Lost in Translation
The Challenges and Possibilities of Ecumenical Dialogue

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The bilingual experience of the Latino community provides a generative model of group dialogue that can offer new hope for the efforts of ecumenical relations within the church universal.

Betrayed by a distinguishable accent, people find it difficult to realize that I was born “a gringo” in the urban heart of New York City. My father and mother met in this vast city converging in communal spaces where people with roots to the island of Puerto Rico, from where they both emigrated at a young age, gathered. My father, who labored as an interpreter while serving the U.S. Armed Forces, preserved his mother tongue—Spanish. My mother, however, fell into the assimilationist trappings of the North American school system and youth culture of the ’50s and found a safe haven in the English-speaking world and its language. By the time I was born, my father was working in small businesses servicing Spanish-speaking communities and was able to live in a unique social enclave within North American society where people can communicate, interact, and negotiate their way through life exclusively in their native language. My mother felt the need to recover the language of her parents and, in the process, became fluent in the language of second- and third-generation Latino descendants—Spanglish. Considering the shifting and unrehearsed exchanges between English and Spanish

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at home, it is a wonder why I grew up to be fully monolingual. I was a North American-born child who spoke Spanish with the understanding that the *lingua franca* of globalization, overpowering and aggressive as it is via educational systems and the media, would catch up with me sooner or later. It certainly did, but twenty-three years later when I returned to the United States after spending my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood on a Spanish-speaking Caribbean island.

Comparatively, my religious upbringing bears a history of curious exchanges. Unusual among Latino families, my family claims a Protestant heritage that extends through various generations. Whether they were European rationalists or Basque spiritualists, the fact is that the Irizarry clan of my familial lineage turned into willing receptors of the first Protestant missionaries who arrived on the island of Puerto Rico at the turn of the twentieth century. Due to the strict demarcations of Catholic and Protestant identities within Hispanic communities, I am frequently called upon to explain my religious character before Protestants who want to force into my spiritual biography a moment of “conversion” from Catholicism and before Catholics who are intrigued about the motives that separated my family from the “Mother Church.” Perhaps, because my family did not foster the antagonism that many “converted” Latino Protestants sustain against the Roman Catholic faith and its adherents, my parents felt more relaxed about gifting me with a Catholic baptism, allowing me to participate freely in Catholic popular traditions, and, moreover, providing me with the benefits of a Catholic education.

Rearing a Protestant child with deep appreciation for the Roman Catholic faith was not a sign of doctrinal laxity from parents who trivialized the important issue of religious identity. When questioned about reasons for baptizing his children in the Catholic Church my father explained that through baptism God's grace is made manifest by the welcoming of a child into a community of believers that promise to nurture that child in matters of faith. The faith community that supported my family through rough times and that embodied God's love and care happened to be a small Catholic community in Brooklyn. Of course, it helped that the priest was also my father's personal friend and was willing to make this (extracanonical) exception at a time where fresh interpretations of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, were still possible due to the broadness of its call to share the means of grace and sacramental unity.

**Changing Climate of Dialogue**

The rest of my participation with various Christian communities went on naturally. I listened to sound-amplified sermons from the neighborhood Pentecostal Church, attended Catholic school, fulfilled my extracurricular requirement as a children’s catechist, exercised leadership roles within the Presbyterian
Church, and read avidly about other spiritual and ecclesial traditions. All this granted me a sense of the importance of rooting one’s religious identity in deep, honest, and deliberate conversations with other faiths and churches. These conversations are rare and perhaps my personal inter-ecclesial engagements are untraditional as to cross the boundaries of theological adequacy. As such they may constitute neither a conscious nor an effective model of ecumenism for ecclesial bodies that have privileged doctrinal negotiation above the healing of Christ’s body through human relationships when addressing church unity. However, since I have taken for granted the ordinariness of such transdenominational exchanges I have found myself attracted to ecumenical projects, and consequently my faith has been enhanced significantly by them.

Unfortunately, Latino Christians tend to be among the most resistant to ecumenical dialogue and inter-ecclesial engagement. The reasons have to do more with religious history than cultural traits or even spiritual character. The missionary enterprise of North American and European Protestants in Latin America, and among Latino communities in the United States, assumed an aggressive posture vis-à-vis a Catholicism they saw as antiprogressive and antidemocratic in contrast to the liberal underpinnings of “Protestant” cultures. The missionary work of Protestants was both religious and political in nature and fostered a climate of mistrust and antagonism among Christian communities that the Catholic Church, rather than appeasing with its popular and commanding influence in Latino communities, helped to fuel. Even today the majority of Latino Christians reflect in their religious discourse crass misunderstandings of each others theologies and religious practices. It is common practice among some Latino Protestants and Evangelicals to reserve the word “Christian” only to those who adhere to their particular faith expression. In lay Protestant/Evangelical parlance there is presumptive distinction between Cristianos y Católicos (Christians and Catholics). In turn, the traditional tendency of the Catholic Church to detract its parishioners from joining Protestant churches by inferring they were “cultic” movements impinged upon the identity of Latino Protestants who accepted undisputedly this connotation. While today very few Catholic churches will call Protestant communities a “cult,” it is common for Latino Protestants to refer to their worship experience not as liturgical activity, nor worship order, but as el culto.
During the last two decades, however, Latino scholars of theology and religion have intentionally engaged in ecumenical dialogue that has even resulted in collaborative publications. These efforts have given life to initiatives like The Hispanic Theological Initiative, La Comunidad (a Latino/a component of the American Academy of Religion), The Hispanic Summer Program, and ecumenical dialogues promoted by the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States (ACHTUS). As a result, a network of scholars who understand themselves to be a part of an academic familia has solidified the ecumenical commitment. However, a shared theology for inter-ecclesial dialogue and church unity is still underdeveloped as we barely start to construct theological frameworks to interpret our own traditions and the place of the Latino identit(ies) within them.

Bilingualism as a Charism of Latino Communities

Religious experience and scholarship alone give us just a partial and biased sight into matters of ecumenism, so what other component of our shared life will help us advance this sort of reflection? I suggest that looking at language and its uses within the Latino community can give us some insights into the nature and possibilities of ecumenical dialogue. The linguistic component of Latino culture provides a generative model of intergroup dialogue and, therefore, can aptly inform efforts of ecumenical relations within the church universal. It is time for the church to move from the multiculturalist paradigm of the ’80s where Latino culture (or any other “marginal” culture) was studied in order to be “understood,” a euphemism to describe the desire to “tolerate and control.” We have to move even from the notion of “appreciation” as the sole basis for engaging the process of knowing from other cultures. I propose that the skill of bilingualism can serve as cultural mediator for religious dialogue among Christian communities.

In addressing bilingualism I avoid romanticizing the bilingual person as the catalyst for every form of social dialogue. I do not suggest, as Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos once did, that Latin Americans compose a sort of “cosmic race” that serves as paradigm for effective social relations elsewhere. In a post-9/11 world and in the name of the so-called “global war on terror,” reviving the discussion on bilingualism seems counterintuitive to the unifying tendency of nationalist politics. Harvard sociologist Samuel P. Huntington cautions his readers about the risks of multilingual experiments in a country in need of a common language that can bring people together into a discourse community of shared values, shared norms, and shared purposes. In a country that is over-obsessed with security issues and fearful of the violation of its geopolitical boundaries, language serves as a litmus test that separates insiders from outsiders. There should be no surprise then that what was taken for granted before—that English was the main and official language of the U.S. government—became just recently an actual policy.
For Huntington, Spanish-speaking citizens and bilingual citizens are a threat to American national security by virtue of their language and the divergent and unknown values, norms, and purposes that emerge from those languages (Huntington 2004). Huntington is right in pointing out what linguists have established already, that speech communities use language not only to communicate but also to shape the forms and values of sociocultural interaction. Huntington forgets to convey the contradiction that may exist in terms of national policies that seek to put in motion centripetal forces when it comes to cultural formation (isolationism and protectionism) and at the same time employ centrifugal forces when it comes to production and exchange of goods (global capitalism, international trade, and open market).

Regardless of how close language relates to politics, we cannot deny that it functions independently from it as it relates more immediately to a household economy of communal relations. As long as new and old immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries sustain the networks between families north and south of the Rio Grande and across the Atlantic Ocean, and as long as Latino culture is consumed and exported through food, music, arts, literature, religion, and beloved **television novelas** (soap operas), bilingualism will exist despite governmental initiatives to curtail it. By remaining bilingual, Latinos keep open a life-support system so that in case something fails in the fragile existence within the monoculture at home or the monoculture of the hosting country, some life may remain at the “border.” In fact, using two languages is a strategy of resilience for it prevents defining subjects by one speech community and removes speakers from the control a monolingual group may hold over them. Speaking a second language gives persons open space to move in and out of linguistic communities, welcoming what will be life enhancing and resisting what limits freedom.

In addition, because language shapes the way people think, bilinguals develop alternate means to observe, analyze, and interpret reality. They develop the skill of “code-switching,” an ability to change not only languages but also frames of reference as they speak (Heller 1995). Needless to say, bilingual individuals (not those who know two or more languages but those who use two languages as they negotiate their interpersonal and community relations through ordinary life) don’t have a system of norms in place for the regulation of this code-switching. There is no syntax for when one language should be used and not another. There are no grammar rules when mixing both languages. That way, rather than a technique,
the bilingual person develops communicative artistry that articulates a message, the motivations for the message, and the quality of relationship the message invites. A bilingual person may “know,” in an aesthetic fashion, which language is to be used for loving, which language for explaining complicated matters, which language for apologizing, which language for asserting, which language for insulting, or which language to express matters of faith. Since humans use aesthetic sensibilities to communicate the feelings of their experience, the use of two or more languages in daily life has to be perceived as a game of communication intended to evoke meanings in the speaker and the listener as they try to understand each other more fully.

From the perspective of the outsider, many bilingual phrases or conversations are entertaining, and they may draw a smile, even laughter, in the listener. The listener should not refrain from doing so, for humor is part of the coping mechanism of the bilingual fragmented experience. Many times bilinguals laugh in silence just thinking about the play of words they can create in order to say one thing and mean another. The bilingual person also laughs when he or she can immediately identify a word in one language that will have a totally different meaning in the other language—even a subversive one. (What about leaving a place after being expelled and reading above the door the word “Exit,” a sound equivalent to the Spanish word éxito meaning success?) This playful aesthetic allows bilinguals to enjoy life even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Aesthetics and humor contain the element of surprise in the midst of lo cotidiano (daily life experience). A shift of language codes can bring new vistas into what was before ordinary and taken for granted.

But there is something more to bilingual aesthetics than emotive communication and creative humor, for it develops also a form of thinking that is continuously challenged with the tensions between two different conceptions of reality (Sommer 2004). Because this conflict is experienced existentially, bilinguals may develop cognitive skills to coordinate alternative identity positions and withstand the conflict with more mechanisms than monolinguals deploy. The bilingual aesthetic forges a special facultad, to use Latina novelist Gloria Anzaldúa’s term, for shifting perceptions without shifting necessarily his or her core identity. If bilingual aesthetics are attended to, we can see people who promise a cognitive model of flexibility, creativity, and agility in thought processes.

Bilingual Aesthetics as a Clue to Ecumenical Dialogue

What can Latino bilingual experience contribute to the prospect of ecumenical dialogue? I will offer, rather than a full-blown theory, some clues to invite further exploration and dialogue with people who employ this bilingual aesthetic.
I invite the reader to consider Latino parishes and congregations as partners in this search for ecumenical models of engagement, by attending not solely to what these faith communities do but the characteristic cultural features that shape them.

The question that motivates ecumenical dialogue is: how can those who claim a shared apostolic faith and a shared evangelical mission centered in God's revelation in Christ give full expression to their unity as ecclesia within the diversity of doctrines, theological perspectives, liturgical expressions, and canonical traditions? The challenge of the “unity in diversity” paradigm for ecumenical relations is that it rarely considers the conceptual nature of either “unity” or “diversity.” While only few ecumenists will equate unity with uniformity, they maintain that “in principle” there is a foundational identity to the Christian church that surpasses confessional and denominational uniqueness. This core has been identified invariably as faith in a triune God, sacramental life, and discipleship in the form of ministry and mission. Pope John Paul II affirmed this core during a general audience in 1995: “[T]hose who believe in Christ and have received Baptism, are rightly recognized by the children of the Catholic Church as ‘brothers in the Lord’, even if there are differences ‘whether in doctrine and sometimes in discipline, or concerning the structure of the Church.’ We can be united with them through several elements of great value, such as, ‘the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements’ (Lumen gentium, no. 8)” (“All Must Strive,” no. 5).

But even articulating this “core” will lead us to different places of interpretation. The moment we name the core of our unity becomes the moment we realize our diversity. Once we grasp the unique language of catholicity, we are required to switch codes and interpret such catholicity in the different languages of our ecclesial communities. But diversity, contrary to common understanding, is neither a condition of total exclusion nor absolute difference. We are diverse because in searching for a better Christian communion (unity) we have expanded the languages by which divine experience can be communicated. As Yves Congar reminds us, “pluralism is the intrinsic value of unity,” and bringing back that diversity into communion is the crux of the ecumenical task (Congar 1984).

In a bilingual aesthetic we find a way to talk about a model of unity that affirms the uniqueness of each body’s identity that invites communication across diverse
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no longer strangers and aliens but you are citizens (sympolitai) with the saints and also members of the household (oikeioi) of God” (Eph 2:19). The virtue of the Christian, as John Milbank suggests, can be exercised at home as well as in the public forum (1997). By using the language of home in public and vice versa, the bilingual person can remain authentic at home and share in authentic relations in the public realm. Theological differences at home cannot deter a Christian from joining in solidarity with others for a public mission of justice and peace, which is the non-negotiable call for people who claim a faith centered in the liberating message of Christ’s Gospel.

Ecumenical dialogue may not happen in the context of one denominational body leading the process vis-à-vis another which is then incorporated into the process as secondary player. This dialogue should happen on the hyphen, what Chicano cultural critics call a “third space.” Theologian Hans Küng suggests that the ecumenical moment necessitates this third space between the aggressiveness of Luther that can lead to schism and the escapism of Erasmus that can lead to lack of commitment and risk (1990). Bilingual persons engage both Spanish and English as their language; one that shifts from resistance and resilience to tolerance and understanding. An ecumenical approach that does not accept the fruitfulness of this tension may result in a loose ecclesial federation focused on shared theological declarations and organizational negotiations. Unity is not a product of fate or destiny or even the result of strategic reasoning. Rather, it is forged en la lucha, the existential struggle that defines the Christian call to be one with Christ.

**A Space for Surprise and Transformation**

Finally, bilingual aesthetics demonstrate that knowing more than one language is humbling; no one language can express fully the reality around us. This evokes a sense of mystery and invites openness to revelation. Ecumenical dialogue should create a space to be surprised and should reflect the willingness to be transformed by the encounter between those who share the same faith but have not heard each other’s experience of mystery. When ecumenical dialogue threatens to stall, due to rigidity in our distinctive beliefs, we should keep on conversing with a view to what we may believe. If we are given an opportunity to listen to each other, to understand each other, to see the seeds of the reign of God in each other, then perhaps each will shed some light upon the Truth we all seek. When one of the paradoxes of faith is then revealed, we can search the Truth (beyond the grasp of our knowledge and speech) while affirming the validity of the Truth we proclaim (truth that is truth as it is spoken in our own language).

When forcing one language to accommodate its meanings neatly into another language, the bilingual person perceives what is lost in the translation. Similarly, the Christian who desires to advance the possibility of the church’s catholicity
may need to engage the plurality of Christian communities not to make their faith understandable, but to make it believable for the engagement itself reflects the belief that Christ’s body is of “one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one Spirit” in the midst of doctrinal diversity. To trust this credo we ought to be bilingual.

References


