

A Chicana Challenge to Progressive Christianity: Pastoral Care that Considers Spiritual Colonization.

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Introduction

The Progressive Christian movement finds itself in the midst of a radically changing society that is searching for an explanation to the chaos of current culture. Societies' masses are hungry for answers and will accept almost any rationalization for the miracles of faith, regardless of their sustainability. Immediate gratification seems to satisfy the ever present search for truth regardless of whether or not it is grounded in scriptural examination, historical analysis, or cultural authenticity.

Oppressive religious practice is not a new phenomenon. Spiritual oppression has existed since the beginning of the age. Throughout history, the powerless masses have lost their authenticity in the quest to find acceptance by the powers and principalities. In order to change the course of history, a wave of liberation thinking must emerge. Liberation that releases both the oppressed and the oppressor cannot be compromised.

Progressive Christianity is poised to incorporate liberation values, but it must resist being captured by the seductive web of power that leaves little room for individual diverse perspectives to be heard. In order to offer an emancipating option for religious practice, Progressive Christian thinking must incorporate spiritual liberation as an essential facet of responsible pastoral care. If it does not, Progressive Christianity is nothing more than any other religious movement that attempts to control the questions and the answers without considering each person's spiritual authority and authenticity.

Furthermore, the Church of the 21st Century is called to be relevant in the times ahead. That relevance must acknowledge the dramatic changes in the demographic landscape, not only in the United States but world wide, a landscape in which ancient spiritual traditions and rituals are once again emerging in the people's search for truth.

The intent of this essay is to look at the matter of spiritual colonization as it affects the Chicano communities of which we are a part. Thus far, the Systemic Model of Pastoral Care¹ is the only model that we have seen that can adequately address the long lasting affects of the missionary mentality, unpredictable family power dynamics, estrangement from ancestral sacred rituals, and social structures that are driven by dominant culture power brokers.

In order to ensure a holistic healing process, effective pastoral care requires a team that integrates the spiritual, professional and cultural expertise of appropriate persons who are familiar with the social and cultural reality of the person seeking care. Recovering personal memories, positive and negative, is essential to the healing process. To that end, the under-utilized and often disregarded practice of story telling must be revived and honored.

¹ The Systemic Model of Pastoral Care, developed by Dr. Archie J. Smith, Jr. is taught in his Pastoral Care courses at Pacific School of Religion. We were fortunate beneficiaries of this progressive thinking. The Model employs the use of metaphors that are understood by the person seeking care, and it incorporates scripture, theology and faith as the essential foundation for the pastor's care. The process of identifying these familiar metaphors can be challenging so the Model emphasizes the analysis of experiences, emotions, psychological and physical conditions relative to the situation or event.

Recovering Story

Passing on “story” from one generation to another is ordinary practice for the many cultures that make up Latino families. Parents teach their children about their heritage so they can pass it on to their own children; a responsibility parents take very seriously in order to preserve the culture. As stories are told from generation to generation, they take on a life of their own.

Similarly Bible stories, an accounting of events told long after they occurred, have also taken on a life of their own. In many instances, the literal interpretation does not correspond with contemporary culture so the message is misrepresented to accommodate the situation. Unfortunately, the Bible is sometimes not regarded as a reliable source of historic information because references are considered myths and legend and therefore not believable.

Regardless of the accuracy of details in the Bible stories or our own, they present us with the narrative history of our ancestors. In this essay, our personal stories are intended to take on a life of their own, but they are not a myth and with God’s grace they will be a legend.

We choose to share our personal stories – our testimony – because we are separate beings with distinctive experiences. We have discovered our stories are spiritually intertwined in ways that we did not initially realize nor that we fully understand. We tell these stories to demonstrate that we are among the people seeking pastoral care and healing.

It is through the ritual telling of story we exercise subversive resistance to the powers that control access to the divine, thereby, distorting our perceptions of God. However, there needs to be a redemptive moment that can be brought forth in the form of forgiveness, which opens the door to healing and liberation. The statement below, by Paulo Freire, explains the need to strive toward total liberation for all.

But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, they themselves become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men: but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This then is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.²

It has been our experience that oppressors exist within our own culture who endorse the lifestyle of this oppressive system in which we find ourselves – mainstream American society. For example, there is a growing population of Latinos and Latinas living in the United States who have opted to abandon their heritage and cultural background on the rise to economic and social power. We conveniently identify with our ethnic/cultural roots when it somehow benefits us or when the public gaze is on us. Renowned Hispanic writer, Richard Rodriguez, in his book *Hunger for Memory*, has articulated this deliberate amnesia as he went through the public and higher educational systems. It is a high price to pay and one that we, as politically identified Chicanas, are no longer willing to sacrifice.

² Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York/London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 1970), 44.

There have been days along this journey that we have turned our backs – either as survival mechanisms, as ways to gain access to mainstream institutions, as conscious choices, as unconscious actions because privilege is a seductive force. These isolated experiences of turning away from culture and family are not liberative. We suggest this because they have resulted in what we identify as not only cultural isolation, but also spiritual repression and brokenness. For that reason we have embarked on this project.

Our intention is to document this struggle that we have undergone in order to provide insight to pastoral care providers who will most undoubtedly encounter Latinas and Latinos in their congregations as the 21st century progresses. The foreseen demographics are upon us. The sleeping giant is awake. Hispanics will soon be, if they are not already, the largest “minority” group in the nation. Our fear is that pastoral care providers will not be adequately prepared to handle this wave. Disaster awaits and is already evidenced in gang warfare, brown-on-brown crime, pre-teen pregnancy, Latino children detaching from their elders, high drop out rates from all levels of education, resulting poverty, and spiritual malaise.

We have chosen the Mexican legend of *La Llorona* as a case study, not because our stories are similar to hers, nor are they as tragic, but because we want to show the extreme possibility of the ramifications of a broken heart. By applying the above described systemic working model of pastoral care, we arrived at a unifying theme/metaphor for the pastoral care team’s response to her crisis.

The Legend of *La Llorona*

The legend of *La Llorona* (the wailing woman) is one of many narrated through the ages. Her tragic story is told and retold throughout the various Latino communities; but mostly in those regions where the Native and Spanish cultures collide. The story varies depending on how our elders heard it from their elders; however, the one event in her life that is common to all versions is the most tragic. She is said to have committed the worst sin that a mother could possibly commit – she killed her children.

Her story is slightly altered depending upon the rendering carried on through the generations. Some say she was a wild, carousing woman going from bar to bar, drinking with the men and she did away with her children because they were a burden to her. By getting rid of them, she could continue her fancy free, self-absorbed life of sexual adventure and revelry.

Others say that she was a wonderful mother who loved her children deeply, but her abusive husband left her with nothing, no means with which to feed, shelter, and clothe her babies. Feeling completely distraught without resources, without hope, without a future, she committed the ultimate act of desperation; intending to kill herself as well. Or perhaps she acted out of revenge—killing the children to get back at him.

Yet others say that she was a young, unwed mother who fell in love with a man who did not want her children. In her desire to be with him, she decided to murder them in order to spend her life with this man that she so deeply adored.

We really don’t know why and where this legend began. We only know that she is said to be heard in the night roaming up and down the shores of streams, rivers, and lakes calling out to the three beautiful small beings that she drowned. Many claim they have seen her lurking in the cemeteries searching for their graves. Realizing her horrible and despicable act, she became hysterical and desperate.

Descriptions of her vary from a young, beautiful, sleek woman dressed in a long white flowing gown recognizing her innocence and fragile mental state – to a mean looking, angry, vengeful woman with a drab dark robe that covers her entire body representing her deserved shame and punishment.

In any case, she is a person children should fear because her spirit wanders in misery, unable to seek forgiveness—totally severed from the love of her family, her community and her God—completely detached from the possibility of healing. She radiates an aura of great misfortune that contaminates anyone with whom she comes in contact. Her spirit cannot come home—so she wails.

Spiritual Colonization

The concept of spiritual colonization is now being explored in contemporary social culture. Lara Medina's essay entitled, "Los Espíritus Siguen Hablando: Chicana Spiritualities," is especially stirring. Medina writes of the need to "decolonize [the spirit] in order to heal and be healed."³ Up until this moment of enlightenment, we were unaware that there was a need to *decolonize* any aspect of spirit, believing that the human spirit could not be dominated. We had failed to make the connection between a growing sense of theological groundlessness and colonialism/neo-colonialism in the Chicano community. Our understanding of this concept was further developed and named by Andrés G. Guerrero in his book *A Chicano Theology*, "Together with the physical and psychological colonization, there exists a spiritual colonization."⁴

Not only were the indigenous peoples of the Americas colonized on their land and in their bodies, but they were also colonized in their spirits. What a revelation! For many, the connection to the divine was and is severed in what may appear to be irreconcilable ways. We are spiritually severed people. Guerrero further articulates, "The systematic denial of spiritual leadership to Chicanos [and most certainly Chicanas] constitutes a form of spiritual colonization."⁵ Guerrero speaks of only those Christian (and, specifically, Catholic) Chicanos who are *estranged* from leadership *within* the church because of racism, not to mention those Chicanos who are alienated from authentic spiritual practice and the church altogether. What is really at the core of spiritual colonization is the *estrangement* from the indigenous, Christian, and/or any other way of knowing the divine. Losing both spirit and religion results in total domination and conceptual liquidation – absolute colonization.

The idea of spiritual colonization was further developed by Archie Smith, Jr.'s explication of "spiritual refugee" in his work entitled *Navigating the Deep River*. Smith challenges the pastoral care provider with the following questions: "To whom can they turn? Who can provide a secure base for an exploration of their spiritual quest, longings, and options? How can their spiritual striving be understood, respected, framed or reframed?"⁶ This line of questioning proposes that this community of refugees is in need of a community to turn to, a place to explore, and that this community has spiritually deep longings. Furthermore, this line of questioning proposes that reframing this theological task and quest is not an option, but a dire necessity. Like many post-colonialists before him, Smith argues

³ Lara Medina. *Living Chicana Theory*, Carla Trujillo, Ed. (Berkeley, California: Third Woman Press, 1998), 191.

⁴ Andrés G. Guerrero, *A Chicano Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 24-25.

⁵ Guerrero, *A Chicano Theology*, 25.

⁶ Archie Smith, Jr., *Navigating the Deep River*, (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1997), 37.

that this reframing must come from within the group and not from the dominant culture. For that reason, we speak for ourselves.

Biography as Theology Linda's Story

I am the youngest child of Ezequiel and Louisa Jaramillo; but surrounded by a large extended family of parents, a brother, two sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and family friends. Being the youngest child of the family accords much privilege and special treatment. The "baby of the family" is to be cared for, guided, nurtured, cherished, treasured, and disciplined by all the older ones. This group of remarkable people saw the value of family at the very core of everyday life, so it a privilege and honor to be part of them.

My ancestors arrived on Indian land as far back as the fifteenth or sixteenth century; long before the founding of the thirteen colonies that led to the formation of a U.S. government. They called it Nueva España (now Nuevo Mexico). We track our roots to regions in Southern Spain, but there is little doubt that we are connected to some Native Tribes of the Southwestern United States and Mexico. Regrettably, ethnic elitism played a role in defining bloodlines that did not acknowledge our Native heritage, so I cannot claim native cultural traditions in my history. Our religious traditions were rooted in the Catholic Church, but there is evidence that many of our practices were influenced by Native spirituality.

I was baptized and confirmed into the Roman Catholic Church, and many Catholic rituals including the worship experience through the Mass are deeply seated in my basic belief system. The Church was at the center of family and community life, and Catholic teachings were concretely prescribed and very narrowly applied. My faith life as a child was driven by family obligations in the church. I don't remember thinking about it; I just did it. We prayed the Rosary regularly, recited Novenas for various purposes to the designated saints, and attended all the required Masses including the Holy Days of Obligation.

My grandmother had pictures, statutes, and other icons all over her home, most of them of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. My whole family and most of my friends were Catholic so it was as much a social construct as a religious one, institutionally replicating the domination that we experienced in every other setting. In the Church, the masses were controlled largely through the threat of sin and damnation if we did not comply. This oppression extended from the church to the community to the neighborhood and into the public school classroom, and finally into my mind and soul.

I still have vivid memories of the year my brother started school and I was the only one at home – my playmate was busy with school things and he changed. I didn't know why. Now, I realize it was because of the influence of the dominating culture. The next year, I started school and was suddenly thrown into an environment where people did not love me, nurture me, or see me as beautiful; quite the contrary. It was my first real experience with racism; as a small child all I knew was that it didn't feel very good and made my stomach ache, obvious signs of rejection and social isolationism.

I was placed in Mrs. Richardson's first grade classroom. Since I am fair skinned, they thought I was Anglo. Everyone in the classroom was white and I was different but it took a while for the school principal to catch it. A few weeks into the school year, he walked into my classroom one day and whispered something into Mrs. Richardson's ear. She looked at me and asked me to get my belongings out of my desk and come with her. I was scared to

death; I didn't think I had done anything wrong. I still remember wondering how I would tell my Mom I was in trouble at school.

Mrs. Richardson told me that I had been placed in the wrong classroom and she walked me across the hall to Mrs. Calkins' room. I had heard about Mrs. Calkins from other kids—she had a reputation for being mean. I had made some friends in Mrs. Richardson's class, so it was sad to be moving. But when she opened that classroom door and I looked in I saw children who looked just like me, I didn't care how mean she was – I was at home. At first I didn't want to tell my Mom because regardless of the school segregation practices, I really wanted to be where I looked like the other kids.

I could recite many more tales of the cycles I've been through – ethnic pride, ancestral denial, cultural recovery, pride, denial, recovery, denial, recovery, recovery, recovery, recovery. The most significant, however, is the era in which I was newly married—changed my name as all women did—to Clark. I discovered a new view of the world—the world of privilege. What a wonder! Along with the privilege came the racial jokes that I laughed at, speaking on behalf of all Hispanics which I readily did, not eating my food with a tortilla because it was bad manners, not teaching my children Spanish because it would leave their father out of the conversation, and the worst of all—not naming my ethnicity on the census forms. For more than a decade, I lived in this privileged world and admittedly enjoyed it—or did I? There was a hole in my soul but I did not know why. It was not until I realized that my children were losing their heritage that I woke up—and started that final long journey to recovery—of myself in all my wholeness.

I have come to recognize that denying people's authenticity is an act of violence, thus sinful. This is especially true for people who are oppressed throughout the world. All the "isms" one can name are systemic efforts to deny people their true identity. It is very difficult to define and articulate our personal point of view if we have not been given voice to do so in our lives. We lose our sense of identity and well-being when we are convinced that we must become like others to be valued.

Because my kids are bicultural, they have had to adapt to the challenges of ethnic loyalty that family and society often impose. Now adults, they share heartbreaking stories about being expected to put one side of their family above the other. They have taught me a great deal about pluralism and the importance of inclusiveness and healing. This experience was one of my great life lessons of a multi-cultural reality and the need to be fully in our own truth to get to a place of understanding others.

I have been blessed to have teachers and friends who helped me understand how my own internalized oppression can shatter or strengthen relationships. I can choose to be angry and bitter, or I could choose the road of forgiveness to be healed. I consider this a journey, so each day comes as it comes. There are days that bitterness and anger prevail when I see "isms" that continue to drive our social structure. I am especially troubled by faith-based bigotry in this country and throughout the world couched as theology. This bigotry that manifests itself when one religious or spiritual tradition is touted as the only expression of faith that leads to salvation marginalizes and is counter to God's unconditional love for all humanity.

In order to better frame an understanding of our kinship with God, we have to have a clear view of ourselves. I think that our search for our personhood begins with finding ourselves—*authentically*. If we believe that we are connected to all living things in God's creation, then we can see ourselves in the *image of God (imago dei)*.

A vivid example of authenticity being denied is racism, which continues to flourish in American life in every setting, including the church. African American Theologian James

Cone says that if there is not a way for black people to determine for themselves what it means to be black, then racism will continue to exist. When black people are validated and measured by the constructs of a white dominated society, there is no hope that racism will cease to exist. If white communities continue to define what it means to be in the *image of God*, then black people will always be seen in the image of a *white* God, which for them is no image at all.⁷

The Genesis story is our story too. It values our individual existence, and gives us the ability to find and claim our spiritual core and authentic-self. Furthermore, understanding Jesus as the egalitarian prophet who totally rejected domination systems in thought, word, and deed authenticates God's covenant with the whole creation and not just one segment of it. In order to discuss the human-divine relationship, we must also acknowledge the human condition which includes sin and evil. Sin is manifested in hurtful acts that cause us to disconnect ourselves from God; and evil is demonstrated through systems that perpetuate that separation.

Biography as Theology Brenda's Story

I have written the story of my faith journey many times – in poems, for research papers that required I disclose my social location, for statements of purpose. And each time I find myself cutting and pasting the saga of my family's trek from Catholicism to Apostolicism and then to the white middle-class church I grew up in, Church of Christ (evangelicalism). I become melancholy remembering this journey and recollecting the many times I longed to go to catechism with my school friends, longed to be dressed in an ornate white gown like my girl cousins for their first communions and then their *quinceñeras*, longed to wear my hair long with a veil over my head like my Apostolic girl cousins. But I never share these desires to be someone I would never be. I never tell of the messiness of feeling rejected by one church and then another and then another. I never tell the journey to the new place I find myself, in a mainline Protestant denomination, the United Methodist Church.

When I applied to seminary a letter of recommendation was required from my pastor. I was on the phone one afternoon calling my home pastor at Church of Christ and remember the fear that he would reject me because in the tradition that women are not pastors and, although the women are most certainly leaders, they do not acquire ministerial titles. As I was telling him what I needed, my heart breaking inside, "Don't worry. I'm not seeking ordination. I have no intention to be an ordained minister." I remember feeling like a liar and so outside myself like those dreams where you hover above yourself and the feeling is so incredulous. His approval was my ticket in. I loyally fought the call for almost two years. We must never underestimate the power of internalized oppression.

The next time I found myself at Church of Christ was during winter break of my first year in seminary. An older white woman in the church whom I have known most of my life responded to my telling her that I was in seminary, "That's great. So many churches would be lucky to have you. But the only place for you here is in the pews."

As long as I kept my seat warm in this white, male-dominated church all would be well. As long as I didn't shake the foundations of this institution, I was not a threat. For the most part, this church loved me and nurtured me since I was a child. They wanted me to be

⁷ James H. Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 53.

the good, homogenized version of Christian that they revered. And, it's true. I had been that person for most of my life.

As an adolescent, I was awakened to the atrocities that colonization had raged on this continent – indeed, in this hemisphere – and against people from whom I descended. At that time, I came into what I consider a “Chicana consciousness.” My Chicana consciousness is a political and ethnic awareness of being a Mexican woman born and living on this side of the U.S./Mexico border. Thus, when people asked *what* I was, I would proudly identify myself as Chicana.

This consciousness greatly conflicted with my good sanitized, Protestant upbringing. Vacation Bible School songs raced in my head: *I'll be a Christian first when I grow up....* But how could I be a Christian when every ounce of Chicana fiber in my body called to reject this identity? How could I be a Chicana and a Christian simultaneously? Wasn't it a contradiction? Who would I be and in what order? Whose would I be? As a Christian, I was thankful to have received the teachings of Jesus Christ and I naively tried to justify colonization as the manifestation of the divine will by which peoples indigenous to this continent might receive the good news.

The attempt at justification tore my realities further apart. The concepts of border living hit home and I found myself one night in the backyard telling a good friend, *I hate the identification “Christian.” I hate Christianity.* The more I learned about colonization as one of the most severe genocides in human history, the more I was repulsed by my Christianity. But no matter what new political or socio-economic ideologies I acquired, I could not shake off what I was bound to: the Spirit of God as it had been revealed to me through Christianity.

I grew uncomfortable in my preaching class. I experienced a Holy disturbance. The Holy Spirit wouldn't let me rest and I started having dreams of pacing up and down behind the pulpit. At first, I was preaching to an empty sanctuary. Later, the sanctuary became populated. And, later, I would have the dreadful dream of my uncle, a bishop in the apostolic church, piercing me in the side with a dagger.

The first time I preached I was scared to death and waited with wide eyes for lightning to strike me dead. The trek from my seat in PSR classroom 6 to the podium was like walking through the Red Sea. And I got there and started proclaiming the living Word of God, I knew I had arrived. And I was sorry for having believed the many voices in my head that said I could never do such a thing.

So I was faced with a decision. Stay with the church I grew up in or find a church that would ordain me. Being one of the few Latinas on campus, I am ashamed to point out that several of the mainline denominations vied for my attention. It seemed to become a seductive game of who could give me what – financial resources, mentorship, etc. I could not help but feel that I would become a poster child for “Hispanic Ministries” in which ever denomination I chose.

It was a hard decision to arrive at the United Methodist Church, but after much prayer I joined a local church in Oakland. I cannot say that I have not looked back. Even today I toy with the idea of refusing to leave the Church of Christ and join in the struggle to make ordination for women possible. Even now I find myself connected with an institution in which I have the option of ordination, but at what expense? Have I become the oppressor of others because I joined a mainline church? And in this age where the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender issue is the hot topic of debate, have I turned away from my brothers and sisters by joining a church that is not “open and affirming”?

A brother who was born into the Methodist church in the Philippines, gay (though not before the eyes of his denomination), and ordained tells me: “You chose to be Methodist. I was born into it. I never had the choice.” He points out something very important – we cannot change the things we were born to be, but we can help transform the system.

A Working Model of Pastoral Care—the Case of *La Llorona*

Water is the metaphor that emerges from the legend and the one that we use in our pastoral care response. However, we note that the legend of *La Llorona* itself is the metaphor for the spiritually colonized condition of the Chicana and Chicano community. By using such an extreme case of spiritual devastation and isolation, it gives credence to the varied experiences of colonized people, which are also spiritually devastating and isolating.

The event in the case of *La Llorona* is “mother kills her children.” The case is then unpacked by listing the following: emotions, beliefs, behaviors, images, relationships, meanings, memories, binds, unbounded desires, questions we would ask her, shifts in meaning. Cultural context must encircle the entire case situation. It was through this lengthy and painful exercise that we arrived at our root metaphor of water. Water is the metaphor because it was water that took her children’s lives and also represents her tears. Moreover, water is significant because of its redeeming and renewing quality. Water holds and nurtures in the womb as we come into humanhood. It is to remind *La Llorona*, who is bound to wander along the sides of rivers, lakes, streams, oceans, and canals, of the possibility of water’s being her passage way to God’s redeeming grace.

The pastoral care model suggests the possible conditions that should be considered in the social human science field. Pastors should recognize the importance of soliciting input from trained mental health professionals. However, we admit to our reluctance to fully trust that someone would fully understand the personal and social context of *La Llorona*’s life. In our experience, we have found it very difficult to locate mental health professionals who are able to respond competently and appropriately. The nature of *Chicanismo* is different from other Latino cultures, so we question the appropriateness of including a professional from any other Hispanic or Latin culture because of their limited understanding of Chicana life experience in the United States.

During the process of fleshing out this case, we found ourselves overwhelmed with deep pity, sadness, and almost a sense of paralysis. So we selected two scriptures as a way of moving through this case to communicate hope and healing.

*Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll –
are they not in your record?*

Psalm 56:8

*For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;
He will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

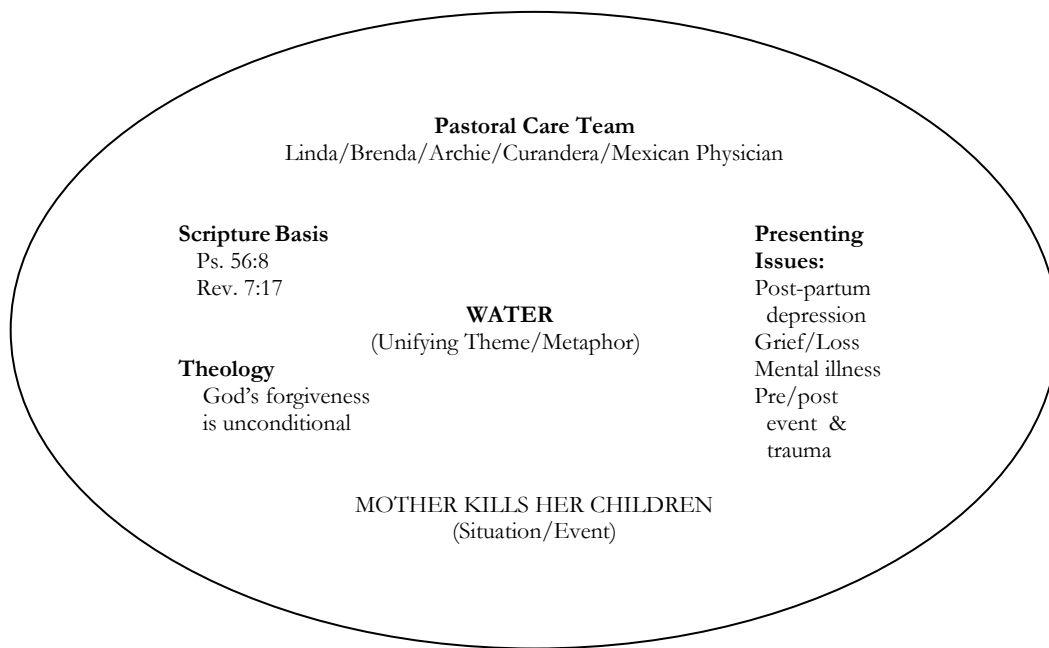
Revelations 7:17

Psalm 56:8 establishes the importance of recording or documenting grief and loss. Lamentation is a critical element in the passage from grief and personal regret toward release, forgiveness and, ultimately, liberation, redemption, and healing. The Revelations passage uncovers God’s redemptive and life giving promise.

The Pastoral Care Team includes the creator of this culturally competent pastoral care model, Dr. Archie Smith, Jr. In addition, we have included a *curandera*, or a spiritual healer (specifically a woman from within the culture) and a physician of Mexican descent. This team of care providers will each bring cultural competence, expertise, and compassion to the intervention

Curanderismo is the practice of using rituals that are a mixture of ancient indigenous practice mixed with Roman Catholic prayer and symbol. *Curanderas* are commonly called upon to address maladies such as *embrujada* (“bewitched,” or witch possessed), *mal puesto* (cursed), *mal ojo* (evil eye), *empacho* (blocked digestive system), *espanto* or *susto* (which is fear that has been internalized in a physical way in the body – often referred to as “fright disease”), and *tristeza* (sadness, grief, sorrow, depression). *Curanderas* also use a method referred to as *limpia*, which is a means of purification and cleansing if the persons condition is critical. We consider this to be the case for La Llorona.

Cultural context/Social location encircle the entire case.



A Case for Forgiveness

As mentioned earlier, water is the metaphor for the case of *La Llorona*, which carries with it the possibility of healing and renewal. We turn now to the story of *La Llorona* as metaphor for the Chicana and Chicano condition in the United States. We will particularly explicate the critical role of forgiveness as it can function in the community.

In the United States as new generations are birthed, the Chicana and Chicano become more and more disengaged with her/his indigenous *and* Christian past. Why is this? Lara Medina aptly notes, “...Western thought...and teaching of religious practices

should not be mixed.”⁸ If by chance the Mexican family has maintained an integrated faith system, once they traverse American spiritual soil they are in danger of viewing that system in a very different way. The practices become suspect, abnormal, and degenerate.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in her great Chicana treatise, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, writes of the condition of the transgender individual: “What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better.”⁹

These same words can be applied to the trans-theological Chicana and Chicano. The Chicana/Chicano, who is denied of expressing her/his spiritually integrated self, struggles to see her/himself in relation to God. The Chicana/Chicano, who is forced to engage and invest in the dualistic discourse of a black and white worldview, finds her/himself in a limited condition. This can soon result in a disinterest toward the divine or, worse, resentment. This is yet another chapter in spiritual colonization.

How do we make a case for forgiveness while maintaining accountability? This is the question that we must continue to wrestle with because in our energy to forgive the oppressive systems we often relay the message as forgetfulness.

Forgiveness is an important aspect of moving toward healing and well-being. It is not necessarily forgetting, but gaining the ability to move beyond the anger and pain that are part of the injury. In the process, one regains a sense of personal strength and power. Forgiveness of oneself and the other is important to feeling well if it is mature forgiveness. According to Archie Smith and Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin, mature forgiveness is “when forgiveness is seen in relationship to power, love and justice.” They argue that this “kind of forgiveness is necessary for spiritual and psychological development, and for social and spiritual renewal and transformation.”¹⁰

To accept and appropriate Christianity for many who are conscious of the realities of the conquest and other equally horrific forms of genocide in the name of Jesus; be they in gas chambers, bunker busters, or abortion clinics, is a difficult task. It is to demand a reconciliatory moment in the history of rape. Since forgiveness is a fundamental aspect of Christianity, this is an especially significant moment. The moment of reconciliation is not only a peace making, but it is also an act of forgiveness.

Please note that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. It can never be forgotten, lest we beckon history to repeat itself. Though we turn our cheek aside, we take a step back invoking distance from the perpetrator of the offense. We do this because we have become *wise as serpents and innocent as doves* (Matthew 10:16). These two creatures have been with us since the beginning – in the garden, at the founding of Tenochtitlán, released from Noah’s hand to start the world over—and released into the spirit to consecrate the body for the journey it must complete. *Forgive them father for they know not what they do.* (Luke 23:34).

The moment of reconciliation signifies the acknowledgement of the shadow past. The child sits at the table with God, not only to dialogue, but also to break bread. To love both mother and father because in loving them we love ourselves. We have hung on the cross with Jesus and remember the day of Tenochtitlán’s fall. Our tombs have been sealed

⁸ Lara Medina, Carla Trujillo, Ed. *Living Chicana Theory*, 210-211.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 19.

¹⁰ Archie Smith, Jr., and Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin. *Complexity and Simplicity in Pastoral Care: The Case of Forgiveness*, *The American Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, (The Haworth Pastoral Press, Vol. 5, No. (3/4). 2002), 295-316.

shut, our bodies mummified, and covered with the buildings and sidewalks of too many great empires. The time of resurrection has arrived. Redemption is at hand.

Challenge to Progressive Christianity

Diversity is a socially acceptable and culturally popular term, but there is little evidence of long-term change actually being incorporated into institutions and systems to create liberating and lasting social transformation. History has shown that deviation from the societal status quo is avoided because change challenges current practice and comfortable thinking even though it often results in social isolation for some. However, social isolation is no longer acceptable in a world society that is aware of the depth and breadth of cultural difference. It is no longer possible in the information age to ignore the devastating impact of elitism and oppression. Therefore, human survival desperately needs progressive thinking.

By its very nature, progressive thinking suggests discomfort and uneasiness as a way to advance and promote out of the ordinary possibilities. The voices of the historically marginalized and systemically powerless are essential to the mix. However, voice recovery requires quiet space and noise-free environments. In other words, the always speaking voices are challenged to quietly listen for the whispers and murmurs that emerge as the oppressed regain their courage to speak. In so doing, all are liberated.

It is true that chaos exists when new ideas emerge and voices change, but it can be holy chaos. It is true that change requires negotiation, but through cooperation stronger relationships materialize. It is true that new pastoral care skills that challenge current practice and comfortable thinking can be learned if hearts and minds are open to making mistakes. It is also true, the powerful will be stimulated to recover themselves in ways that will ultimately be liberating and transforming.

Oppressive religious practice is not a new phenomenon. Spiritual oppression has existed since the beginning of the age. Throughout history, the powerless masses have lost their authenticity in the quest to find acceptance by the powers and principalities. In order to change the course of history, a wave of liberation thinking must emerge. Liberation that releases both the oppressed and the oppressor cannot be compromised.

“Liberation is thus a child birth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is super-ceded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor no longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom.”¹¹

Progressive Christianity is poised to incorporate liberation values, but it must not get captured by the seductive web of power that leaves little room for individual diverse perspectives to be heard. In order to offer an emancipating option for religious practice, Progressive Christian thinking must incorporate spiritual liberation as an essential facet of responsible pastoral care. If it does not, Progressive Christianity is nothing more than any other religious movement that attempts to control the questions and the answers without

¹¹ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 49.

considering each person's spiritual authority and authenticity. The Church of the 21st Century depends on it.

Concluding Authors' Notes:

This essay is adapted from a joint final project written for a Pastoral Care course at Pacific School of Religion, May 2004. We must acknowledge that our experience at Pacific School of Religion was socially isolating so we sought each others' support. We chose to jointly write this essay as a way of demonstrating our unique and distinct experiences as Chicanas, calling attention to our diversity. Moreover, we were afforded the opportunity to honor each others' thoughts as academics and ministers serving the church and the community. We consider it a great privilege to work together as we document it for generations to come.

"Fiction is my jugular. For me it is a great consolation to know that whatever miserable things happen in my lifetime, goodness will inevitably result because I will write about it. There is strength in this when none is left in the soul....."

Helena Maria Viramontes

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