Reading from My Place: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes

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"The Christian scholar in a changing academy." As I began thinking about this theme, my immediate course of action was to read some of the classic works that deal with the nature and purpose of the university, as well as some of the more recent studies and critiques as to how the academy in the United States has wavered from those ideals, or remained true to them.

Then it occurred to me that one of the signs of a changing academy is the very fact that I have been invited to present this lecture. When I first came to teach in this country, after eight years of teaching in Puerto Rico, I was the only Latino Protestant teaching in any seminary or graduate school of theology anywhere in the United States. It was some years before there were two. Today, although I can still name all of them, the numbers have increased to the point that it takes some thought to count them. This is not to say that things have changed as far as they must. The number of Hispanic professors in centers of higher education, and specifically in the field of religion, is still ridiculously small. Even worse is the case for Hispanic Protestant women, of whom I can only count three in all the ATS-accredited schools of theology. Yet, one can still see that change has taken place, and that our numbers, though still abysmally low, are better than they used to be. The same is true for other minorities, all of which, though still grossly underrepresented, have made significant gains in the number of faculty positions they hold.

In short, my very presence here represents a change in the academy which is just beginning to

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take place, but which I dare say during the coming decades will develop into the most radical change which the American academy has seen since its inception.

This change in the academy means much more than a change in color and gender. It implies also a change in method and in substance, for while a few years ago all that we wanted was to see more of us present in the hallowed halls of academia, now we are beginning to insist that our own particular perspectives and experiences be taken into account, and be allowed to impact the very core of the more traditional academic disciplines.

Furthermore, because for many of our people the crucial issue is survival, we find that we can no longer afford the comfortable security of academic compartmentalization, but must somehow deal with life as a whole, without thereby losing our academic interest and integrity.

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What this may mean for the future of the academy as a whole, I do not know.

What it might mean for the future of the academic study of religion, especially as it takes place in our schools of theology, I suspect. My suspicion is that for an increasing number of my colleagues, and eventually for the entire academic enterprise, it will mean that we shall have to engage much broader issues than those in which we were trained, and that we shall have to leave behind the mantle of false objectivity behind which much of the academic enterprise has taken refuge. For me personally, it means that I can no longer remain in the security of

second-century patristic studies, and ignore the total, living theological enterprise. It means also that, although I believe there is a paradigm here for other Christian scholars, for the present I am quite content to speak of the role of the minority Christian scholar in the emerging academy.

For these reasons, as an exploration of the risks minority Christian scholars will be required to take in a changing academy, I have chosen to do here two things which were anathema in the academy in which I was formed. The first is to wander into a field not my own. The second is to do so with full acknowledgment and even celebration of my own subjectivity. Hence my title: "Reading from my place: The Bible through Hispanic eyes."

(Since I have just declared that I shall unashamedly claim my subjectivity, perhaps I should confess, if only in passing, that one reason–not the only reason, yet an important one–why I have decided to dive into biblical hermeneutics, and move away from my own field of church history, is that during the last twenty or so years I have tried to apply these principles to the study of church history, and therefore I run the risk of having what follows sound like a defense or justification of my own work. By dealing instead with biblical hermeneutics, I hope to open the discussion beyond the field of history–although I believe that everything I shall say here regarding the reading of the bible is also true regarding the reading of history.)

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There is a poetically mysterious dimension to any dialogue. How is it that I, a center of being

and consciousness which no one can fully understand–not even myself–can express my thoughts and sentiments in words that are themselves subject to interpretation, and still hope to communicate with another center of being which is fully as mysterious as myself? When I say "God is love," my understanding of "God," of "love," and even of "is," is shaded and nuanced by a myriad of experiences, many of which I do not understand nor even suspect. The same is true of the person who hears my words. And yet, I believe—and I know—that dialogue is possible. That somehow it is worthwhile to say to another "God is love," even though our understanding of those words will never be exactly the same. Dialogue, mysterious and seemingly impossible though it might be, is the basis of our entire social life. It is the hope that communication might be possible that sustains me as I make a phone call, preach a sermon, or write a book. You, who listen to me this afternoon, will certainly not hear what I shall say exactly as I intended it. Yet I persist in speaking to you and to the rest of humankind presuming on the poetically mysterious miracle of dialogue, whereby, in spite of its impossibility, communication does take place.

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When the miracle of dialogue really happens, the otherness of each party is respected; what one party says is not to be understood merely on the basis of the whims of the other. I must not allow myself to hear you saying whatever I please, whatever fits my presuppositions. Your words have a normative dimension that I must not violate. On the other hand, I can only hear them within my context and from my own perspective. And yet, dialogue takes place, and somehow we manage to communicate. Communication is that mysterious bridge where intimacy and otherness meet.

To read the Bible is to enter into dialogue with it. In that dialogue, there is a sense in which the text is normative, just as the interlocutor of any other dialogue is normative. Impossible though the task may be, I must strive to understand the ancient text in its own context. I know that I cannot jump back to the time of the exile in Babylon, nor even to the time of the Roman Empire—living late in the twentieth century is difficult enough! No matter how much I study the original languages, I shall never understand the nuances of every turn of phrase the way a native speaker would have understood them. And yet I must take the text and its context in all seriousness. That is why the study of the biblical languages, and of all the disciplines which in various ways contribute to the historico-critical method, is so important. I must listen to the text as I would to another, respecting and trying to understand its otherness.

At the same time, the other pole of the dialogue is just as important. It is I, from my context and my perspective, who read the text. In order for there to be true dialogue, the text must engage me, not as I would have had I lived at the time of the Babylonian exile, but as I am here and now. It is not only the text that speaks to me, but I who speak to the text, demanding its responses in genuine dialogue.

In such dialogue, the question of perspective is important for two complementary reasons: first, because it cannot be avoided; second, because it should not be avoided.

First, perspective cannot be avoided. If there is anything we have learned during these last

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decades of modernity, it is that knowledge is always perspectival. We probably would have learned it much sooner had we really listened to Immanuel Kant, who showed that objective knowledge is a contradiction in terms. But the modern age was so enamored with the dream of objectivity that it has taken us two centuries to begin to understand the implications of what Kant was telling us. Kicking and screaming, shaken and poked by the likes of Freud and Marx, modernity has finally begun to awaken from its dream of objectivity, and the result has been the birth of post-modernity.

Precisely because perspective cannot be avoided, when it is not explicitly acknowledged the result is that a particular perspective takes on an aura of universality. Thus it happens that theology from a male perspective claims to be generally human, and that North Atlantic white theology believes itself to be "normal," while theologies from the so-called Third World or from ethnic minorities in the North Atlantic are taken to be contextual or perspectival.

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Just as important for our purposes is the second point, namely, that the matter of perspective should not be avoided. The reason for this is not simply that we delude ourselves when we believe that ours is not a particular perspective. The reason is rather that, unless the text addresses us where we are, it does not really address us. If a black woman in Africa reads a biblical text in exactly the same way in which she was taught to read it by a white man from Nebraska, the text will most likely be addressing issues that were important for her teacher and for other white men in Nebraska, but will not be addressing other issues that relate more

directly to that woman's life. If I do not speak to the text, asking questions that are genuinely my own, the text will not really speak to me, and the dialogue will be undercut.

Perspective, however, does not mean fragmentation. Whenever one speaks of theology being contextual, there are those who raise the question of the possibility that the contextualization of theology may lead to the fragmentation of the church. This is a legitimate concern, and one which must be addressed, for history shows that contextualization may indeed lead to divisiveness. Such was, for instance, the principal root of the long-standing schism between the Latin West and the Greek East. Over the centuries, each of these two branches of the church contextualized the Gospel in its own culture, and the time came when each accused the other of heresy. To say, however, that contextualization is what led to schism is to miss an important distinction. What led to schism was not contextualization itself, but unconscious contextualization. The inculturation of the Gospel in the Greek-speaking East was a positive and necessary result of the evangelization of the East. And the inculturation of the Gospel in the Latin-speaking West was also a positive and necessary result of the evangelization of the West. The problem lay in that neither the Greek-speaking East nor the Latin-speaking West was willing or able to acknowledge that its own understanding and expression of the Gospel were contextual. On the contrary, each of them insisted that its own theology was nothing but “the faith once delivered to the apostles.” On that basis, there was no option left but to reject and condemn all different understandings of any aspects of the faith, as well as any practice of the faith that did not agree with one's own. Precisely because contextualization had taken place,

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but was not acknowledged, contextualization resulted in schism.

The same is true today. Contextualization may certainly lead to fragmentation; but that is not necessarily its result. Unconscious contextualization, on the other hand, will certainly lead to fragmentation, because it is by nature sectarian, not recognizing that it is but part of the whole. What leads to fragmentation is not the existence of a black theology, a Latino theology, or a womanist theology. What leads to fragmentation is the lack of recognition that all these theologies, as well as all expressions of traditional theology, are contextual, and therefore express the Gospel as seen from a particular perspective. None of them can claim to speak for the whole. And any theology that makes that claim is by definition sectarian and divisive–even if it is what the church has traditionally taken as normative and universal.

It is for these reasons that I prefer to speak of "perspectives" in theology. It is not a matter of each particular group having its own truth, quite apart from all the rest. On that basis, since any group can be further subdivided, we would come to the conclusion that truth in theology is a purely individual matter, and would thus fall into a radical solipsism in which no dialogue is possible.

To speak of "perspectives" is to imagine that we are all looking at a landscape. The landscape itself is the same for all of us. Yet each one sees it from a different perspective, and will thus describe it differently. Since we are dealing with the interpretation of Scripture, it may be well

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to spell out some of the implications of this image of a landscape with a multitude of observers.

First of all, it is important to remember that we are all looking at the same landscape. We may certainly see it in a myriad different ways; but we still are all speaking of a single landscape, of a common text. This is part of what binds us together. The primary subject of our conversation is not our varying perspectives, important as they are. Our conversation is about the landscape, and how it is illuminated from each of our various vantage points. This means that, although what I am exploring is an interpretation of the Bible as seen through Hispanic eyes, it is still an interpretation of the Bible, and not simply of Latino experiences, good or bad.

Secondly, although we are speaking primarily of the landscape, we do not stand as outsiders to it. We are not outside observers, as if we were watching a movie. We stand within the landscape. We are affected by the landscape. Since we are people of faith, we can even say that we are defined by the landscape. We are also part of the view which other observers see, from their own perspective. And they too are part of the total landscape which we see. Part of the beauty of a landscape is that it draws me, the observer, into it, so that I am engulfed and in a way defined by its greatness. In the case of biblical interpretation, we are people who stand in faith, who believe that the Bible speaks to us, and who therefore are quite conscious that what we are describing is not simply a landscape "out there," but rather something that is at the very heart of our lives. We are not speaking of the biblical text as if it were dead letters, ancient history, distant memories; we are speaking of a text in which we find ourselves, our very lives.

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Third, as in the case of a landscape, it is absolutely impossible for two people to stand at exactly the same place at the same time. Some will stand so close to each other that their views will be virtually indistinguishable. Others, standing at a greater distance, will have widely differing perspectives. This means that, while it will be possible to classify various perspectives, all such classifications will be provisional, and may shift according to the issue at hand. We may say, for instance, that there is a group of people looking at a landscape from hill A, others from hill B, and still others from the bottom of the valley. Generally speaking, those on hill A will share a common perspective, which will be distinguishable from those on hill B. Yet there will be among those on hill A some who are on top of the hill, others who are lower down the slope, some who are standing on the right, others who are sitting on the left, some who are looking at the horizon, others who are more interested on the river at the bottom of the valley, and so on. Thus, those who share the common perspective of hill A could also be divided into various subgroups, according to a variety of criteria. Likewise, when we speak of "a Hispanic perspective," we must immediately acknowledge that this is just one of many possible ways of classifying perspectives, and that even among Hispanics there is a wide variety of perspectives. There are Hispanic males and females, poor, rich, and in between, liberals, radicals, and conservatives, young and old, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and others, etc. This is why, in a conversation such as this, we are always tempted to spend so much time trying to define who we are–what our common perspective is– that we never get to look at the landscape itself. The only way to move beyond such an impasse is to speak of "a Latino perspective," making an effort to be as inclusive as possible and hoping that such a perspective resonates with other

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Hispanics, but knowing that it must never claim to be the Latino perspective.

Fourth, a variety of perspectives enriches everyone’s appreciation of the landscape itself. If I stand on hill A, someone from hill B can point out features in the landscape that I would never have noticed on my own. If I am interested in the way light bounces off of rocks and rivers, I can contribute something to my neighbor, whose interest lies in the various shades of green in the forest below us. Through conversation, we can enrich each other's experience of the landscape –and thereby we can enrich each other’s lives. Thus, I affirm my own perspective, not in order to claim that it is only I who understand the landscape, but rather in order to enrich the entire community of observers around me. And I am also much impoverished if I do not listen to what they have to say about the landscape as they see it from their own unique perspectives.

Finally, and most importantly, all of this is worth doing only because we believe in the miracle of communication. Thanks to communication, I do not stand alone in the landscape. Thanks to communication, those others who stand with and around me, both near and far, are much more than silent features in the landscape. They address me in their otherness. They speak to me, both of themselves and of their own vistas as they look at the landscape. They enrich my enjoyment of the landscape, forcing me to move around, to shift into their perspectives, to see the towering rock or the small bush I had missed. Some of the great landscape artists owe their greatness precisely to their ability to present in a single picture a vista that is subtly yet coherently enriched by a variety of perspectives. Likewise, our interpretation of the biblical text

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will be enhanced as we take into account the variety of perspectives offered to us by the entire church catholic.

Such a variety of perspectives is not only valuable; it is absolutely necessary. Although I have just used words such as "enhancing" and "enriching," we are not dealing here with an optional enhancement to Christian theology—like chrome trimming on an automobile. We are dealing rather with something that belongs to the very nature of the church, and without which the church cannot be true to its own nature—more like the four wheels in a car. To say that the church is "catholic" means that it includes within itself a variety of perspectives. To say that it is "one" means that such multiplicity, rather than dividing it, brings it closer together. This is the miracle of communication, which in Christian theology we ascribe to the Holy Spirit.

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Significantly, in the book of Acts the first consequence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples—men and women, the twelve as well as the others—is their ability to communicate. Thanks to the Spirit, these disciples can communicate with a variety of peoples; and their communication is not centripetal or imperialistic. The Spirit does not impose on all the language of the original disciples, but rather makes it possible for various people to understand "each in their own native language." From the very outset, the Spirit makes the church truly catholic by including in it a variety of languages and cultural perspectives even though, as the rest of the book of Acts and the entire history of the church show, on this score Christians have constantly and repeatedly resisted the Spirit.

If the miracle of communication is to take place in the emerging pluralistic academy, it will not take place around a supposedly objective truth or body of knowledge which has been surreptitiously predefined by those who have traditionally held all the trumps. Like the miracle of Pentecost, real communication will only take place as scholars from different perspectives, and bringing with them the experiences of various sectors of humankind, approach the landscape which is their field of inquiry with such mutual respect that all "tongues"—read all perspectives—have a place in the dialogue and the inquiry.

Not all Latinos have the same experience, and therefore not all readings "through Hispanic eyes" are alike. There are differences of gender—differences which are quite crucial in communities where males often suppress their own consciousness of oppression by oppressing females. There are differences of origin—differences which sometimes are overplayed by those in the dominant culture who wish to justify their unresponsiveness on the basis of our own divisiveness, but which nevertheless are quite real. Some of us are descendants of the original inhabitants of these lands, who were here long before the arrival of the first Europeans. Some of us are descendants of African slaves brought to work for Spanish masters. Some of us are descendants of the Spanish conquistadors and colonizers. Most of us are a mixture of these and other strains. In background, some of us are Mexican, others Puerto Rican, others Cuban, or Dominican, or Central American. Some can claim more than one of these various backgrounds. Some of us were born in the United States. Others came as political exiles. Still others came for economic and other reasons. Many of us are not even quite sure why we are here. Some call

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ourselves “Latino/as,” others “Hispanics,” or “Hispanic-Americans.” Some prefer more concrete identifications: “Chicano,” “Puerto Rican,” “Cuban-American,” “Mexican-American,” “Salvadoran,” etc.

With such a variety of experiences and backgrounds, it is not surprising that there are many paradigms for Latino hermeneutics. Today, however, I would like to center our attention on the paradigm of marginality. No matter what our background, most Latinos, when speaking of our own experience in this society and in the church within this society, identify with the image of marginality.

This became quite clear to me some fifteen years ago, when a group of us was planning a journal on Hispanic theology. We knew what we wanted: a journal that would re-read the Bible, theology and history from our own perspective(s) ; one that would bring together the concerns and experiences of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and all others who call themselves “Hispanics” or “Latinos.” But we did not know what to call it, or what to use as a theme or logo on the cover. We toyed with dozens of names and logos. Someone suggested Don Quijote charging at a church that looked like a windmill. But others objected that this was too Spanish, and did not take into account the native background that is also part of who we are. Someone else suggested a Mexican hat and a guitar. But it immediately became clear that this left out the African background of many of us. One after another, all proposals were turned down as not being sufficiently inclusive.

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Then someone suggested the name *Apuntes*, and the subtitle: *Reflexiones desde el margen hispano*—Reflections from the Hispanic margin. The suggestion was immediately received as one that really brought all of us together. “Apuntes” had the value of being a somewhat ambiguous word, which could be taken to mean “jottings,” but also "aimings.” Thus, this title would allow us to consider ourselves as merely making marginal jottings at the edge of theology, but also as aiming at some core issues within church and theology. Note that a common denominator of both meanings is that in both cases one stands outside the center, either making marginal notes or taking aim at something in the center. At that point, the question of what to use for a cover was easily answered. We would take a page from a classical Christian author, and write marginal notes to it. On this we all happily agreed, and adjourned the meeting in order to celebrate what we were convinced was an inspired solution to our dilemma.

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The point was clear. While we sought to define our own identity by means of a central theme or logo, we could not do it. Clearly, there is something—or rather, several somethings—at the core of our being that binds us together: language, culture, history, traditions, etc. But all of these are sufficiently varied that when we try to pin them down they prove both unitive and divisive. The one point at which there is a commonality of experience and perspective is marginality.

As I reflect on the most interesting interpretations I hear in our churches, it is clear to me that this perspective of marginality is a guiding principle in much of our interpretation of texts.

There are many reasons for this, but they can generally be collected under two headings. The first is our experience as Protestants in a culture where the majority are Roman Catholic. In many Latino circles, the new openness and dialogue between Protestants and Catholics which developed after the Second Vatican Council has lagged far behind. This has to do in part with the attitude of many Roman Catholics who feel that Hispanics should by rights be Catholics, and that therefore Hispanic Protestants are traitors to their own culture and traditions. It also has to do with the prevailing attitude in many Hispanic Protestant circles, that Roman Catholics are not really Christians, and ought to be converted for the sake of their own salvation. Finally, it has to do with the very marginalization of our communities, where ideas and trends that have been circulating in the dominant society for decades are slow to penetrate. In any case, as Protestants our experience is often one of marginalization even in our own Hispanic communities.

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Then, we are also marginalized in the larger community, where being Protestant is quite acceptable, but our race, our accent, or even our surname are not as acceptable. And this is certainly true of most of our own denominations, many of which boast of their minority memberships, but seldom give such minorities an opportunity for leadership. And, even when such opportunities are given, the polity of most major Protestant denominations is such that it is very difficult for Hispanic congregations, many of which are poor, to be fully enfranchised in the various denominational structures.

Sometimes the very experience and conscience of marginality leads to strange consequences.

This is clearly the case with Matthew 5:23-24: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer the gift.”

This is one of those passages in which our mind and our convenience play games on us. Ever since the first time I remember taking communion, I remember also being told that the passage meant that when one comes to communion one must do so with a spirit of forgiveness. It would not do to come to the altar with hatred in our hearts. And that may well be true; but that is not what the text says.

The text does not say simply that if we bring our gift before the altar, and there remember that we have something against our brother or our sister, we should forgive them. The text says rather that if we remember that our sister or our brother have something against us, we must go and be reconciled. And that is much more difficult. If it is a matter of how I feel about another, I can easily change that—or at least I can easily fool myself into thinking that I have changed it. I forgive everybody! Now I can come before the altar!

If, on the other hand, the problem is that we remember that another has something against us, then the matter is much more difficult. It is no longer simply a question of inner feelings, of private decision, of quiet forgiveness. It is rather a question of setting aright whatever is wrong.

It is also a matter of recognizing that others may have something against us. And, even more difficult, of recognizing that they may have a reason to have something against us. That our present good intentions are not enough. That in a sense, even our present inner repentance is not enough. The injured brother or sister is not merely something in my heart, something I can change by willing it away or by feeling sorry for what I have done. They are a physical reality, out there, with which I must deal, and seek to set things aright, if I am to be faithful to the Lord's injunction.

In all of this, marginality and the consciousness thereof have played a strange series of functions. First, they have made me suspicious of an interpretation in which those who most often wrong others if for no other reason than because they can—because they stand at the center, holding the threads of power and control over the marginalized—are left off the hook too easily. All one has to do if one has wronged someone else is to repent before the Lord. The wrong does not have to be righted. The relationship does not have to be levelled. Inner repentance is enough. Second, marginality means that, in any relationship in which I am marginal and another is central, the text does not really refer directly to me. All I can do is to stand at the margin, waiting for the one who has wronged me and others like me to come and offer reconciliation and reparation. There are many other texts that insist that those who have been wronged must be ready to forgive; but this is not one of them. Thirdly, since in spite of the foregoing I still believe that the text is also for me, this passage reminds me that marginality is relative; that although in terms of racial and ethnic relations in this country I stand at the

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margins, there are many other contexts and relationships in which I stand at the center, and push others to the margin: As a male, I enjoy privileges and considerations that most women do not enjoy. As a North-American citizen, I enjoy rights and an economic status that the vast majority of humankind lacks. In education, income, comfort, and in many other ways, I am not truly marginal. Thus, what my experience of marginality as a Latino allows me to see in those relationships in which I stand at the margin, I must also be willing to see in those other relationships in which I stand at the center.

One way in which some of us experience marginality is *mestizaje*, the experience of being *mestizos*—that is, mix-breeds—and all that goes with it. It is Virgil Elizondo who has done most significant work with this understanding of our reality. The Mexican, he says, is born out of the *mestizaje* of the Spanish and the Indian; the Mexican-American, out of the *mestizaje* of the Mexican and the Anglo. *Mestizaje* is a threat to both its parent cultures, for it undermines "the barriers of separation that consolidate self-identity and security." It also points towards the future, for all culture and all ethnic identity is provisional, and eventually gives way to a new *mestizaje*.

The implications of this paradigm for biblical interpretations are obvious. We read much of the Bible from a perspective of ethnic and cultural purity. But there are also other trends in the Bible. Just to give one passing example, when I spoke here in Chicago a couple of years ago at the graduation ceremonies of one of your theological institutions, my text was an apparently

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insignificant remark in Acts 13, where we are informed that Saul is also called Paul. To me that is a cue that Paul can do what he does because he is a cultural *mestizo*; and that the entire book of Acts can be read as the progressive *mestizaje* of the church; and that the process and the goal of Christian mission may be interpreted as the progressive *mestizaje* of the church and the faith. (But that is a likely subject for a different lecture.)

Another image by which Latinos express their marginality is exile and alienness. While for many of our cousins in Latin America the Exodus becomes the central paradigm, for many of us in the United States that function belongs to the Babylonian exile. For whatever reasons, we find ourselves in a land not our own—in some cases, in a land that was our own but is no longer. In that land, we must find a way to live, to survive, and to be faithful.

This is why Hispanic theology in the United States, from its very inception, has been concerned with issues of migration, exile, and alienness.

The marginalization of an exile community can easily lead to an escapism in which one lives only for the time of return—or, in the case of many Latino Christians, for the time when we shall enjoy life eternal, without the blemishes and the pains of this earthly life. There is indeed a long tradition of biblical interpretation which reads exile in such terms, and longs for the eternal mansions. For that reason, Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon is of the greatest significance for us: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they

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produce…But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Most particularly, we must remember that those who announced an early return from exile were declared to be false prophets: "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams they dream, for it is a lie they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord" (Jer. 29:4-9).

The point here is that the marginalization that goes with an experience of exile can easily be compounded when a people in exile accept their marginalization on the grounds that their exile will not last long, that this is just a temporary situation which will soon pass. As Latinos, very often we have ignored the political issues of this land, forgetting that, marginal though we might be, in the welfare of the land we too shall find our welfare, and that there will be no justice for us unless this is a just land.

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Although *mestizaje*, exile, and alienness capture a significant aspect of the Hispanic experience of marginalization, poverty is sufficiently important to deserve particular attention. This is not the place to repeat all the statistics regarding the poverty in which most Latinos live. Suffice it to say that, for over twenty years, every negative statistic underemployment, poverty rate, for Hispanics—unemployment, school drop outs, etc.—has remained at a steady 150% of what it has been for the rest of the population. (That is to say, for instance, that when unemployment stands at 8% for the rest of the population, it is 12% for the Latino population.) Whatever the

statistics may be, the point is clear: in general, Latino experience in the United States is one of poverty. (Which is not to say that such conditions are necessarily worse than in our various countries of origin. It is simply to say that the experience here and now most often includes poverty and lack of economic opportunity.)

This particular form of marginalization also affects the way we read Scripture.

An example of how the experience of poverty sometimes leads us to interpret a passage in a rather unusual way took place in a very impoverished community in one of our cities. The pastor had been preaching on the Ten Commandments, and came to the law regarding the sabbath: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is sabbath to the Lord your God." The most common interpretation of this passage is rather legalistic, as if for some capricious design God had decided that one day in seven would be for rest, and now it is our task to spell out that law in its minutest detail. That was the sort of interpretation against which Jesus had to struggle constantly, and which has repeatedly appeared in the Christian church. Another rather common interpretation turns the commandment regarding the sabbath into a religious law, stipulating that this is a day set aside for worship, as if God required one day in seven. Clearly, the text says nothing about this, for the worship of God on this particular day is not even mentioned. And in any case it would be rather uncharacteristic for the sovereign God of all creation to demand one day in seven—as if the rest were not equally holy! A more enlightened interpretation realizes the joy and the celebration intended in the sabbath law. The

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sabbath is the day in which we rest, just as God rested; in which we rejoice in our work, just as God saw that creation was good; in which not only we, but also the animals and even the earth, join in the blessed and joyful rest of God.

But in this particular church the preacher followed none of these avenues. Rather, he began by asking how many in the congregation had been able to work six days during the previous week. A few hands went up. He then asked how many had been able to work five days. A few more hands. Four Days? More hands. Then he asked, “How many of you were not able to find work at all?” More than half of the congregation raised their hands. Finally, he asked, “How many of you wish you could work six days a week, but can't find work?” Almost every hand went up.

At that point, the preacher read the text again: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” He stopped, and asked, "How, then, are we to obey the law of God, that commands that we shall work six days, when we cannot even find work for a single day?”

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You may consider this particular preacher more inflammatory than necessary. But the point is that, as one profoundly identified with a population where unemployment, and not overemployment, is the great evil, he saw in the commandment something most of us do not see. The commandment says that we must rest, yes; but it says that in the context of work. It says that in a context in which it is expected that all will have employment. The order which the commandment envisions is one in which people will take the time to rest, and give the same

time to other people as well as to animals and the whole of creation. But that rest is envisioned within a context of work. “Six days you shall work” is no less part of the order which God envisions and desires than resting on the seventh day. The commandment is not only to rest. It is also a commandment to work.

Clearly, in an agrarian society in which each household had a plot of land, and in which there was always work to be done, the emphasis lay on the need to set aside a day for rest. In such a society, one could easily work seven days a week, with no respite, and expect similar work from animals, servants, and employees. Against such practices, the law rightly sets aside a day for rest. And the point at which the law was most likely to be broken was in working more than the six days, and leaving no time for rest. Thus, it is not surprising that in much of the most ancient tradition of interpretation the emphasis lay on the day of rest.

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It is true that we still need laws guaranteeing rest. Unfortunately in recent times, with our twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week competitive economy, the principles of rest are being increasingly violated. Christians are often incensed at the manner in which the laws regarding the day of rest are being eroded. And they should be; but not for the reasons often adduced. The problem is not that an increasingly secular society is impinging on God’s day. The problem is that an increasingly inhumane society driven by the maximization of profits is impinging on the very order of creation, in which all—people, animals, and even the land—require rest as well as work. The sabbath was not ordered for the sake of a God who

requires worship. The sabbath was ordained for the sake of a creation that requires rest.

Yet what the preacher that I have quoted was driving at was much more radical than this. What he was driving at is that the reason why we have centered our attention on the day of rest to the exclusion of the days of work is that most biblical interpretation has been done by those who do not have to worry about work. These are mostly two categories of people: those who do not have to work at all, and those who normally have employment, but who need the guarantee that they will not be overworked by their employers. Historically, there has been much tension between these two groups, and it is in that context that the labor laws were forged determining the number of work hours in a regular week, and other such matters. In the tension between these two groups, which has existed since time immemorial, the commandment regarding rest has played an important role.

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That debate, however, has left aside an ever increasing number of people in our modern societies whose problem is not having a day off, but having work to do. Although society does not determine exactly who these people will be by giving them actual names, society does determine that there will be a certain level of unemployment, and that people at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder will have to fight among themselves for the relatively small number of jobs available to them. These were the people to whom this particular preacher was speaking. Unfortunately, they are also the people who already know all of this without having to be told. Still, the point is clear: the reason why we do not see that the commandment is also

about the right to work is that most of us are not in that predicament. Christians who are so incensed about the erosion of the sabbath laws should be even more incensed at the fact that our society has never even considered the possibility that the right to work may be a God-given right—for God does not command us to do what we cannot do.

Does all of this have anything to do with the role of the Christian scholar in the emerging academy? I believe it does, for it means that, in contrast to what I was taught and told in years past, the ideal of the Christian scholar—and most particularly of the minority Christian scholar— will not be detached objectivity. The word I must seek to speak in the university is not a word devoid of my own imprint, of my own pathos, of the experiences of my people which are close to my heart. On the contrary, my contribution will be the more valuable—although perhaps not the more appreciated—as it somehow brings to the core of academic debate and research those issues, experiences and perspectives which have been too long neglected, because they are not part of "normal"—read normative—human experience.

Finally, there is another dimension of marginality which I constantly experience, and which I am experiencing at this very moment. Marginality forces us to abbreviate and undue representation. Because the Latino community and experience are marginal to a setting such as this, we often find ourselves in a situation in which, in the scope of an hour, we have to speak of all Latino experience and all Latino hermeneutics. This is a position which I always approach with ambivalence. On the one hand, I crave the opportunity to bring some of that experience

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and some of our insights to the attention of centers of learning and of reflection such as this. On the other, I fear lest I be substituted for the reality, lest listening to a lecture be substituted for meeting people, walking on our streets, worshiping in our churches, listening to real interpretations as they emerge in the life of the Latino community.

I can only hope that, as a true community of inquiry, you will not be satisfied with what I say, but will go and see for yourselves what the Latino people at the very margins of this university are living and saying. You may find it quite enlightening. That is the emerging academy of which I would indeed crave to be a part!