

## Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Laura Hymson

Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *Mujerista Theology*. Orbis: Maryknoll, 1996.

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Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's comprehensive introduction to Hispanic feminist theology is a collection of essays brought together to give a complete picture of Mujerista ideology. In the preface of the book, Isasi-Diaz outlines three main goals of Mujerista theology:

1. Mujerista theology helps to create a valid voice for Latinas and provides a platform for the voices of Latina grassroots women;
2. it develops a theological methodology that takes seriously the religious understanding and practice of Latinas as a source for theology; and
3. it challenges theological understandings, church teachings, and religious practices that oppress Latinas.

Mujerista theology is a process of enablement for Latinas that insists on developing a strong sense of moral agency and clarifies the importance of the Latina experience (p. 61). This theology is aligned with womanist thinking, since the struggle for women's liberation is not an individual one, but includes liberation for their race, their men, and their children (p. 2). The three phrases and themes that are woven together to create this theology are 1) *la lucha* (the struggle); 2) *permitanme hablar* (allow me to speak); and 3) *la comunidad/la familia*. Isasi-Diaz's conception of Mujerista theology is one that is deeply rooted in the struggle for liberation. It is a struggle that cannot be separated from faith in God, the value of women's experience, and a legacy of oral tradition and ritual prayer.

Her first essay draws from memories of her childhood and her mother's teaching that what one believes is secondary to the life that one leads. For Isasi-Diaz, this translates into the centrality of orthopraxis instead of anxiety over orthodoxy (p. 21). Another recurring theme is liberation and struggle, as she uses the phrase "*la vida es la lucha*," (the life is the struggle) as key to understanding Mujerista theology. In the essay, "To Struggle for Justice is to Pray," she writes that struggling for justice is a liberative praxis that is intentional and reflective. It is a "communal praxis that feeds on the realization that Christ is among us when we strive to live the gospel message of justice and peace" (p. 33). The goal of the struggle is to radically change the structure and systems within our society, not to benefit from them. Many Hispanic women pray for the strength to continue the struggle and nothing more. Their prayers do not ask for a lightening of their load but instead the ability to work for justice and the common good. This struggle is waged with family, friends, and community. Building community is essential to the struggle and involves forming alliances across differences without prejudice.

Returning to the role of Isasi-Diaz's mother and older generations, Isasi-Diaz highlights the difficulties Latinas face in publicly addressing sexism at home and in church (p. 25). Hispanic culture's emphasis on the family defines a woman's place in the private sphere. Women who publicly denounce sexism in their culture are accused of selling out to Euro-American women, and those who choose not to are quickly labeled non-feminist by the members of the women's movement. Mujerista theology is a space for Latinas with both opinions to work toward justice without rejecting their culture or forfeiting their beliefs.

A theological source of Mujerista theology is *lo cotidiano*, which she describes as women's experience of struggle in their daily lives. It includes forms of speech, the experience of class and gender distinctions, the impact of work and poverty on routines, the experience of authority, prayer, religious celebrations, and the conceptualization of key religious figures (which may include Jesus, Mary, the Saints, orishas from African religions and deities from Amerindian religions). *Cotidiano* is women's understanding of the divine. It is the lived-text in which and through which Latinas understand what is wrong and evil. It is therefore a social category (p. 71). Women here are not objects but subjects and agents of theology.

Mujerista theology also involves epistemological vigilance. There is a serious effort to be aware of subjectivity, to "know the limits of our capacity to know reality, and of the concealing and distorting tendencies of this same capacity" (p. 76). Additionally, there is a need to constantly evaluate the theological enterprise and ask whom it benefits. Mujerista theology insists that we each claim responsibility for our subjectivity, and it states that all theology has to start with self-disclosure. It helps to discover and affirm the presence of God in the midst of our communities and the revelation of God in our daily lives. Isasi-Diaz acknowledges that through Mujerista theology Latinas must come to understand the reality of structural sin and find ways to combat it, because the effect of structural sin hides God's ongoing revelation from us and from society at large (p. 62).

Isasi-Diaz illustrates these principles in her own text, which starts by revealing her story within the framework of social forces. She is careful to locate herself in her writings as Latina, as Cuban, and as a well-educated member of the middle class. Isasi-Diaz also writes from her personal experience as a Roman Catholic woman who first recognized sexism during her years in a convent (p. 17).

Isasi-Diaz's story and its relation to Mujerista theology reaffirms that solidarity within this theology goes beyond agreement, empathy, and passive support. She urges Christians to use the Word as it was intended and to replace the idea of charity, i.e., the giving of what we have in abundance, with solidarity, i.e., the understanding of the interconnections between the oppressed and the oppressors, in order to bring about radical change and liberation with the knowledge that salvation comes through love. Although in Mujerista theology the struggle is embraced, suffering is not to be romanticized. Women and their bodies are to be valued, nourished, and encouraged to move away from a culture that values procreation alone and not all aspects of women's sexuality, a type of culture that allows for the exploitation of women's physical labor and their bodies.

Mujerista theology includes a kind of “grassroots ecumenism” and is a type of religious solidarity that fuels the struggle by banding together all religious Hispanic women regardless of denomination. (After all, many women attend more than one church, in that they visit friends’ churches and neighborhood parishes.) She argues, however, that the church must play a more active role in the struggle for liberation by admitting its patriarchal hierarchies and societal privileges and abolishing its elitism. The church also needs to ask itself who is benefiting and at what cost to the greater community and society at large (p. 156). Isasi-Diaz argues that we must all work for the common good, which in the broader scope includes a national commitment to full employment; an adequate minimum wage; the redistribution of wealth through inheritance and wealth taxes; comparable remuneration for comparable work regardless of sex, sexual preference, race/ethnicity, age, etc.; and universal health care. Along with the call for financial support from the government, Isasi-Diaz calls for a change in the economics of the family to encourage symmetrical marriages; which includes a better balance between families and work for men and women, with an end to the financial burden and stigma attached to single parenting.

At the core of Mujerista theology are the concepts of “*mestizaje*” and “*mulatez*,” which indicate a racially and culturally mixed people and heritage. This culture and theology offer a new understanding of pluralism and embrace diversity and difference. Hispanics in the U.S.A. who experience racism and ethnic prejudice must work with a theology in which these are seen as sins and that embraces diversity as a virtue. The idea of the coming of the “Kin-dom” is central here. “Kin-dom,” taken from Georgene Wilson, O.S.F., is meant to represent the coming together of all people—with an emphasis placed on the family ties and relationships that are central to Hispanic culture. (“Kin-dom” is used to replace Kingdom, a sexist and elitist term.)

In her article, “The Word of God in Us,” Isasi-Diaz makes clear that the Bible is not the starting point for Mujerista theology, since it needs interpretation in order to become accessible and relevant to women’s lives and experience. Instead, she posits that prayer is key and that what becomes important in Mujerista biblical interpretation is women’s interpretation and their use of texts when they are in need. Many Hispanic women draw strength from the female characters in the Bible stories that are passed down orally. Isasi-Diaz writes, “It is not that the integrity of the text is not important; it is that the need for survival takes precedence” (p. 152). An example she provides is a woman delivering a speech who inadvertently mixes two stories together to make her point, but no one seems to notice or find it relevant. The story illustrates her point clearly while using familiar characters, symbols, and storylines. Thus, the Bible links women today to women in ancient times with similar struggles.

Though not the starting point, there are a number of scriptures that surface as crucial to Mujerista theology. One that is central to Isasi-Diaz’s life is Psalm 137: “we sat and we wept when we remembered Jerusalem.” This is important for Cuban refugees like Isasi-Diaz, who long to return home but have made new lives and found opportunities abroad. Another biblical story is that of Miriam in Numbers 12:2: “Has Yahweh indeed spoken

only through Moses?" This reference acknowledges penalties she may have suffered but asks for authorities to look closely at women and see they have no leprosy, that they are clean and worthy of God's attention. Yet another story is that of Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1:15-22 that highlights women's active role in liberation.

Isasi-Diaz ends her book with a focus on *Mujerista* liturgies. She gives us a wonderful example of one created by *Las Hermanas*, a women's organization created in 1971 by Chicana women in the Catholic religious community. Their organization welcomes laywomen from all national backgrounds, but there was a concern about holding mass at meetings and conferences because of the ramifications and implications that might arise if they brought a male priest into a women's space. This would be considered disempowering and an acceptance of the refusal to ordain women. The group, which no longer has a leadership hierarchy but rather a national board, decided to write liturgies of its own. Each meeting begins with the ritual of reciting the history of the organization, followed by a performance paying tribute to women's struggles and experiences, and a *fiesta* celebrating women who have served the group. Some are Eucharistic; others are prayer services. One important element is the environment in which the liturgy is given; great care is taken to replicate the sacred spaces women have created at home, since many Hispanic women have shrines or pictures of Jesus and the Saints on their walls. On this communal altar they place bread, milk and honey. The final element is an unbroken circle of women united. Finally, there is song and the recitation of a biblical text that is relevant to women's lives.

Isasi-Diaz argues that *Mujerista* liturgies are free from patriarchal distortions and provide safe spaces for women to speak and listen. In these spaces, women's rituals are practiced. One that is particularly moving is the healing ritual in which women sit circling a large water basin surrounded by stones, flowers, candles, pictures of loved ones, and holy cards. Each has a chance to place a stone in the water and name a hurt she wants removed. These rituals relocate the sacred, thereby revealing that at the core of *Mujerista* theology is the reality of life for Hispanic women, complete with hardships and struggle, but always with a striving towards justice and peace through people united (the kin-dom); faith in God; and love, with an emphasis on family, community, and culture.

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