Racism and God-Talk

A Latino/a Perspective

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Introduction

> Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.
>
> —John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

> The future begins in the dream of what could and ought to be.
>
> —Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*

The Fundamental Contradiction

The apostle Paul writes, "As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27–28, NRSV). Today's church, while recognizing that questions of ethnic identity in the ancient world differ greatly from modern conceptions of race, embraces Paul's eschatological vision of a community in which distinctions of race, class, and gender are transcended in Christ as a normative statement for understanding Christian identity. However, in the North American context, race consciousness plays a central role in the theological constructions of racially marginalized and oppressed communities. Given Paul's vision of God's kingdom defined by the breakdown of all distinctions and relationships of domination—no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—how do we make sense of ethnic particularity within the church's theological formulations?

The tendency toward group inclusion/exclusion at the intersection of two or more cultures has persisted throughout human history. Cultural identity, an intangible and fluid reality, often solidifies in response to threats to the unifying identity of a group, stimulating the formation of values and practices that maintain the "purity" of the social grouping. Since classical antiquity color difference has been an established category for defining group identity, distinguishing "us" from "them." Yet only in the modern period have these physiological differences been linked to certain moral and intellectual traits as part of a biologically distinct and inherited group identity. Shrouded in the taxonomical language of science, the categories "Caucasoid," "Negroid," and "Mongoloid," legitimated "real" (i.e., biological) differences between ethnic groups and established a hierarchy that valued the "white" European while devaluing and objectifying the dark-skinned "other" as demonstrated by the reluctance to sanction intermarriage.[1] Over time slavery became almost synonymous with blackness as the practice of using physical traits to differentiate the conquerors from the conquered became an accepted and essential part of the cultural matrix. While the Christian church was often a willing accomplice in this history of domination and submission, many voices of resistance and transformation have arisen from within this tradition, such as those of Bartolomé de Las Casas during the Spanish conquest of the Americas and the church-led abolitionist movement in the antebellum United States. Despite the advances of the civil rights movement, we continue to live in an age of racial disparity. As a religious body that embraces the breakdown of all relationships of domination in God's kingdom, the church must draw upon its own traditions of resistance to effectively counter racism.

In an effort to support the church's critical self-examination, this book explores the biblical and religious dimensions of North American racism while highlighting examples of resistance within the Christian religious tradition. The Bible—a complex collection of documents from various sources reflecting a multiplicity of social, historical, and cultural locations—lends itself to many, often contradictory, interpretations. At no point in church history has this been more evident than in the antebellum United States when abolitionists in the North read and interpreted Galatians 3:1–29 as a manifesto for human freedom while Southern theologians cited Paul's letter to Philemon in defense of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. If political historians have interpreted the Civil War as the nation's first major constitutional crisis (arising from the fundamental contradiction of the three-fifths compromise), then these conflicting interpretations of the Bible constitute the young nation's enduring moral crisis. In 1852

Frederick Douglass exposed the nation's religious hypocrisy in his Fourth of July address:

> Americans! your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent. You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation (as embodied in the two great political parties), is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three million of your countrymen. . . .
>
> Fellow-citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie.[2]

This uniquely American moral crisis remains conspicuous in world history because it arose in a nation and culture committed to the idea of human equality, a belief emanating both from the egalitarian ethos of the Christian doctrine of justification (with Christ on the cross establishing a new community in which all who are in Christ are equal before God) and from the Enlightenment belief in universal human rights grounded in natural law (in tacit rejection of biblical and ecclesial authority). Ultimately, this contradiction became manifest in both the public and private spheres as bitter armed conflict was preceded and even precipitated by religious schism over the issue of slavery. Long before the first shot was fired at Manassas, all the major American Protestant denominations had split into Northern and Southern communions—the Methodists in 1844, the Baptists in 1845, and the Presbyterians in 1857[3]—foreshadowing the political divide that eventually threatened to destroy the nation.

Nevertheless, social historians have seldom analyzed the problematic of race from a primarily theological perspective. Within academic discourse there exists a consensus opinion that the Industrial Revolution and the growth of capitalism are directly responsible for the rise of American racist thought;[4] however, recent scholarship challenges this prevailing thesis. Historian James H. Sweet argues that the identification of blackness with servitude characteristic of American racism was part of the western European cultural matrix long before the discovery of the New World and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade.[5] Medieval and premodern prejudices traceable to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim attitudes about ethnic and religious otherness gave rise to the notion of European cultural superiority that eventually manifested itself as racial prejudice based on skin color. At some point in each of their histories, all three Abrahamic faiths have espoused the view that sub-Saharan Africans were culturally inferior and therefore naturally suited for slavery, yet few studies have explicitly examined how the confessional commitments of these faith traditions might contribute to—or counter—a racist worldview. This project undertakes a critical examination of explicitly theological perspectives for understanding and transforming North American racism. Employing a method that is both confessional and public—grounded in the distinctively Christian discourse of the faith community while actively conversing with a plurality of critical perspectives in civil society—I examine racialized readings of the Bible not only to highlight the church's role in perpetuating racist social structures but also to articulate a Christian response to the problem of racism that draws upon the U.S. Latino/a[6] experience of *mestizaje.* In this book I articulate a transcultural theology of human liberation by interjecting the insights of Latino/a theology into the ongoing conversation on race in the public arena by offering the metaphor of *mestizaje,* or mutual cultural exchange, as a challenge to the church that it recognize the effects of racial and ethnic particularity in all theological construction.

Toward a Theological Response

Theological anthropology—the Christian understanding of what it means to be human in light of our relationship to the Creator—is central to any discussion of the church's response to the problematic of race. A Christian doctrine of humanity draws upon various aspects of traditional church teaching—especially the doctrines of Creation, Christ, and the Trinity —in order to present an understanding of humankind grounded in the knowledge of God. Still, the depth and breadth of human sin call into question the very possibility of reliable knowledge of God as evidenced by Christianity's troubled relationship with such dehumanizing institutions as slavery and apartheid. The second half of this book presents a creative reconstruction of traditional doctrines through the lens of U.S. Latino/a experience in order to advocate a theological anthropology that transforms and transcends a cultural heritage tainted by the sin of racism. First, however, it is important to provide a theological analysis of racism that honestly confronts the church's responsibility in perpetuating racist structures yet also identifies a methodological direction for liberating Christian doctrine from theological racism.

Christian identity is formed at the nexus of many, often competing, relationships incorporating (but not limited to) ethnic, gender, economic, biological, linguistic, moral, and religious factors. Consequently, it is vital for theology to adequately understand the complex interaction between Christianity and culture and account for the role of cultural factors in theological construction. At stake is an understanding of God's revelation in the world—does revelation transcend culture, or is revelation a cultural phenomenon? The problem with the former view is that when revelation is understood as independent of culture, it can quickly become irrelevant to culture, while the problem with the latter view is that when revelation is equated with culture, it becomes impossible to offer divine judgment upon the sins of a culture. H. Richard Niebuhr's classic text, *Christ and Culture* (1951), establishes five paradigms for understanding Christ's relationship to culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ as the transformer of culture.[7] Niebuhr accepts the historical and cultural particularity of all theological narratives yet makes room for God's transcendent and transformative Word in the world. His fifth paradigm, Christ transforming culture, provides an attractive option for political theologies advocating for a more just society.

If racism is a product of cultural factors, and particular theological traditions are necessarily part of the cultural matrix that generates racism, to what extent do deep theological commitments foster or resist racist worldviews? While at certain times in its history the Christian church has perpetuated racist attitudes and practices, Christian theology is not intrinsically racist; the thesis here developed is that Christian doctrines remain open to interpretation and can be manipulated for good or evil. Recognizing both the temporal and the spiritual realities embodied in the church, Christian theology acknowledges the sinfulness of the faith community without abandoning its core salvific message. Accordingly, the role of the contemporary theologian parallels that of the prophets of ancient Israel, men and women who arose within the faith community, exhorting it to remain faithful to its true identity while proclaiming God's judgment upon the community's disobedience. Ultimately, Christian identity is inseparable from Christian community, for it is only as *ecclesia* that the Christian life is properly understood. Thus, tradition and canon become crucial concepts for a Christian understanding of what it means to be human—especially when unraveling the place of racial/ethnic particularity in the divine providence—for it is in the context of the historical church that God has chosen to reveal God's self.

Canon has both formative and normative functions because it involves a continual exchange between the individual and the communal spheres circumscribed by an explicit catalog of authoritative texts, narratives, and practices. While a tradition's canon is in great part constitutive of that tradition, it is to some degree contestable given the diversity of interpretations within any single tradition. This investigation defines canon as a "core" set of beliefs and practices that preserve the historical continuity of a given tradition yet remain fluid enough to allow for change. Since mere repetition proves inadequate as a tradition encounters new situations, theology is an inherently hermeneutical undertaking that continually "makes sense" of the world in a narrative relation to its "original" story. Accordingly, theological interpretation always takes place within a specific tradition and in a particular social location involving a process of participation and distanciation.[8] Given that no neutral standpoint exists from which to extricate oneself from one's own tradition, it becomes necessary to view tradition in general as a highly contextualized social praxis. Believers affirm their identity as members of a particular tradition by active participation in the life of that community of faith and reform this tradition by distancing themselves—through intersubjective discourse with other members of one's faith community (both past and present)—from those aspects of the tradition they find objectionable. For this reason, the theological anthropology proposed here respects the role of collective identity and cultural inheritance on the formation of personal identity yet affirms the role of dissension in reforming religious traditions by defending individual freedom over against authoritarian collective forces.

The present work originates within the theological self-reflection of the U.S. Latino/a community of faith but also incorporates external critical perspectives, embodying a model of theological reasoning that presupposes cooperation and coordination between conversation partners who do not necessarily share the same interpretive framework as a safeguard against every culture's tendency to create a false idol out of its particularity. While U.S. Latino/a theology recognizes that its particular cultural perspective provides valuable insights and interpretations of the Christian tradition, Latino/a theologians also honor the traditional sources of Christian theology (Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience). Accordingly, there is a methodological concern about the role of culture in defining Christian theological identity. Great care must be taken so that no single cultural perspective defines the tradition and so that our theological constructions do not favor one particular group or culture over others. In the words of the apostle Paul, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4:7, NRSV).

Every theology must unravel the relationship of Christ to culture. The word *culture* has many connotations, but I choose to employ the terms *culture* and *cultural* to refer to those attitudes, ideas, languages, practices, and institutions that differentiate specific populations from one another while recognizing that the very factors that constitute cultural identity are socially constructed and continually negotiated. Theology cannot reduce Christianity to culture without accepting Feuerbach's reductionist critique that Christian theology is really anthropology, but neither can it embrace what Bonhoeffer has termed "revelational positivism." From a classical Reformed theological perspective, theological statements are possible because God reveals God's self.[9] More to the point, God is both the content of that revelation and the only means by which humans can know this content. Christian theology, because of this unyielding commitment to Scripture as its *norma normans,* is often judged by its critics to be blatantly foundational. However, theologies whose experiences and explanatory narratives are never subjected to external criticism weave elaborate discourses that are little more than *idioglossia*—private languages. Without undermining the normative function of Scripture this investigation accepts as axiomatic that revelation is always mediated through culture. Christocentric and Trinitarian in orientation, the constructive theology articulated herein affirms the particularity of God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth through the power of the Holy Spirit in order to argue that the act of revelation always takes place in concrete historical situations by means of particular cultural symbols. Even though knowledge of God begins with God's self-revelation, all attempts to understand this divine act are themselves human acts of interpretation and by definition culturally specific.

Because theological discourse is human language about God, it cannot limit God's freedom, so God's self-revelation always remains mystery. Accordingly, theological language is not the language of absolute certainty but that of faithful and humble acknowledgment. Recalling Anselm's classical formulation, "faith seeking understanding," theology is the search for a deeper understanding of the subjective (individual and collective) religious experience. Therefore, as the human search for knowledge of God, theology cannot have the "last word" on God but must propose answers to the questions of faith that are always *provisional.* Such open-endedness does not eliminate the possibility of certainty in the church's teaching, but rather than equating theological assurance with Cartesian epistemological certainty, this conception of theology locates dogmatic certainty in the obedient act of continual self-criticism in light of the Word of God.

The task of theology remains abundantly clear: theology serves the church by informing and correcting its proclamation of the Word of God in an ever-changing world. Given that God's self-revelation is known only indirectly—that is, always mediated by Scripture and the church's proclamation—great care must be taken not to equate the church's teaching with the Word of God. Still, it is possible to affirm the unequivocal authority of Scripture over tradition while recognizing that Scripture, like church doctrine, is the Word of God only by an act of God. Scripture bears witness to God's self-revelation, but this does not warrant a direct identification of the Bible with revelation, since Scripture's authority over the church rests not in itself but in the One to whom it bears witness by the power of the Holy Spirit. The only unquestionable foundation for Christian theological reflection is the living Lord Jesus Christ, who as the incarnate Word of God is himself the truth of the Gospel. However, naming Jesus Christ as its absolute norm does not relieve Christian theology of the difficult task of articulating what this norm is or how it is to be applied. While the norm of faith is outside us (*extra nos*), God chooses to speak through human words (Scripture, tradition, confessional statements, etc.); therefore, systematic theology is burdened with the awesome task of instructing the church. Church teaching is a human word that serves the divine Word, so from a human perspective there is no guarantee that church doctrine will not slip into error and disobedience. Theological proclamation is always uncertain action. Only insofar as the church continues to listen faithfully to the living Word by always remaining open to the possibility that it has misheard the Word is it able to proclaim and teach faithfully.[10]

The church's dogmatic theology functions as both gateway and barrier, though authentic church theology never instructs by force. Rather, by listening to the Word of God and constantly reminding the church of the revelation attested in Scripture, it calls the church to faithfulness. While its content is grounded in the biblical witness, accepting the Scriptures as God's command, theology remains free to take up questions and concerns not directly addressed by the biblical witness (though always with an eye toward Scripture). Recalling the four-part description of *ecclesia* in the Nicene Creed ("We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church"), the church is "one" although visibly and lamentably divided because it acknowledges Christ as its only Lord; "holy" when the church adopts the proper humility by doing penance before God for its sins and praying for a new and better hearing of the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit; "catholic" in the sense that particular theologies serve the whole Christian church and ought to listen to different perspectives, even those labeled heretical; and "apostolic" insofar as its teaching is in part determined by the faith of the ecumenical councils and creeds. Finally, dogmatics is called to be contemporary and contextual in that it must address the struggles and sufferings of the church in the world today.

The critical question that systematic theology in every generation needs to answer is whether as a human word it truly serves the divine Word or is governed by lesser cultural, historical, and political idols. God's promise to the church is that God will speak in the preaching and proclamation of the church. Unless the church wants to disown this promise, it must accept its role as the teaching church in such a way that it does not elevate the human word alongside, or in place of, the Word of God. To this end, dogmatics must continually listen to the Word of God, which requires a particular attitude where the church teaches with authority yet respects the limits of its authority. The reality of a divided church confirms that —in spite of shared sources and norms—inherited cultural frameworks indelibly shape theological traditions. Therefore, recognizing the existing plurality of perspectives within the church remains a *necessary* theological task.

The present-day eruption of theological pluralism is linked to the dramatic emergence across the globe of local theologies resisting the hegemony of Western academic and ecclesial norms. By "Western" theology I mean the dominant theological traditions of Europe and North America that have, until recently, defined doctrine and practice for world Christianity, as contrasted to the emergent theologies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as marginalized voices within Europe and North America. This movement toward contextual and local theologies is characterized by the realization that particular experiences, contexts, and traditions play a vital role in theological construction.[11] Accordingly, contextual theologies like U.S. Latino/a theology undertake the tasks of theology aware that the Christian tradition is not singular. Rather, constructive and systematic theology is expected to provide an ordered account of Christian belief and practice from a particular location while engaging in critical dialogue with the diachronic and synchronic plurality called "church." By viewing the history of Christianity as a series of local theologies grounded in the historical "Christ event" that all communities self-identified as "Christian" purport to proclaim and embody (while also acknowledging that no single tradition is the privileged interpreter of this Christ event), contextual approaches also affirm a set of *loci communes* (common places) identifiable as the Christian tradition—even when these are expressed symbolically and culturally in diverse ways.

Accordingly, a method more faithful to the diversity found within the Christian tradition is one that lives with dissensus while working toward theological convergence. When theology adopts this mind-set, particular confessional and cultural traditions are no longer viewed as mutually exclusive but can become mutually corrective. Recognizing that these inherited cultural frameworks encompass all aspects of human life—not just the religious sphere—demands an approach that enables us to critique our traditions while standing inside them. As human beings, we are neither determined selves nor autonomous isolated egos, but always exist as a self in community; given the understanding of canon previously articulated, this understanding of religious community includes our predecessors, our contemporaries, and our successors. Since God is a living subject, who approaches us in the midst of our particularity, it is methodologically important that we listen to how the "other" has encountered the living Word. Not because God is many—for God is one even in God's triunity—but because of the simple fact that all our conversations about God run the risk of becoming internal monologues. By conversing with the plurality that is the Christian tradition, past *and* present, while also engaging external (non-Christian) critical discourses, we are rescued from solipsism and provincialism, and can perhaps avoid dogmatically rejecting or denying potential avenues of God's revelation. Adopting an intentionally inclusive methodology allows theologians to recognize cultural distortions of God's self-revelation while at the same time affirming that *every* cultural manifestation of the Gospel is a potential vessel of God's self-revelation. The goal is an ecumenical theology respectful of the differences within catholic Christianity in which genuine conversation and mutual exchange are demanded.

This commitment to mutually beneficial exchange transcends particularity and helps illuminate the cross-cultural permeability linking confessional traditions with their surrounding cultural milieu. The implications for a theological analysis of racism stemming from this view of the relationship of theology to culture are profound. First, by understanding theology as culturally mediated yet distinguishable from culture, it becomes possible to analyze racist theological interpretations without dismissing an entire tradition. Second, by recognizing that multiple and overlapping spheres of human experience are constitutive of culture—the religious, moral, racial/ethnic, and so forth—it encourages genuine pluralism by welcoming previously silenced or marginalized perspectives to the interdisciplinary conversation without privileging any one narrative for the very reason that no *one* perspective is capable of representing reality in its fullness. Because cultural/ethnic identity is intertwined with religious/theological identity, a comprehensive academic study of race and racism in the United States ought to include insights from Christian theological anthropology.

Theology in the Public Arena

There is no universally accepted Christian confessional statement that confronts the problem of racism by affirming the full humanity of all persons as *imago Dei* regardless of national origin or differences in physical appearance. While all the major Christian denominations in the United States have adopted language and policies denouncing racism since the advent of the civil rights movement, Christian doctrines of humanity—in their analysis of the human condition—have largely ignored the role of racial prejudice in perpetuating sinful social conditions. In 1985 the *Kairos* document—a theological statement issued by an anonymous group of primarily black theologians in South Africa—challenged that nation's churches to oppose the vicious policies of the apartheid state.[12] While this document is generally considered too controversial to serve as an ecumenical confessional statement on human differentiation, ethnic conflict, and racial reconciliation, it does serve as a historical guidepost for future Christian political engagement of—and theological reflection on—the challenges of global racial disparity. Arguably an instance of a *status confessionis* for the whole Christian church,[13] the *Kairos* document serves as a prime example of a local and contextual theology that informs and illuminates our understanding of the Word of God across contexts and cultures. As a Christian, biblical, and theological analysis of the political crisis in

South Africa in the mid-1980s, the document condemns political domination and oppression on the basis of race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status and calls for all Christians to choose sides against oppression in the historical struggle for liberation because God "works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed" (Ps. 103:6, NRSV).

Fully aware that explicitly theological reasoning can sometimes stifle—even end—political debate, this theological exploration of the problem of racism engages both the Christian community and the broader civil society in the hope that theological analysis can foster and nurture genuine conversation.[14] While a comprehensive history of racism in North America lies beyond the scope of this investigation, an exploration of the historical development of racial discourse demonstrates how contemporary contextual theologies have come to affirm both ethnic/cultural particularity and the universality of the Gospel while empowering marginalized faith communities to resist political and cultural domination. However, before North American Christianity can confront its own racial *kairos* situation, the church must overcome the widespread fallacy—especially in the United States, with its constitutional separation of church and state—that "political theology" is the bringing together of two incompatible realities.

Embodying an alternative model of theology—one that openly expresses its deepest theological commitments, remains respectful of pluralist concerns, and rejects coercion as a means of affecting political change in a democratic society—this work addresses the religious-secular divide that characterizes much contemporary public discourse. One response to the marginalization of theology in the public arena is to produce theologies that intentionally incorporate critical perspectives external to the Christian tradition but do so by surrendering that which is uniquely "Christian" about their discourse.[15] Critical theories, while having a place in theological reflection, are not the *primary* discourse of faith communities. Therefore, a more effective means of transforming a faith community's praxis—or of understanding that community's distinct contribution to the social well-being—begins with an appreciation of that community's deep doctrinal commitments.[16] This particular task of theology—differentiating specifically Christian doctrine from other sociopolitical discourses—may inevitably increase the Christian community's isolation from the public discourse. Still, in a free and democratic society, theologians have a responsibility to make the faith community's deepest commitments intelligible to outsiders as honestly and authentically as possible, as well as the freedom to engage in political debate from an openly confessional stance.[17] Thus, while the theologian utilizes diverse theories of explanation in conversing with those who do not share the same confessional commitments, his or her *unique* contribution to the public discourse is to offer critical analysis of social issues informed by the rich resources of his or her own distinct tradition.

In *Remembering Esperanza,* Mark Taylor develops critical guidelines for doing theology in the contemporary North American context by recognizing a threefold tension among tradition, pluralism, and liberation as constitutive of theological content.[18] By refusing to limit theology to a single starting point and instead suggesting that contemporary theologians are entangled in a threefold tension of equally compelling demands, Taylor develops a "thick" description of the North American context.[19] This description recognizes "three demands that we often wish to respect simultaneously: to acknowledge some sense of tradition, to celebrate plurality, and to resist domination. As compelling as each of these demands seems to be, pursuing any one of them makes highly problematic the realization of the other two."[20] A singular focus on tradition results in a culturally irrelevant and myopic theology; a singular attention to plurality can result in political impotence (when all perspectives are equally valid, how does one resist injustice?). Furthermore, the postmodern emphasis on pluralism without tradition only recognizes those aspects of tradition that perpetuate political domination without acknowledging how tradition can also create an appreciation of difference that provides vital resources for political resistance. Finally, focusing on liberation alone (to the exclusion of tradition and pluralism) can result in a failed struggle against oppression, since a sense of tradition nurtures and sustains liberation struggles over time, and a healthy sense of pluralism prevents the divisiveness that so often destroys resistance movements. Taylor's program, with its concerted effort to retain some sense of tradition, to develop a healthy pluralism, and to empower the community of faith to resist domination, has much in common with the inclusive vision of U.S. Latino/a theologies. It also provides analytical tools for evaluating the public character of theology. Unfortunately, the suspicion within the academy that a theologian committed to the doctrinal claims of his or her faith is incapable of the same degree of objectivity as "secular" scholars impedes the effectiveness of "public" theologies. This characterization of the confessional theologian as "partisan" over against the academic as "nonpartisan" hampers genuine interdisciplinarity by granting epistemic privilege to one type of rationality over another. It also illustrates how theology's perspective is not always welcome in the academy, even when theology enters public discourse committed to making its confessional claims intelligible to all conversation partners on the basis of shared rational criteria.

During the period of modernity, an era most often identified with Descartes's search for self-evident and universal epistemological foundations, the natural sciences were elevated to a position of epistemic privilege and theology marginalized to the realm of the private and personal. The postmodern moment, by rejecting totalizing metanarratives and emphasizing the contextualization of all human knowledge, allows theology to reenter the interdisciplinary conversation. I claim a public voice for confessional theology by emphasizing interdisciplinary conversation as the means of achieving authentic pluralism. Such discourse does not demand that interlocutors share the same assumptions but only that they intentionally develop ways to talk with one another by emphasizing shared experiences. Given that Christian and cultural commitments overlap and often merge, theology cultivates the proper relation between participation and distanciation in order to maintain the cultural relevance of its message while at the same time affirming its particularity. As a theology of liberation this work employs a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that questions and challenges received theological traditions and cultural frameworks of interpretation in order to show how unconscious motivations, socioeconomic interests, political ideologies, and cultural biases shape all interpretations of history, science, philosophy, and theology. While recognizing that a theologian's role is often prophetic—exposing a particular tradition's sins or calling the community toward a "new" understanding of itself—the confessional theologian nevertheless acts from a deep sense of commitment to and respect for the tradition. In other words, prophetic theology faces a two-tiered challenge: (1) to critique and transform the tradition while speaking *within* the community of faith, and (2) to defend the tradition's ideas as effectively as possible—by means of shared rationality—when speaking *outside* the community. Therefore, what the contemporary situation demands is a "hermeneutics of trust" to accompany our hermeneutics of suspicion. Such an approach does not alienate the faith community by imposing external ideas upon it, but undertakes the difficult task of reconstruction *by reclaiming the tradition's own resources in order to address new situations and contexts.* In other words—in spite of all our cultural and confessional differences—it is important to identify shared *loci communes* that distinguish particular local traditions as belonging to the broad Christian tradition. For example, while *mestizaje* is an integral part of my personal Christian experience, I contend that the reality of *mestizaje* (understood as mutual exchange between two or more cultures) has always been a vital part of the Christian tradition (though not always identified by that name). All of us inhabit multiple communities and begin life with a cultural inheritance informed by many sources. Not surprisingly, as a theologian shaped by both the Reformed/Calvinist tradition and Latin American liberation theology, I intentionally bring both perspectives together in theological reflection. Thus, what follows is an analysis and creative reconstruction of Christian doctrines shaped as much by John Calvin and Karl Barth as by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgilio Elizondo.

Interjecting a Mestizo *Perspective*

In recent years the place of religion in the public arena has been greatly debated, whether in reaction to U.S. president George W. Bush's "faith-based initiatives" approach to social problems or in the aftermath of the religiously motivated terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. However, a quick survey of post-9/11 academic literature on the subject gives the mistaken impression that religious fundamentalism—whether militant Islamists or the U.S. "Christian Right"—has a chokehold on religion in the public arena,[21] as popular news media coverage singles out best-selling author Jim Wallis as the lone voice for progressive Christianity in the United States.[22] This book introduces the insights of U.S. Latino/a theology into the ongoing conversation on religion in the public arena, optimistic that the metaphor of *mestizaje*—despite its ethnocentric and nationalist undertones—can contribute to a transcultural theology of human liberation. This refreshing optimism challenges Samuel Huntington, who identifies Mexican immigration and what he terms "Hispanization"[23] as the greatest threat to American national identity and national security in the post-9/11 United States. I engage the discourse on race as a Protestant Hispanic American by advocating a notion of cultural *mestizaje* that transcends ethnocentric categories and challenges the church to recognize the effects of racial and ethnic particularity upon all theological construction. In conversation with U.S. Latino/a theology, this investigation proposes a more inclusive conceptualization of *mestizaje* that moves beyond its Latino-specific usage. Focusing on the mutual exchange between cultures allows us to employ the term as an interpretive tool for resisting racism and transforming communities while critically evaluating past uses of *mestizaje* as a theological metaphor in light of the inclusive vision of community found in Galatians 3:27–28.

Interjecting the work of U.S. Latino/a theologians in the public discourse serves to break down the black-white dichotomy that has dominated the conversation on race in North America. Given that the experience of living as a marginalized minority within a dominant majority population frames the interpretive horizon of most Latino/as in the United States—specifically the experience of bilingualism and biculturalism arising from navigating two cultures while never fully belonging in either—U.S. Latino/a theologians seek to develop discourses that build bridges between different cultures, languages, and perspectives. Accordingly, *mestizaje* has become a central category for U.S. Latino/a theological reflection. The terms *mestizo* and *mestizaje* refer to the process of cultural and biological mixing of Iberian and Amerindian peoples. Originally a denigrating label, *mestizaje* has been transformed and appropriated by Latino/as as a term of self-identity and cultural pride. Theologians employ the term broadly—as descriptive of "the U.S. Hispanic ethos that seeks inclusion of the other"[24]—emphasizing the possibility of dialogical and mutually enriching relationships at the intersection of two or more cultures. The challenge for Latino/a theology is to encourage and value cultural distinctness without denigrating other cultures or perpetuating exclusionary practices. Recognizing the limits of *mestizaje* as a transcultural symbol of liberation, many U.S. Latino/a theologians continue to reinterpret *mestizaje* so that it remains both a symbol of Christian hope and a paradigm of universal human liberation. The eschatological dimension of Christian thought (its "already-not yet" aspect) reminds the church that while it is renewed in the Spirit and called by God to live in inclusive community, where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female but all are one in Christ Jesus, our present reality is tainted by sin and relationships of domination persist. Therefore, a genuinely Christian use of *mestizaje* must not only trust in the unseen hope of faith but also foster strategies for resisting and transforming relationships of domination here and now.

Today "race" is no longer considered a valid descriptive category in the natural sciences, yet race has been embraced by marginalized and oppressed groups as a necessary descriptive category for political discourse in order to resist white cultural and political dominance. Fully aware of the temptation every community faces to make a false idol of its ethnic particularity, I nonetheless argue that the Christian church's response to racism must embrace liberating aspects of the "race consciousness" movement in its theological constructions. In my opinion, the work of Hispanic theologians in the United States—especially their creative use of the concept of *mestizaje*—provides a transcultural paradigm for resisting racism in our increasingly globalized society. The U.S. Latino/a experience of racism is that of being objectified, categorized, and left without a cultural identity. Constantly treated like an alien—even if born and raised in the United States—leaves one feeling emotionally isolated, politically impotent, and vulnerable to economic exploitation. Latino/as seek to broaden the discourse on race to include the "browning" of America without minimizing the long, tragic history of enslavement and exploitation of blacks in this country in order to bring to light the similarities and shared struggles of the subjugated other—whether that other is African American, Native American, Asian American, or Latino/a—within the dominant Euro-American culture.[25] This discourse demands brutal honesty, challenging Latino/as to come to terms with their participation in and perpetuation of racist structures. For example, we cannot deny the fact that it is possible for many light-skinned Hispanics to shed their cultural/ethnic identity in order to assimilate and succeed in U.S. society, an opportunity denied many African Americans solely because of the color of their skin, the texture of their hair, or the shape of their noses. Nor can Latino/as pretend they are immune from becoming racist by virtue of having experienced discrimination themselves. In my own Puerto Rico one finds a spectrum of racial types that include *blanco* (white), *indio* (dark skinned and straight haired), *moreno* (dark skinned with a mix of black and white features), *negro* (black or African American in appearance), and *trigueño* (wheat-colored), reflecting both the biological diversity of our ancestry (*mestizaje*) and that part of our Spanish cultural heritage that elevates white/European traits, culture, and lineage to the detriment of all things African and Amerindian.

Throughout this investigation *mestizaje* is understood in one of three ways: (1) the historical and biological reality of mixing between two or more human groups, (2) the complex interaction and mutual exchange between two or more cultures, and (3) a distinctly Christian theological anthropology grounded in Christ's own historical identity as "mestizo" that advocates a liberating vision of human equality distinguished by active resistance to various forms of cultural, political, and religious domination. U.S. Latino/a theology posits a communal notion of personal identity grounded in a complex web of social relationships and historical commitments that attempt to make sense of the cruel history of *mestizaje.* At the same time, Latino/a theologians seek to protect individual self-determination over against the potential encroachment of tradition and culture. So while *mestizaje* is at its core the mixing of different cultures, to identify oneself as *mestizo* in the way most Latino/a theologies employ the term entails something more than just being the offspring of parents from two different cultures—it entails a spiritual conversion from the old way of viewing human relationships as relationships of domination to a new, Christ-centered vision of human relationships where "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NRSV).

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on theoretical and methodological questions raised by the problematic of race while the second part articulates a theological response to the problem of racism. Chapter 1, "Beyond Black and White: Understanding Race in North America," traces the history of theological and scientific racism, then presents three race-conscious responses to the "persistent problem of race."[26] In analyzing Western notions of race and identity I accept as axiomatic that race is a cultural construct inextricably linked to European colonial expansion, that race is not a valid descriptive category in the natural sciences, and that race has been embraced by marginalized and oppressed groups as a necessary descriptive category for political resistance. After a brief history of racist interpretations of biblical texts within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the chapter examines the so-called curse of Ham (Gen. 9:18–27) and its role in the development of theological racism in the United States. To highlight scientific racism's deep and long-lasting influence on popular beliefs about race, I trace the history and eventual rejection of scientific racism within academic discourse in addition to detailing the recent resurgence of biological theories of race in the North American academic context. Because this persistence of racism in contemporary society has not yet allowed for the abandonment of race as a descriptive category, the chapter concludes with an analysis of three contemporary race-conscious responses to racism—Cornel West's genealogy of racism, critical race theory (arising out of critical legal studies), and the contributions of U.S. Latino/a theologians.

Chapter 2, "Exploring *Mestizaje* as Theological Metaphor," defends *mestizaje* as a vital concept for fostering racial reconciliation by analyzing the work of three Latino/a theologians in the United States, Virgilio Elizondo, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Luis G. Pedraja. First, the chapter focuses on the central role of *mestizaje* in the development of U.S. Latino/a theology. Then it responds to the criticism that Latino/a theologies embrace essentialist notions of race (*mestizaje* is a concept most often associated with pan-Hispanic nationalist and ethnocentric movements) by arguing that Latino/as risk further "ghettoizing" politically marginalized minority populations when they appropriate *mestizaje* as both a religious *and* a nationalist symbol. My analysis of Elizondo's theology exposes the primary risk in employing *mestizaje* as theological metaphor—namely, that by emphasizing the biological/historical understanding of *mestizaje* Latino/a theologies encourage identity-based politics that further contribute to the marginalization of U.S. Latino/a perspectives by giving the false impression such theologies are unable to "break out" of a specifically Hispanic location. Finally, the work of theologians Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Luis G. Pedraja provides strong examples of how *mestizaje* has been transformed from a source of personal and group identity into a politically empowering model of religious social activism and dialogic encounter with the other.

Chapter 3, "The Public Relevance of Theology," confronts the primary crisis of spirituality within North American Christianity: the privatization of faith. The dominant view of religion in the United States marginalizes confessional perspectives in public discourse by limiting faith to the domain of private religious experience with little or no relevance in matters of policy. I articulate a Christian political theology informed by both the Calvinist Reformed tradition and Latin American liberation theology that is grounded in the community's lived faith yet remains receptive to external critical voices by analyzing New Testament narratives in order to gain a deeper understanding of Jesus' relationship with civil authorities, to discern Jesus' teachings concerning slavery, and to describe his resistance to the dominant political and religious authorities of his day. These narratives then serve as prototypes for contemporary political action, informing the development of a transcultural theology of human liberation that is public and confessional, spiritual and temporal, revolutionary and nonviolent.

The second part of the book draws upon the insights of U.S. Latino/a theology in order to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of doctrine by reconstructing major Christian doctrines through the hermeneutical lens of *mestizaje*. Chapter 4, "Guadalupe: *Imago Dei* Reconsidered," utilizes Guadalupe—an instance of *mestizaje* often associated with Mexican nationalism—as a case study for the encounter between Christ and culture by defending the Guadalupe theophany as a valuable resource for a theology of human liberation. As a Latino Protestant writing about the most recognized Latin American and U.S. Latino/a Catholic devotion, I trace Protestant discomfort with (and objections to) Guadalupan devotion to iconoclastic tendencies among sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, as well as to the strict Christocentric understanding of divine revelation in the theology of John Calvin. Recovering resources within the Reformed theological heritage that allow Protestants like myself to approach Guadalupe as a vehicle of divine self-communication (i.e., a new cultural manifestation of the Gospel), I argue that some readings of the Guadalupan tradition are compatible with a Reformed Christocentric theology. The chapter ends with constructive proposals for reconstructing the doctrine of Creation by creatively incorporating Guadalupan insights that remind the ecumenical church that our identity as creatures made in the image of God necessarily includes the historically marginalized "other."

Chapter 5, "The *Mestizo* Christ," explores *mestizaje* as a Christological metaphor by allowing us to see how in Jesus of Nazareth God became incarnate as *mestizo*. Since Jesus—as a marginalized Galilean—identifies with the racialized other, the church must affirm and actively struggle to preserve the full humanity of those marginalized and oppressed because of their race or ethnicity. The metaphor of *mestizaje* applied to the person and work of Christ yields a Christology that focuses on the nature of Jesus' relationships with his neighbors, his relationship to God, and his relationship to the dominant religious and civil authorities. After an examination of classical Christology in which five thematic loci are identified as important for an emancipatory reconstruction of the doctrine of Christ, I defend an understanding of the person and work of Christ indivisible from his liberating praxis. The chapter concludes by arguing that *mestizaje* is not just a source of cultural and ethnic identity but also provides a strong theological argument for understanding the Christian life as the communally embodied continuation of Christ's saving work in the world today.

In an effort to see how humans are reconciled with one another, chapter 6, “The Spirit of Community,” discusses the work of the Holy Spirit in founding and empowering the community of faith. The Holy Spirit is shown to empower humanity for the ministry of reconciliation, and our theological metaphor is enriched through the recognition that moral agency is a crucial dimension of *mestizaje.* Since traditional understandings of justification and sanctification emphasize that the Christian life begins with a conversion experience made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a liberationist understanding of Christian conversion as political solidarity is needed before the whole church can embrace *mestizaje* as a model of liberative praxis. I then raise a question implied (but never adequately stated) in both chapter 4 (on the doctrine of Creation) and chapter 5 (on the person and work of Christ): *Does the church community exclusively mediate reliable knowledge of God, or is reliable knowledge of God available independent of the teachings of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church?* By focusing theological reflection upon the work of the Holy Spirit, I seek to help the church embrace God’s presence in human cultures beyond the Christian community and thereby address the problems raised by the encounter with other world religions.

The conclusion, “Toward a *Mestizo* Church,” shows how the paradigm of *mestizaje* as descriptive of the work of the Holy Spirit yields concrete liberating practices that must be embodied by the Christian community. Broadly, these “marks” of a *mestizo* church include resistance to racism, sexism, and classism. Such a prophetic Christian community would emphasize a liberative reading of Scripture that empowers the church to engage in positive social transformation while preserving a distinct cultural identity that does not denigrate or exclude other cultures. Part 2’s exploration of doctrine as a source of liberating praxis presents Christian practices that might constitute “marks” of the *mestizo* church, including (1) engaging in political activism to resist racism grounded in a belief that the racially and ethnically “other” shares in the *imago Dei,* (2) continuing Christ’s ministry of reconciliation by fully embodying the “way of the cross” as adversarial politics, (3) broadening our definition of spiritual community to recognize God’s liberating work wherever it occurs, and (4) working together with new manifestations of spiritual community located outside traditional understandings of *ecclesia.*

Arguing that dominant theological traditions can benefit from an open and receptive encounter with different, even apparently incompatible, perspectives, I ultimately intend this investigation to contribute a deeper appreciation within North American theology for the integral role of liberation in the formation of Christian doctrine. This investigation undertakes a major task of theology, to preserve the diachronic and synchronic unity of the church in the face of pluralism by identifying those doctrines and practices without which a tradition cannot name itself Christian. In this continuing theological conversation, the task of marginalized perspectives is often to correct historical errors by emphasizing neglected or silenced aspects of doctrine—not to supplant one perspective with the other but to articulate a richer, more authentic comprehension of divine mystery. By reconstructing major Christian doctrines through the lens of mestizo experience, my goal is to enrich the Christian tradition by reminding the dominant theological perspective of long-neglected, important, and integral liberative themes essential to the biblical and doctrinal heritage of ecumenical Christianity through the ages.