Mañana Today

(4 of 5)

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For our session today, I have been asked to look once again at my book *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* and to discuss it with you. At first, I thought I would summarize the content of the book, but that seemed rather pointless, since you have just read it. Therefore, although at the end of this time slot I'll try to look very briefly at what the book actually says, it seems best to begin this session focusing on its background.

This book was published in 1990, and therefore more than a third of a century ago. This results in an interesting anomaly: We are speaking *today* about a *mañana* (a tomorrow) that was discussed long before *yesterday*!

AETH

So, allow me to say something about the context in which the book itself was shaped and produced. This was the late 80s. It was still the time of the Cold War and the last years of the Reagan presidency, when the tense relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union were being played out in proxy wars in Central America. This was resulting in growing waves of immigrants from Central America into the United States.

It was also a time when voices that had long been ignored began to be heard. In 1970, James Cone published *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In 1971, Gustavo Gutierrez (who died a few months ago) had published the book *Liberation Theology*, which became a rallying point for

new theological endeavors in Latin America. In 1972, the US Senate had passed a proposed amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing equal rights to women. This was followed by a long struggle. By the late 80s it was clear that the amendment had failed to pass at the state level.

These various events and voices were echoed in parallel stirrings among Hispanics in the US.

Among Catholics, this was seen in the work of Latin organizations of priests and nuns, "Padres" and "Hermanas." In 1972, Father Virgilio Elizondo and others created the Mexican American Center for Cultural Studies (commonly known as MACC, which now has evolved into the Mexican American Catholic College). Eleven years later, in 1983, he published his seminal book, *The Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Journey*.

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The institutional response of the Catholic Church in the US was slow, but constant. In 1969, a Division for the Spanish-speaking was established within the National Catholic Welfare Conference –which reflects the prevailing attitude that the task of the Church among Hispanics was mostly one of welfare and aid. In 1974, a Hispanic Secretariat was established within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This led to a series of *Encuentros*, beginning in 1972, which soon became one of the most progressive movements within American Catholicism and was partly inspired by the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin American Bishops, which

had met in Medellín, Colombia in 1968, and sought to apply the decisions of the Second Vatican Council.

Similar stirrings were also felt among Protestant Hispanics in the US. The National Presbyterian Hispanic Caucus was founded in 1969. The United Methodist Caucus, MARCHA, held its first meeting in 1971. Several other denominations developed Hispanic caucuses in the same decade. However, the struggle was just beginning. It was only in 1992, after more than two decades of advocacy by MARCHA, that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church approved and funded a National Hispanic Plan. This was a plan in which every agency and body of the church had a place and a responsibility. To this day, very few Protestant denominations have followed suit.

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I had been teaching in Puerto Rico throughout most of the 60s (from 1961 to 1969), when I came to live in the US. I had been here repeatedly, first as a visitor and then for three years as a student at Yale; but actually living here was a new experience. Catherine and I were married in 1973, four years after I came to Atlanta, and she summarizes what I was going through in the 70s by saying that she witnessed my transformation from being a visiting Latin American to becoming a US Latino.

You may find this strange, but our first lengthy conversation the day we met was on the relevance of second-century theologian Irenaeus for both feminist and Latin American

theologies. (Remember that at our last retreat Irenaeus was the main example we used for what I called “Type C” theology.) When Catherine and I met, I was just beginning to develop close ties and friendships within the US Latin community. Still, during our first year of marriage we traveled to Latin America several times a month. There, I usually was the speaker, preacher, or teacher, and Catherine accompanied me. The opposite was true here: Feminist issues were at the foreground of public interest as well as in the church. Thus, she would often be invited to preach or teach, and I would go as her companion.

Very soon, particularly in the US, we developed a policy: We would give preference to invitations to lecture, teach, and preach jointly and even suggested that as a possibility to any who invited one of us. Since at that point women’s issues were on the front burner, it was usually a group of women –often mostly Euroamerican women– who invited Catherine, and she suggested that I share the platform with her. In the early 80s that began changing, partly because the number of women in leadership positions and in theological education was increasing, and partly because Latine issues began moving to the forefront of attention.

Let me just say in passing that we soon developed a strategy in all these joint ventures: When it was a matter of discussing issues of racial and cultural prejudices and margination, it was not I, but Catherine, who addressed them. And when the subject was gender discrimination, it was my task to deal with them. The underlying purpose of this strategy was to show the connections linking various issues and causes that are often weakened by disconnecting them.

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As we traveled throughout the country in that endeavor, it slowly became clear to me that, while Latin American theology was a valuable tool and should to be studied, there was also a growing trend among non-Hispanics in the US to use their interest in Latin American issues and theology as a substitute for paying attention to Hispanic realities, experiences, and contributions within the US itself.

This became evident to me when after speaking in a well-known seminary in Manhattan about the struggle of Hispanics and of their churches in New York City, during the Q&A time, the president of that institution proudly announced: "You should know that we have made arrangements for several of our faculty to spend time in Mexico studying Spanish so they can really delve into Latin American liberation theology." I responded that I was very glad and proud that there was a theology coming out of Latin America that had drawn the attention of such an august institution and its celebrated scholars, but I was puzzled because that theology speaks of God's particular concern for the poor, and yet you are learning Spanish in order to be able to talk with people in Latin America rather than in order to cross the street and listen to your neighbors.

As I now look back at that event, I can see that it was part of that process that Catherine defined as my ceasing to be a visiting Latin American and becoming US Hispanic or Latino.

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At about the same time, in 1974, just as Catherine and I were beginning to join our interests and careers, and as I was becoming more involved in Latin issues and churches in the US, Perkins School of Theology, at SMU, inaugurated its Mexican American Program –whose name was later modified to make it more inclusive of other Latine experiences and concerns. We soon became deeply involved in that program, as well as in similar programs in various other schools and denominations. By 1977, I had left my teaching position at Emory and began devoting all my time to writing, speaking, and some organizing.

It was a whirlwind period, for there were few of us explicitly trying to do theology from a Hispanic perspective. I vaguely remember a weekend in which I spoke at a national Hispanic Catholic event, then to the Hispanic leadership of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, and finally to a gathering of Latin pastors of the Assemblies of God.

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Among all these activities, at an annual gathering of MARCHA –the Hispanic caucus of the United Methodist Church that I mentioned earlier–, a group of us connected with the Mexican American Program at SMU developed a proposal to publish a journal on Latine theology. I was named the editor of the proposed journal and continued serving as such for 20 years, until the turn of the century. Our first task was to decide on a name, and we decided to call it *Apuntes: Reflections from the Hispanic Margin*. The first issue of that journal, published in 1981, explains its name as follows:

> The very word, "Apuntes," is ambiguous, and has been purposely chosen because of that ambiguity. On the one hand, it means jottings, notes, or marginal

> glosses. That is partly how we see ourselves. We do not deceive ourselves into believing that we are at the very heart of the theological enterprise. That enterprise reflects the structures of the society around it, and Hispanics are not by and large in the decision-making centers of that society. Hence the subtitle of our journal, "Reflections from the Hispanic Margin." We intend for the theology aired in this journal to be a marginal gloss to the dominant forms of Christian theology.
>
> But the word "Apuntes" also means aimings. And that indicates that we do not intend simply to doodle at the margins of the theological enterprise. We are taking a bead on the very heart of theology, hoping –even against hope– that our comments on and from the margin will help the Church at large to rediscover some forgotten dimensions of the biblical message. While still at the margin, and from the perspective of our Hispanic experience, we shall take a new look at Scripture, and at the entire theological enterprise. And we are convinced that this new look will be valuable, not only to us, but also to the Church as a whole. (*Apuntes*, vol. 1, # 1, 1981)

The reason for this rather lengthy background is that it was within that context that the book that we are discussing today, *Mañana*, developed. In 1988 or so, a couple of years before this book was published, I was invited by the Mexican American program at SMU to teach a course to a group of Hispanics, mostly Mexican American, on the connection between Christian theology and Hispanic experiences and realities. That was long before Zoom or even the Internet were available, and therefore I commuted periodically from Atlanta to Dallas in order to teach the course, which lasted a semester. As was expected, the material that students should read prior to each meeting included a variety of sources, some written by other Latinos and Latinas, and some written from parallel minority or marginal perspectives –mostly by women, Black theologians, and Latin American theologians. But it included also for each session a brief writing in which I tried to condense some of what I had learned out of my own

experience as a Latino and particularly much of what I had said and learned in the constant lecturing and preaching that had kept us busy for several years.

A couple of weeks before each meeting, I sent to the students one or two of these brief writings. An important part of their work for the course was to read these short essays, reflect on them, compare them with what they had learned or were learning in other courses, and bring a report to the class. This report should include matters such as what was not clear, confusing, or incomplete; what they found most interesting (and why); what was missing; what should be corrected or modified; and so on.

The book that you have been reading (or are supposed to have been reading!) is the result of combining my original papers with the reactions and contributions of the students in our discussions in class sessions. This was done on purpose, because one of the emphases of Latin American theology that I had been reading, and of what I had been promoting in my classes and lectures in the Latin community, was what we call in Spanish *teología en conjunto* –joint theology. This is what the first chapter of the book calls *Fuenteovejuna theology*, trying to connect *teología en conjunto* with *lucha en conjunto* –doing theology jointly on the basis of our joint struggle– and illustrating it with an episode drawn from classic Spanish literature.

I feel a need to underscore this, because it is a fundamental point in the best of Latin theology –actually, in all theology. The book you have read is not really *my* book, even though it carries

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my name. It is really *our* book: the book that the entire class at SMU produced. This is important to me because it goes against most of the tradition of modern theological education, which is not based in collaboration as much as in competition. Professors move ahead in their careers not so much by what they do in collaboration with others, as by making a name for themselves. Most grading is individual, which also does not promote collaboration, and when grading curves are applied those curves themselves promote competition. To me this seems to contradict much of the very gospel that theology is supposed to study, clarify, and put into practice.

There is another point I must make in order to give you a fuller understanding of the book you have been reading. In my mind, this book was part of a trilogy. As I was working on it, there were two issues I had to make clear. One was that the sort of theology I was proposing is deeply rooted in Christian theological tradition. The competitive tone of contemporary theological teaching and research tends to favor innovation and to favor it in such a point that sometimes it is difficult for people to recognize in it the gospel they have long believed. In writing this book, I was not seeking to innovate but rather to make relevant what from the beginning has been the faith of the church. In my mind, that was the function of the book on the three types of theology we discussed in our previous retreat. The book proposing those three types, and generally opting for the third, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, was published in 1989, a few months before *Mañana*.

AETH

The other issue that caused me some concern was a more specific instance of the first. I was trying to make sure that the inclusion of economic and social issues in *Mañana* was not dismissed as an unprecedented, out of the blue, twentieth-century distortion of history. A few years earlier, in 1986, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops had issued a statement, "Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." The response of many Catholics in the country was outrage born out of ignorance of Patristic times: The bishops have gone off the deep end! How dare they say such things? Their ancestors in the faith must be rolling in their graves! I was aware of that response and felt the need to avoid or mollify such reactions among people reading *Mañana*. Therefore, in the same year that *Mañana* was published, 1990, I published *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. In short, in my mind *Mañana* was part of a trilogy, supported on one side by *Faith and Wealth* and on the other by *Christian Though Revisited.*

AETH

But enough about that. Let's get to the book itself. I must confess that I have not read it in a long time. In preparing for this session I even discovered that we did not have a copy in our own personal library! Providentially, just as I was preparing to order one from the publisher, I received an email from a colleague in Wheaton College, Daniel Carroll, telling me he had been charged with disposing of the library of Samuel Escobar, an aging Peruvian colleague who had been teaching in Valencia, Spain. Samuel, a good friend, was one of the leading voices in the movement called *misión integral*. Danny Carroll was sending me the copy of *Mañana* that he had found in Escobar's library in Valencia. That is the copy I have here with me. I find it

fascinating, because I can look at his underlining and his comments (those I can decipher!) and have a sort of conversation with this colleague who is my friend but can no longer speak for himself. In any case, I value it because it is a testament to a *teología en conjunto* whose conversation still goes on.

The foreword to the book also witnesses to another similar continuing dialogue by which I was blessed. This was a decades-long conversation and friendship with Father Virgilio Elizondo, who was without any doubt the founding luminary of Catholic Latino theology. If in your reading you skipped it, as I often do with forewords, I encourage you to go back and read it. It is probably the best part of the entire book.

(If you have not read it, don't feel too bad about it. When the German translation arrived, I was unhappy to note that they had omitted the foreword and simply said that the original English version had a foreword by "a priest" –*ein Pfarrer*. I found that offensive and apologized to Virgilio for it. Even worse, in thinking about our meeting here today, I pulled out the Spanish translation that was published years ago in Buenos Aires, to which I had not paid much attention, and realized that it too omitted Virgilio's foreword.)

Just to give you a glimpse at what Elizondo says in that Foreword, allow me to read a few words that will connect us with the history that we were discussing a couple of days ago. You may not agree fully with what he says, but it is worth considering:

> Let us never forget that we Iberomericanos are not descendants of the religious and cultural problems of Europe, which produced Protestantism and post-Tridentine Catholicism. We are descendants of neither, and therefore should never be forced to assume them in order to be called Christians. We are descendants of two great mystical traditions: the pre-Reformation evangelically renewed Iberian, and the Native American. Both were quite different from the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation of European Christianity! The evangelical humanism of Erasmus and Cardinal Cisneros mingled with the mystical religions of the peoples of these lands to give birth to our mestizo Iberoamerican Christianity. This providential synthesis is at the very root of our birth as the mestizo people of the Americas. Into the United States came the children of the Reformation, Protestants and Counter-Reformation Catholics, while in Latin America a totally new expression of Christianity was in the process of being born, one that had nothing to do with either the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation. Today, this new church in Latin America, which was born at the very beginning of the Americas, is being threatened by very sincere but narrow minded Anglocentric Catholics and Protestants who do not understand or appreciate the identity of the new church. This church has developed not according to the Protestant or Catholic modes of Europe or the United States, but in accordance with the inner dynamics of the Spirit, which is actively at work among the entire people of God who share in the Iberoamerican heritage. (p. 13)

Moving from that foreword to the book itself, since you have read the book, a very brief summary should suffice to prime the pump of our discussion.

AETH

The **first chapter** of the book is somewhat autobiographical, simply saying that for me being a minority is not a new experience. I grew up in Cuba before the Second Vatican Council, when much of Protestant so-called evangelism was really Catholic-bashing, and many Catholics were taught that Protestants were not Christian, and even that we did not believe in God. Then I came to this country, where I became a minority on other grounds, and it actually took me a few years to come to its full realization.

That first chapter also deals briefly with the tendency we Protestants in Latin America had in the mid-twentieth century, to defend ourselves by pointing to the supposedly superior Protestant cultures of the North Atlantic, thereby contributing to our alienation from our own culture.

It is at the end of the first chapter that I tell the story of *Fuenteovejuna*, and use it as a paradigm for *teología en conjunto*. I have already said something about that. Needless to say, those first pages of the book, although they were discussed in the course at SMU, were not worked out *en conjunto*, as much of the rest was.

In the second part of that first chapter –which was part of the class discussion– the case is made for the significance of the perspective from which any theology is done. As I now read it, I remember that I was responding to what had become rather common in theological curricula in the 80s, and fortunately now seems to be declining. At that time, it was common, when looking at the catalogue of a theological seminary, to find a list of courses on theology, with no adjectives, parallel to other courses with adjectives: “feminist theology,” “Black theology,” etc. There was some value in those courses, which acknowledged the significance of various theologies done from traditionally marginalized perspectives. They made it clear that it is legitimate for Black women, for instance, to do theology from their own perspective and experience. At the time when it was first acknowledged, this was important, and even revolutionary.

AETH

There are, however, two negative sides to that sort of curriculum. The first is that it does not acknowledge that what is simply dubbed "theology," with no adjectives, also has some hidden adjectives –that it is not as universal as it claims. Its main claim to universality is simply that it is dominant. The second is that it allows "theologians" in general, with no adjectives, not to take into account the insights of theologies with adjectives such as "Black," "Latino," or "Feminist."

If we begin by acknowledging that all theology is contextual and perspectival, we can develop a true dialogue whereby we are all enriched and enlightened in our understanding and in our living out of the gospel –and that is after all the main purpose of theology.

The **second chapter** of the book is probably the least relevant for our present situation. Most of it deals with demographic figures and projections. The last thirty years have proven many of those projections to have been grossly understated and therefore have made them obsolete.

AETH

However, the last few pages of that chapter do bring in two important dimensions of the Latine theological approach I was proposing. The first is what I call non-innocent history. The Bible tells the history of the people of God, warts and all. The great King David is an abusive and homicidal womanizer. The wise King Solomon proves to be an idiot, allowing idols to stand by the God who made him wise. The disciples abandon Jesus. Peter and Paul quarrel.

This is very different from the way most nations tell their stories. We are the great nation, the one that has always been right. We took a land that really didn't belong to anyone but a bunch of savages. We developed the land and made it rich, but that "we" does not include those who produced that wealth while enchained by slavery. We have always been right, and we have always practiced what is right. Therefore, whatever we do now will also be proven to have been right. This is particularly relevant today, for we are living in a time when there is a clear intention to rewrite history as if we had always been on the right.

The second dimension mentioned in this second chapter is the experience of exile. To understand the Hebrew Scriptures fully, one must take into account the experience of the Babylonian exile. To understand Latinos and Latinas fully, one must understand the experience of exile –and of immigration, which for many is another form of exile. This produces significant dynamics in families, in intergenerational relations, in the development of culture, and much more.

AETH

In many ways, what I mean by "exile" in those pages is very similar to the "mestizo" experience that Elizondo describes in *Galilean Journey*. As he was growing up in Texas, he was repeatedly told that he did not quite belong, because he was a Mexican. When he was finally able to visit Mexico, he was told that he did not belong, because he was a gringo. He belonged to two cultures, and he didn't fully belong in either of the two. Eventually, he came to the conclusion

that it is precisely in those mestizo borderlands where cultures and traditions meet that creativity often flourishes.

The **third and fourth chapters** try to place ourselves within the context of wider events that are often obscured by our preoccupation with more immediate events. By pointing to these wider contexts –which I call "macroevents– I was trying to go beyond the immediate and call our attention to some larger trends. The first of these is the end of the Constantinian era; the second is what I call "the failure of the North" and the explosive growth of Christianity in the South; the third is the growing self-consciousness of many who were mostly silent until fairly recent times. All of this leads to what at that time I called "the Reformation of the 20th century," of which I mentioned five characteristics: (1) that new voices are being heard; (2) that the post-Constantinian era, despite all its threats, also offers promises; (3) that we should be looking at Scripture not only for the content of truth, but also for some guidance as to its nature; (4) that the new reformation is radically ecumenical; and (5) that we will be positing anew the old question of the nature of universality.

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In the **fifth chapter** we move into some of the traditional and central issues of Christian theology. Following the general outline of many introductory handbooks on theology, these latter chapters begin with the Scripture and its interpretation. The title of that chapter is "Reading the Bible in Spanish." Obviously, that does not mean literally reading it in that language, but reading it from our own perspective, particularly from the perspective of

non-innocence that I described in an earlier chapter and that is an important element in the Bible's outlook on history. Since this chapter deals with biblical interpretation, and this will be the subject of our next session, at this point I will leave it at that. I am glad that we will have the time to deal more specifically with biblical interpretation, particularly because when the book was first published this was the chapter that was most widely discussed.

In the **sixth chapter** the book moves to what medieval theology placed under the heading of "On the One God." The title of the chapter is "Let the Dead Gods Bury their Gods," for not all gods are worthy of worship. This includes any god whose existence we are able to prove as well as any god we are able to manipulate. The difference between the true God and all idols is not simply that we can see the idols, while God is invisible. The difference is also and foremost that we can manipulate and idol, while God is always sovereign.

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But gods are also used to manipulate society. Christians must acknowledge and confess that too often the impassible, immutable, solitary God of Christendom has been used to preserve the status quo and its existing injustices. In brief, this chapter tries to show that idols have a socioeconomic function –and that this sometimes includes the Christian *idea* of God, which we take to be God, and is therefore an idol.

You can easily follow the rest of the outline. After all, it is fairly traditional. **Chapter seven** roughly corresponds to the medieval and traditional treatise "On the Triune God." It begins to

explore what the doctrine of the Trinity implies for human relations. It seeks to correct the common approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, not by more or better speculation, but rather by living out the example and model of sharing that is the very essence of the Godhead. **Chapter eight** deals with creation, and what it says both about God and about our relationship with the rest of creation. **Chapter nine** deals with theological anthropology; **chapter ten**, with incarnation; and **chapter eleven**, with eschatology. It is this last chapter that provides the title for the book: How does our eschatological expectation, our trust in *mañana*, affect our living today, in the moment in which God has placed us?

I began this session by telling you about the birth of this book out of conversation, *en conjunto*. I often tell my fellow preachers that one of the main differences between preaching and writing is that when you preach you immediately see the reactions of people, and therefore, even if you are the one speaking, there often is an immediate conversation. When you write, one or two other people see your manuscript before you send it off and comment on it. A year or two later what you wrote is published. And then, slowly, reactions trickle in, and the conversation continues. Sometimes it continues in weird ways. In a restaurant in Israel where you happen to be wearing a name tag, somebody walks by, looks at your name tag, and asks: "*Mañana*?" But sometimes it continues in more planned settings, such as the one we are planning to have later today. I am really looking forward to it!

AETH