Latina Feminist Theology

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Nun, saint, or parish helper? For most, the idea of a woman studying theology results in religious life. This mentality is dominant especially within the Latino culture and has kept most women from attempting to understand or question their religious beliefs. Until recent decades, Latinas’ involvement has become more visible in the scholastic theological field. Latinas have gained a voice and position in theological work. Although feminist theology has been around for a longer period, Latina feminist theology is one of the most recent forms of theology, which continues to grow. It is through this theology that Latina women have the opportunity to question, learn, and understand their religious and cultural beliefs. What you may be wondering is what exactly is Latina Feminist theology? In order to fully grasp the meaning of this concept we must first define each term individually.

After 1920, when women received the right to vote and gradually began to gain greater independence, the idea of Feminism and Feminist theories was distorted with the idea of women burning bras or better yet, “men-hating” women. All of the interpretations of the independence of women are wrongly portrayed resulting in the hindrance of feminism. As a result many people today hesitate to recognize themselves as a feminists’. In actuality, a feminist, as Isherwood and McEwan define in their book An A-Z of Feminist Theology, is “the advocacy of women’s equality and rights; advocating feminism, women’s rights, the movement for the advancement and emancipation of women” (63).

As for theology, it has almost always been associated with the study of God. Though at the core of theology is the study of God, it goes beyond creating new forms of theology such as liberation theology and Latina Feminist theology. Theology is understood as faith seeking understanding and it is this definition that most scholars utilize when theologizing. Aquino, a theologian scholar, states that liberation theology arose after the Vatican II introduced a theology of critical reflection “on all historical activity combating forms of oppression, impoverishment, death, and inhumanity suffered by people because of unjust structure” (Aquino 62). From liberation theology came Feminist theology, which “has its starting point [in] the experience of women” (Lorentzen 4). It is from experience of everyday life and daily struggles and hardships through which women practice their theology. In particular, Latina feminist theology arises from
liberation theology because “theology done by women shares in the liberation process of the poor, but pays special attention to the liberation of women who are triply oppressed” (Aquino 109). Latina women therefore must work harder to have their voices heard and their theology recognized. While this theology is from a woman’s perspective, it is not only for women; it aims to fulfill of both men and women “in accordance with the gospel of equality” (Aquino 67).

Now, what exactly does it mean to be a Latina feminist theologian or to study Latina feminist theology? Maria Pilar Aquino is a Latina Feminist theologian who has been studying and practicing this theology since its early stages. She currently teaches at the University of San Diego. Aquino was born in Nayarit, Mexico in 1956 and later moved to the United States with her family. They worked in agriculture and during the time period of the U.S. “Bracero program” her family was offered employment in the United States. Growing up she witnessed the Latino/Chicano movements first hand since her parents were involved in the Mexican-American farm workers movements. Aquino eventually pursued a higher education in theology and religious studies with a focus on liberation theologies, social ethics, feminist theologies, peacebuilding, and justice and reconciliation. She is one of the most prominent Latina theologians and “she is internationally known for her pioneering work in Latin American and U.S. Latina feminist theologies of liberation” (http://www.sandiego.edu/).

For Aquino, Latina feminist theology seeks “to accompany the spiritual experience of the grassroots Latina feminist women and men who struggle for authentic liberation in view of new civilization based on justice, equality, and integrity for all” (Aquino 139). This form of theology goes beyond the scholarly practice and into the depth of the reality of everyday Latina women. In her essay “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features” Aquino quotes Ana Castillo and states “that because we [Latinas] have been historically prohibited from a writing profession [it is assumed] that we have nothing of interest, much less of value to contribute” (Aquino 146). The patriarchal society of Latin America and the dominance of patriarchy in the United States have wrongly created this mentality. In the church there has always existed a separation between men and women due to the patriarchy within the church. Although this division exists, Aquino states that “in spite of this exclusion, Latin American women love the church” and includes “we want to try out a new language, a new understanding of faith, which will empower our common capacity to be fully women and men with enriching difference” (71). This goal of empowerment and equality of women continues to be at the core of Latina Feminist theology today.

Years have passed since Aquino’s first provocative writings on Latina Feminist theology and although times have changed and her theology has evolved, this theology continues to flourish. As a current theology student focused in Latina Feminist theology, Aquino’s work has allowed me to better understand the origin of this theology and the various directions it can take. Her work, which is greatly focused on Latina women in Latin America, also helps to understand the beliefs and practices of Latina/Chicana women in the United States. As first generation to be born in the United States I have tried to conserve my family’s culture, while appreciating the American culture that surrounds me. I am strongly pulled towards Latina Feminist Theology because growing up it was always my grandmother and my mother who taught me of God, and church, and engaged me in religious practices. Not to say that the male figures in my family were not religious, but it was always the females who carried on the tradition and the faith. When I was young I never bothered to question the male figure who would head the mass celebration or who would dictate the happenings of the church. This is because I was taught that the male priest was the representative of Jesus and therefore should not be questioned. As I grew older I began to wonder why a woman was not heading the church; there were always more women at mass,
more women involved in parish activities and more women promoting the church. I realized that women were the backbone of the church; better yet, women were the rock on which the church was built; they were the foundation that kept it standing. Recognizing this reality opened my eyes to the injustice and inequality that exists in the church. Jesus in the New Testament preaches a gospel for the poor and marginalized; women in the church are the marginalized. Latina Feminist Theology captivated me because it seeks the equality of women in the church and in the faith. Not only that, but religion and theology are part of Latino culture and have great influence in most Latin American countries. It is because of these two issues that I was drawn to theology, but specifically to Latina Feminist theology.

In conclusion, theology by Latinas transcends “the limits of traditional theology, but it also re-creates the method, presuppositions, and content of liberation theology in general...[it] is a believing process, which formally incorporates into its work the re-creative dynamism of the Spirit in the past and present lives of women” (Aquino 77). Latina Feminist theology liberates women and acknowledges them as equals. My goal as a Latina, a feminist, and a current theology student is to continue in this area of study and to eventually remove the “saint” or “nun” stereotype that burdens Latinas who study theology and to ensure we have a respected and equal voice in the church. Women have been theologizing for centuries now, from the Virgin Mary to Sor Juana Ines de La Cruz to Maria Pilar Aquino and to the generation to come. Latina Feminist theology has just begun to flourish and there is still more to be seen.

Works Cited


