
Theological Education *en Español*

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Our situation¹

It goes almost without saying that something is going on in theological education. In 2018 Ted A. Smith, in a special issue of *Theological Education*, a journal of the *Association of Theological Schools (ATS)*, described the status of theological education as the breaking up of the influential professional model established at the turn of the twentieth century. Related to this, he also asserted that “the changes taking place in schools, churches, and the wider society run so deep that they suggest that we are in a time of transition from one prevailing paradigm in theological education to another.”² He goes on to write in the first paragraph his book *The End of Theological Education*:

With quarantines closing campuses, uprisings for Black freedom shaking foundations, denominations splitting, established financial models collapsing, and the role of religion in American lives changing in deep-epoch-defining ways, the challenges facing theological schools today can make it seem as if the end is near.³

Justo González describes the situation as a multidimensional crisis.⁴ He identifies recruitment, financial difficulties, and relevance as issues related to this crisis.⁵ Marcia E. Riggs, in the foreword of Christine J. Hong’s book *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education*, goes deeper, commenting on Hong’s proposal. She states that Hong’s proposal is to go from saving theological education *from what we might do* and inviting us to consider *who we are*.⁶ The crisis is one of conscience that needs us to be “moral agents responsible for transforming our teaching institutions.”⁷

1. This is an expanded version of an article published in *Living Lutheran* in 2021.

2. Ted Smith, *Theological Education*, Volume 51, No 2, 2018: 1-2.

3. Ted Smith, *The End of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 1.

4. Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), ix.

5. González, *History of Theological Education*, x.

6. Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (New York: Lexington Books, 2021), ix.

7. Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, ix.

Although theological education understood as the traditional institutional establishment is in crisis, theological education as a practice and a community of persons “committed to learning and the cultivation of faith’s wisdom” is not, and that this wider understanding of theological education as a practice “is one of the best tools we can use for guidance into the future.”

The theological education community has responded. The theological educational network of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has created a plethora of new programs to deliver theological education in the last decade. It provides, as a network, the equivalent to full tuition to students, along with a successful denominational effort called *Fund For Leaders*, which provided more than \$3M in scholarships annually in the last two years and will continue in 2024-2025. The network pivoted fast amid the COVID crisis into providing online access to its academic programs. Access and finances are provided in our ELCA theological network.

Moreover, Justo González identifies the importance of theological education. He affirms that theological education is part of the essence of the church, that although theological education understood as the traditional institutional establishment is in crisis, theological education as a practice and a community of persons “committed to learning and the cultivation of faith’s wisdom is not, and that this wider understanding of theological education as a practice “is one of the best tools we can use for guidance into the future.”⁸

8. González, *The History of Theological Education*, ix-xi. The word “practice” is mine, as I read and interpret González’ proposal.

Cocorocó

As I think about the theological education crisis as a *latines* professor and administrator, the story of *Terrazo* comes to mind. *Terrazo* is a classic Puerto Rican book of short stories, written by Abelardo Díaz Alfaro in 1947. In one of its stories, a Puerto Rican teacher tries to teach English to his students. Here is a dialogue between the teacher and Tellito, one of his students:

-Read with me: The cock says cockadoodledoo... Tellito, ¿how does the cock sing in English?

-I do not know, teacher.

-But you have just read it!

-No. -answered Tellito, looking at the picture.

-Listen, the cock sings cockadoodledoo.

-Teacher, that's the American cock, the cock at home sings cocorocó clearly.

The teacher started to laugh, and then the whole class. Outside, startled by the laughs, Don Ciprián's cock flaps his wings and sings a clean and metallic cocorocó.

One can read this story as ethnocentric or even with some tension as two cultures—the Spanish and American—collide in a small and embattled Caribbean island at the beginning of the Cold War. I think there is more to it: something theological.

This “more” to the story has to do with the incarnation and to what we Lutherans call the vernacular. In his “On Translating: An Open Letter,” Martin Luther wrote:

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how are we to speak German ... Rather, we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must watch their mouth and be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.⁹

The vernacular is the efficacious and meaningful way the Word inhabits our words by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Martin Luther's effort to bring the Bible, preaching, and worship to real people in real life. This “more” of the story of the teacher and Tellito has to do with the real presence of the Word among us and the capacity of the Word to inhabit the precariousness and limitations of creation (*finitum capax infinitum*). It relates to words, as we create reality and relate to each other through words. The Word grasps us and establishes a full-of-grace relationship with us. In the incarnation God came to us and the Word became one of us. Jesus assumes our reality and inhabits it as it is. The Word

9. Martin Luther, “On Translating: An Open Letter,” in Euan K. Cameron, ed. *The Annotated Luther: The Interpretation of Scripture*, Vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 30.

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is preached in the vernacular, which is more than simply speaking any language. It is the Word being incarnate in the wholeness and depth of our reality and being. The Word is capable of dwelling in the contingency and precariousness of a small Caribbean island. In Puerto Rico, it means that the cock sings *cocorocó*. God finds a way to be present and understand Tellito as he listens to the cock singing in Spanish. Not as ethnocentric but as a contextual and profoundly theological reality. God listens and speaks to us *en español*. Theology and biography go hand and hand.

The vernacular as an expression of the incarnation struggles with reality as it is in life and theological education. It is easy to say that Tellito has a place at the table. It is complicated to add *cocorocó* to the professional model of theological education and its academic canon as it has been established in the United States for more than a century. This model and canon are part of what Walter Mignolo identifies as the colonial matrix of power: the creation of “the conditions to build and control a structure of knowledge, either grounded on the word of God or the word of Reason a Truth.”¹⁰ In this Western panorama ingrained in modernity, the construction of knowledge made it possible “to eliminate or marginalized what did not fit...to build a totality in which everybody would be included.”¹¹ Inclusion, here, is “a one-way street”¹² controlled by those who have power. In this sense, this is what Hong calls a moral crisis in theological education: the dilemma of “control of the sphere of knowledge and subjectivity.”¹³ Tellito has to fight his way in.

Ann E. López connects the colonial matrix of power with education. She argues that it extends to the occupation of mind and being. The colonial project of education “extends to higher education, evidenced by the lack of Indigenous and local customs and traditions at universities in the West.”¹⁴ I argue that this also extends to seminaries and theological education institutions. Our theological education network provides a plethora of new

10. Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xv.

11. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, xx.

12. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, xx.

13. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, xix.

14. Ann E. López, *Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 5.

programs and innovative spaces and ways to access theological education. It is making a herculean effort to provide full tuition, affirming a profound commitment to its ecclesial vocation. The network, as in theological education in general in the United States, continues to teach and share knowledge as part of the colonial matrix of power that is thread in first-world institutions. We may be traveling the first miles of a more participatory pedagogical and epistemological road here, but the professional model is still in place both institutionally and in the theological framework of all of us.

The late Enrique Dussel argued that, as we had a linguistic turn in philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century and a pragmatic turn proposed by Karl-Otto Apel to dismantle the underpinnings of Eurocentrism and modernity, we need an epistemological “decolonizing turn.”¹⁵ This is needed because, Luis N. Rivera Pagán argues, imperial power creates the domains of political subordination, material appropriation, and ideological justification. Imperial dominion is mystified, and an imperial hegemony is established.¹⁶ It is in this place where *latines* communities live: a place of dislocation and displacement. A place where “painful and complex processes of forging new strategies to articulate cultural differences and identifications”¹⁷ happens. A geography where we feel “like a man without a passport who is turned away from every harbour.”¹⁸ Nicolás Panotto articulates this in this way:

The general field of religion and theology in particular also account for these processes, both internally and externally. That is to say, on the one hand “the religious” acts as both an ideological framework and as a matrix of meaning for certain colonial enterprises. On the other hand, it also experiences in its speeches, practices, and ways of institutionality similar tensions to those found in its identity, political and symbolic environments. Hence, Christian theology responds to its paradoxical mimesis, where its discourses and practices have served and attend both at the behest of oppression and also of liberation and decolonization.¹⁹

The question is: How can theological education in the United States turn into *liberative* theological education?

15. Enrique Dussel, “Epistemological Decolonization of Theology,” in *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*, Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent, eds. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 36.

16. Luis N. Rivera Pagán, “Towards a Decolonial Theology: Perspectives from the Caribbean,” in *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*, Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent, eds. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 45.

17. Pagán, “Towards a Decolonial Theology,” 47.

18. Rivera Pagán is quoting Graham Greenes’ *The Power and the Glory*. “Towards a Decolonial Theology,” 47.

19. Nicolás Panotto, “A Critique of the Coloniality of Theological Knowledge: Rereading Latin American Liberation Theology as Thinking Otherwise,” in *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*, Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent, eds. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 218.

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Identities are in its use

Tellito was a Puerto Rican islander. Much has happened since he realized the cock at home sang cocorococó *clarito*.²⁰ The *latines* communities in the United States are complex and varied almost past the first quarter of the twenty-first century. I am a Puerto Rican born and raised in Puerto Rico. My wife, Denise, is Nuyorican, raised in Puerto Rico, went to college in New York and graduate school in Puerto Rico. She has been in the *guagua aérea*²¹ three times with me between Philadelphia, Puerto Rico, and Chicago in our thirty-four years of marriage. Javier Andrés, my oldest son, was born in Abington, Pennsylvania, and raised in Dorado and San Juan, Puerto Rico. He lives now in Washington, D.C. Gabriela Denise, my daughter, was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, went to college in Pennsylvania, began her working career in Puerto Rico and now lives in Miami, Florida.

My family’s situation is not extraordinary. It is part of the everyday realities of migration, displacement, and relocation the *latines* communities and the *latines* diaspora struggle with every day. Our vernacular is Spanish, English, and Spanglish. The colonial matrix of power is experienced and suffered in a variety of ways by the generations of *latines* communities living in the United States. If theological education wants to be a meaningful thread that promotes life and dignity among our communities, it needs to be competent and committed to speak in this rainbow of *latines* vernaculars.

I think we need to deconstruct the essentialist identity that has been imposed on us both in the south and the north of the Río Grande. South of the Río Grande we have been constructed as beasts and non-beings.²² Imperial debris. North of the Río Grande we have been classified as the generic Hispanic.²³ Let me use my

20. “*clarito*” is Spanish for “clearly” or “very clear.”

21. The *guagua aérea*—the aerial bus or airbus—is a reference to the continuing transit of Puerto Ricans between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland due to the colonial relationship between the two. The idiom was coined by Luis Rafael Sánchez, a prominent Puerto Rican author, in his seminal novel. See Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* (San Juan: Editorial Cultural), 1994.

22. Luis N. Rivera Pagán, “Culto y cultura: Evangelización de los pueblos americanos,” in *Diálogos y polifonías: Perspectivas y reseñas* (San Juan: Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico, 1999), 57ss.

23. José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Church in Puerto Rico* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 11. Rodríguez comments on the diverse identity descriptions among *latines* in

Puerto Rican context as an example. Yara González describes Puerto Rico as a colonial Caribbean geography of the United States where “(b)oth the Catholic and (to a greater extent) the Protestant churches...contributed to the United States nationalist expansionism sacralizing the political processes of cultural, military and political imposition in Puerto Rico.”²⁴ This colonial situation triggered the development of an essentialist and either-or identity documented in our literature.²⁵ Luis N. Rivera Pagán, reflecting theologically to this situation in his essay “Perspectiva teológica sobre la crisis en Puerto Rico: Algunos desafíos,” asserts that one source of the Puerto Rican uncertainty related to its identity is the coloniality of power, this is, the political, economic and cultural dominion exercised successively by two imperial metropolises (Spain and the United States).²⁶ He adds that, apparently, “we lack the necessary knowledge and power to create our own path towards a national community.” He goes on to say,

A methodological requisite to understand the role of a Christian religiosity in the plural and paradoxical configuration of the Puerto Rican identity is to overcome the essentialist understanding of our national identity... The Puerto Rican identity, as an authentic national identity, is not an culminated and uncontaminated essence; it is a forge process, a polyphonic and polychromic process, subject to its perilous and contingent historical development.²⁷

My main thesis here is that identity is in its use and this use needs to be postcolonial. It needs to address and negotiate with the colonial matrix of power and gather materials that promote life and dignity as we construct anew our identities. The movement toward a non-essentialist, porous and dynamic construction of our identity is identified by Mercedes López-Baralt in her massive and important edited anthology *Literatura Puertorriqueña del Siglo XX: Antología*. In this anthology she describes the movement from an “essentialist, sedentary and totalizing” identity toward diversity and heterogeneity as a multiplicity of themes and perspectives are introduced in our literature living side by side.²⁸ Thus, I can describe our Puerto Rican identities as a

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(w)eb of significance that describes a new and complex panorama... This identity is inserted in the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States geographies providing Puerto Ricans with a regional appropriation of the world that is, at the same time, part of the conglomerate of rationalities and worldviews present in the world... At the surface of this dynamic and fluid web Puerto Ricans participate in hybridization processes...breaking up and mixing the collections that use to organize their cultural system, by providing alternatives to the deterritorialization of symbolic processes and by expanding their possibilities of survival through the creation of impure genres... pirates and thieves, Africans and Newyoricans, foreigners and criollos, Americans, *jibaros*, and *mulatos*; a multitude of faces and a multitude of strategies witness the presence and availability of new possibilities to articulate Puerto Rican identity... Moreover, (it is) a linguistic web that speaks Spanish, English and Spanglish gathering these pieces as they find sense and meaning by their use in this complex reality.²⁹

The *latines* realities are somewhat similar, now having more than twenty nations and contexts in which conversation, negotiation, and construction continually happens. As we affirm diversity in our ecclesial landscape, this does not mean substituting or eliminating. It means adding and expanding. It means we need to expand and deepen our theological education landscape to include Tellito. Our theological education system will only grow and strengthen as new eyes and new voices read and comment on our confessional tradition and find connections, relationships, nuances, and language that help us better grasp and articulate our faith. Again, theological education cannot limit itself to lip service to our *latines* communities if it wants to be theological education *en español*.

A way forward

The late Vitor Westhelle wrote about the future of the Lutheran communion in *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of*

the United States and provides good documentation on the origin and use of the term “hispanic” in note 1 of chapter 1.

24. Yara González-Justiniano, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica* (New York: Lexington Books, 2022), 7-8.

25. Mercedes López-Baralt, *Literatura Puertorriqueña del Siglo XX: Antología* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2004), xix.

26. Luis N. Rivera Pagán, “Perspectiva teológica sobre la crisis en Puerto Rico: Algunos desafíos,” in *Ensayos teológicos desde el Caribe* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2013), 226-227.

27. Pagán, “Perspectiva teológica sobre la crisis en Puerto Rico,” 228.

28. Francisco J. Goitia Padilla, “Identity, Language and Theology for the Proclamation of the Gospel,” PhD diss (Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2012), 176-178.

29. Goitia Padilla, “Identity, Language and Theology,” 174.

Luther's Theology. He presents one of Martin Luther's mantras as a possible connection to do theology and create communion: Experience alone makes a theologian.³⁰ The experience of one theologian, affirms Westhelle following Luther, allows us to enter into a conversation: "an open circle, or an expandable round table...where theology is done when the experiences of the participants become channels through which information is received and shared."³¹ We communicate our experiences in a narrative and theological form, with its pedagogical impact, when we invest in communication as *co-munus*...as a gift of the task itself.³² We share what we have: *anfechtung*, *tentatio*³³...and even communication as *koinonia*.³⁴ Westhelle proclaims:

We are also between celebrating what we have in common in listening to each other and the reception of the gift. Those gifts come from places and knowledges, contexts and experiences, not yet familiar to the old bastions of Lutheran traditions. The task ahead is to level the ground of the *koinonia* so that those gifts can be shared around in this spirit: what was given to me and rooted in my experience and context I also give to you. This is me and I give it to you. It is in this giving and accepting that we know that we are at the leveled table of Christ.³⁵

Raúl Fonet-Betancourt and José David Rodríguez comment on this wonderful theological vision of Westhelle. Rodríguez understands theology as a collaborative task. He points to a medullar trait in *latines* culture: working and sharing life together. *Teología en conjunto* is doing theology "implying not only the coming together but also the integration and intimacy involved in such a sharing."³⁶ It includes our rich diversity and our integral collaborative spirit.³⁷ Fonet-Betancourt describes this gift sharing in *koinonia* proposed by Westhelle as a reunion of all rationalities, with their *a priori* recognition of regionality, that inhabit a world of negotiated frameworks of meaning. The leveled ground of *koinonia* produces, in Fonet-Betancourt terms, pluriversals.³⁸

Enrique Dussel helps to focus Fonet-Betancourt's proposal of pluriversals. He asserts that the development of a postcolonial cultural alterity of postcolonial nations and communities needs to include the best of modernity and should create a trans-modern pluriverse which is multicultural and in critical intercultural

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conversation.³⁹ This includes resistance toward maturity and the affirmation and study of our own texts and symbols, before or along with, the dominant texts and symbols of the modern hegemonic culture.⁴⁰ José David Rodríguez also contributes to this panorama. He identifies a commitment to the hardships, locations, and realities of the *latines* communities at the margins, a wholistic interdisciplinary approach to theological education, dialogue that promotes conversation among "those sectors of society with whom we share a common quest for human development and fulfillment,"⁴¹ a *latines* appropriation of theology and epistemology, and the affirmation of the vernacular as pointers toward a *teología en conjunto*.⁴² As we celebrate José David in this issue of *Currents*, I can say that he lives out in word and deed what *teología de conjunto* is, and what Westhelle, Fonet-Betancourt, and Dussel propose.

Theological education needs transformation. Reorganization is not transformation. Transformation creates friction and resistance. It requires time, commitment to study, thoughtfulness and maturity⁴³ from all constituencies. As we explore competency-based assessment approaches, which goes in the right direction, we also need to consider alternatives to the colonial matrix of knowledge and power of which we are part and promote conversation and participation in a *true* aggregate of vernaculars. This *true* aggregate of vernaculars will produce a melody of methodologies, hermeneutics, pedagogies, and theological lens that will strengthen and expand our theological education denominational system.⁴⁴

30. Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 219.

31. Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 219.

32. Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 222.

33. Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 220.

34. Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 221.

35. Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 225.

36. José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, *Teología en conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1997.

37. Rodríguez and Martell-Otero, *Teología en conjunto*.

38. Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, *Hacia una Filosofía Intercultural Latinoamericana* (San José: Departamento Ecueménico de Publicaciones, 1994), 37-39.

39. Enrique Dussel, *Filosofías del Sur: Descolonización y Modernidad* (Argentina: Akai, 2015), 294.

40. Dussel, *Filosofías del Sur*, 290.

41. Rodríguez, *Teología en conjunto*, 17.

42. Rodríguez, *Teología en conjunto*, 16-17.

43. Dussel, *Filosofías del Sur*, 290.

44. Our document *How Strategic and Authentic is our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action* states, "We need theological education and leadership formation that is life-giving, transforming, and transcending. It must also be honest, impartial, and inclusive. With education and leadership focused primarily on Western and Eurocentric voices, the stories of those who do not fit such a model are excluded from the greater narrative of the gospel. This is a denial of identity and existence. Theological education and leader-

Theological education *en español*, being a partner for transformation, is collaborative, pluriversal, communion-oriented, postcolonial, diverse, and inclusive, as our identities gather at the margins to give glory to the One and Triune God. The very nature of the Latinx communities as a gathering of nations and cultures united by a linguistic thread leads us to understand leadership and learning in collaborative ways. We affirm the variety of world views and hermeneutics ingrained in both our original and current geographies and value conversations that promote agreements. We value both our cultural roots and our Lutheran heritage as participants of the *communio sanctorum*. This *communio* precludes us from equipping lone rangers and creating isolated communities of faith. We are intentional in identifying and wrestling with power and colonial issues embedded in society, church, and theological education. We are committed to advance constructive societal, ecclesial, and pedagogical alternatives. We recognize and validate the *imago Dei* in every human being as we all are peers, colleagues, and children of God amid our *simul iustus et peccator*.

These vernacular aggregates, which includes the *cocorococó*, are precisely what Justo González identifies as “according to the whole” or the catholicity of the Church: the openness for the testimony of plural perspectives and experiences, which is implied in the fourfold canonical witness of the gospel.”⁴⁵

Theological education *en español* is theological education *en conjunto!*

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ship must endorse not a single, controlling narrative but a collection of stories and experiences that bring wholeness to the body of Christ as represented in God’s creation... When we know and embrace one another’s complete story within God’s created world, we have a greater ability to share honestly, to be impartial, and to live into inclusivity and authentic diversity.” See https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf, 5-6. Accessed November 1, 2024.

45. Justo González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 22.