

The Latino/a experience has a certain universal attraction because it ultimately resists all forms of instrumentalization and continues to provoke broader interest. The Latino/a experience of God, Christ, and the church (in and through its own internal diversity) is culturally fecund. Nanko-Fernández refers to a recognition of this open-ended process as the healing of cultural amnesia (2006a). Latinos/as are the first to forget their own history and bear a good part of the responsibility in this regard as well.

In the United States of the 1940s and '50s a Catholic Revival took place that became associated with literary figures and social activists such as Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and Flannery O'Connor (see O'Gorman). All of these figures had a profound sense of their local identity as well as a capacity to integrate faith and culture on the basis on their experience. The Catholic Revival of the 1940s and '50s in the United States spread partly because there was a sense that the traditions of the church offered something that was lacking in any other institution. Those conditions—if they existed in the first place—are gone. The Latino/a experience of today demands new, intercultural forms of reflection that address the plight of children in gangs who will never graduate from high school. At the same time, my fervent hope is that Latino/a Catholicism will grow and prosper for the same reason that Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Day continue to capture the Catholic imagination. Latino/a culture resides in our midst. As a cultural phenomenon in the United States, its regionality is of the past; today there is virtually no urban center in the United States without it. Will Catholics today recognize and promote this gift? That seems to me to be the perduring question left unanswered by the noble project of building a multicultural church.

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