

From Disputation to Dialogue

Jews and Latinos/as toward a New Convivencia

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If Latinos/as and Jews are to understand each other in the twenty-first century, it will be important for Latino/a Christians in the United States to reckon with the whole complexity of our non-innocent history. That reckoning will necessarily be a matter of small and tentative steps, of relearning the lessons of the past as we revisit our history with new and urgent questions in our quest for an authentic *convivencia* that will be more than grudging tolerance of proximate others.

In a *San Diego CityBeat* column, Judd Handler waxed nostalgic:

Remember the 1970s TV show *Welcome Back, Kotter*? One of the juvenile delinquent “Sweathogs” who made teaching a laborious chore for Mr. Kotter was Juan Epstein. A Puerto Rican-Jew, the Epstein character was an extremely rare representation of any sort of Latino-Jewish coupling. True enough, Latinos and Jews don’t exactly go hand in hand like chocolate and peanut butter. At least they didn’t used to.

United States Latino and Latina theologians have come to recognize how important it is to take social location seriously in all of its complexities. As a result,

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we understand both viscerally and intellectually the importance of dialogue and of consciousness-raising across the boundaries of ethnic difference and of religious diversity. One such boundary that has received increased attention is Latino-Jewish dialogue, even if it was considered “rare” back in the days of Mr. Kotter. Such initiatives by U.S. Latino/a Christian theologians to date have been limited, and the reasons for this are more complex than we have the opportunity to explore here. In fact, U.S. Latino/a Christian theology is a relatively recent arrival on the scene, a development of the last thirty years at most, making it something of a younger sibling to the now flourishing theologies of Catholic-Jewish understanding that are the rich fruits of *Nostra Aetate*. United States Latina/o Christian theology is an enterprise that traces some of its roots to Latin American liberationist theologies, yet it must be emphasized that U.S. Latino/a theology is by no means the same as Latin American liberation theology.

One particular approach that Latina/o Christian theologians in the United States embrace in our work is called *teología de conjunto*. This expression is shorthand for an approach that places the responsibility for engaging in analysis and investigation not on the shoulders of the individual scholar but in the give-and-take of the community. We Latina/o theologians recognize that we are not the ones who invented this approach, for we are at least indirectly (even sometimes unconsciously) indebted to the tradition and present practice of Jewish scholarship, in which the animated give and take of inspired study is the milieu in and from which understanding emerges, the milieu in which G-d is unseen but ever present.

I offer here an initial foray into Latino/a-Jewish dialogue, by attending to the particular historical relationship of Latinos/as and Jews, reconsidering the notion of *convivencia* (“living together”) from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim experiences in medieval Spain, and revisiting the disputations that occurred between Christians and Jews in the same period to expand our understanding of dialogue. What follows here is programmatic in intention and scope, an effort to survey territory that should be explored in much greater depth and detail in the future. No mapping is innocent; maps can claim and divide as well as mark the way. I hope my charting the territory here will help us rethink boundaries that were imposed to divide and control, to minoritize and exclude.

Lessons of a Non-Innocent History

Bearing in mind the Latin American legacies that U.S. Latinas/os share, U.S. Latina/o theologies take into serious consideration the particularity of the experiences of Latinas and Latinos in the United States, the experiences of immigrants and their children and grandchildren. In the light of what will follow, it is also important to point out that U.S. Latinos/as are *not* Iberian. Neither Spanish nor Portuguese, we Latinas and Latinos in the United States are heirs of a complex

legacy, and we bear both on our bodies and in our souls the marks of the Iberian colonization of the Americas as a complex and often violent encounter between Spanish and Portuguese *conquistadores*, on the one hand, and the first peoples of the lands that came to be mapped and marked as America by the Europeans, an encounter that also came to involve those Africans who were brought across the Atlantic against their will.

In a presentation that had its beginning as a speech to the Interreligious Affairs Commission of the American Jewish Committee—a speech that was delivered in Midtown Manhattan on September 10, 2001—I explained, “Ours is not an innocent history, for we are heirs of the threefold violence of 1492” (Ruiz 2002, 40). I invited that audience to “listen to how Christopher Columbus set out his program of conquest and conversion to his royal patrons Ferdinand and Isabella.” Columbus wrote:

By knowing the language of the Indians, devout and religious persons could see to it that all [the Indians] would become Christians, and I hope in our Lord that your Highnesses would be determined to act in this matter with great diligence, so as to turn to the church such great peoples and convert them, just as you have destroyed those who did not want to confess Father, Son and Holy Ghost [Moors and Jews], and at the end of your days (for we are all mortal), you shall depart your kingdoms in a very peaceful state and clean of heresy and wickedness . . . to increase the Holy Christian religion.

I explained that, as the words of Columbus himself make clear, “bound up with the *Reconquista*, the victory over the Muslims, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the program of colonial missionary activity in the Americas began as part and parcel of the ideology of empire” (Ruiz, 40–41). Yet matters were not nearly as straightforward as Columbus imagined, for the complex and conflicted history of the relationship between Iberian Christians and Iberian Jews traveled with him across the sea. Reyes Coll-Tellechea explains:

Accompanying Christopher Columbus on board the Santa María as it left the Iberian Peninsula on August 3, 1492, was Luis de Torres. De Torres, a polyglot, was the expedition’s interpreter. Like many other Iberian Jews, de Torres had recently converted to Christianity in an attempt to preserve his right to live in Sepharad, the land Iberian Jews had inhabited for twelve hundred years. The edict of expulsion, dated March 31, 1492, deprived Jews of all their rights and gave them three months to put their affairs in order and go into exile. Implicit in the edict was exemption if Jews converted to Christianity. It was only implicit, of course, because neither the laws of the land nor the laws of the Catholic church provided for forced conversion. . . . Those who did not accept conversion would be expelled from the land forever. The fate of Sepharad was irreversible. (3)

As Cuban-American church historian Justo González reminds us, our history as Latinas and Latinos in the United States is not innocent. This consciousness calls for a sober awareness that, as Coll-Tellechea tells us, “Remembrance cannot restore that which has been lost, but it is essential to recall the limitless power of human action to create as well as to destroy. Memory is not a matter of the past but a fundamental tool for analyzing the present and marching into the future with knowledge and conscience” (3).

For Latinas/os in the United States, the importance of such remembrance as the first step toward rebuilding understanding is underscored by the controversial findings of the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) May 2002 survey on anti-Semitism in America, according to which:

Hispanic-Americans born outside of the U.S. are much more likely than other Hispanics and other Americans to hold anti-Semitic views. . . . Forty-four percent of foreign-born Hispanics fall into the most anti-Semitic category, while only 20% of Hispanics born in the U.S. fall into this category. As a result, it is only foreign-born Hispanics whose anti-Semitic propensities are significantly above the national average (44% vs. 17%). The anti-Semitic propensities of U.S.-born Hispanics are only slightly above the national average (20% vs. 17%). (ADL, 23)

Yet, the report also notes that “once Hispanics have been assimilated into the U.S. population, their attitudes about Jews appear to change significantly” (ADL, 23).

The ADL report goes into detail, describing how the attitudes of what it calls “foreign born Hispanics” (who, according to the report, constitute 63 percent of Hispanics in the United States) differ from the attitudes of U.S. born Hispanics (who constitute the remaining 37 percent):

Perceptions regarding Jewish control, influence and power as well as more traditional canards about Jews, religion and ethical practices appear to be driving anti-Semitism among foreign-born Hispanics. . . .

For example, over half of foreign-born Hispanics (55%) agree with the assertion that “Jews don’t care what happens to anyone but their own kind,” compared to 26% of Hispanics born in the U.S. . . .

Forty-four percent of Hispanics born outside of the U.S. agree with the assertion that “Jews were responsible for the death of Christ,” compared to 26% of those born in the U.S. . . .

Forty-six percent agree with the statement that Jews are “more willing than others to use shady practices to get what they want,” compared to 22% of those born in the U.S.

Finally, over half (52%) of foreign-born Hispanics believe Jews have too much power in the business world, compared to 26% of Hispanics born in the U.S. (ADL, 24)

Explaining the difference in attitudes between “foreign-born” Hispanics and U.S.-born Hispanics as a function of assimilation is not especially helpful, particularly in the light of the ways in which the enormity of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Latin American (im)migration to the United States is challenging previous understandings of assimilation (see Alba and Nee). Roberto Suro explains:

Immigration from Latin America has added more than 13 million people to the U.S. population, with three-quarters of them arriving since 1980. The Hispanic second generation—the U.S.-born children of Latino immigrants—now stands at more than 10 million people, average age 19 years old, and is growing faster than any other native-born sector of the population. Those two pieces of data and many other similar formulations have erased any doubts that Latinos are the major engine of demographic change today and will be for the foreseeable future. (14)

Whether or not assimilation has anything to do with it, the change in attitudes can be attributed at least in part to the likelihood that the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Latin America will interact with Jews in the United States more often than did their parents and grandparents in Latin America. Ilan Stavans, the Mexican-born son of an Eastern European Jewish family who is regarded by many as a leading interpreter of Latino language and culture in the United States, points out that:

About half a million Jews live in Latin America . . . the fifth-largest concentration of Jewish population on the globe . . . most Latin Americans are not familiar even remotely with the word *shoah*. . . . They would not understand what it means, how it connects. . . . They wouldn't understand it in any way as connected to the genocide that Indians suffered or that other segments of the Latin American population have undergone. The semantics of the word is totally foreign to the region.

The *Despite Treblinka* web site notes that “ignorance of Jewish history is further aggravated by the fact that some Hispanic youngsters have never had any contact with Jews in their lives.” One web site reports that the 6,362,943 Jews in North America constitute 1.426 percent of a total population of 446,088,748; and the 5,914,682 Jews in the United States constitute 2 percent of the U.S. population and 40.5 percent of the world's Jewish population (American-Israeli Cooperative

Enterprise). Looking at a different set of numbers, in July 2005 the U.S. Census Bureau projected an estimate of 42,687,244 Latinos in the United States, more than 14 percent of the U.S. population. In some sense, the issue before us—Latino/a-Jewish understanding—is not a matter of numbers, yet what has brought the growing Latina/o reality to the forefront of public consciousness in the United States is a clear consequence of the larger and larger demographic footprint that persons of Latin American origin represent in the United States.

Suro writes: “Jews and Latinos live in two different Americas, and the situation will not change in the next generation or two, so it needs to be understood and accepted. Both Jews and Latinos stand apart from the white Christian majority and the black minority, but they are not natural allies, not necessarily even natural friends, given the differences of class, generation, and demographic prospects” (34–35). It seems to me that Suro’s sketch of what he regards as the status quo between Jews and Latinos/as leaves very little room for even a very modest hope. I would argue that understanding and accepting the status quo—as Suro sketches it—does no service either to Jews or to Latinas/os in the United States. Even the smallest steps toward understanding each other are better than no steps at all, and the distance covered in the accumulation of such small steps can carry both Latinas/os and Jews further down roads that we can travel together:

For Latinos and Jews to understand each other, it will be important for both to realize that they have very different experiences of group identity. That should be obvious from their histories. There is nothing in the Latino past that approximates the Holocaust, either in its horror or its continuing power to draw Jews together in common purpose. Nor do Latinos share a bond comparable to the religious beliefs and liturgical traditions that connect all Jews, despite their disparate practices. It would be an easy mistake for Jews to assume that in a community mobilization effort Puerto Ricans and Dominicans would naturally work together. Similarly, Latinos might easily conclude that Orthodox and secular Jews embrace such different lifestyles and are in conflict on such basic issues as the very nature of religion that they are disparate communities, without realizing that on issues that touch on the fate of the Jewish people as a whole, such as the endurance of the State of Israel, they can overcome seemingly enormous differences in the interests of ethnic unity. (Suro, 24)

While all this may be true, it is equally true that if Latinos/as and Jews are to understand each other in the twenty-first century, it will be important for Latino/a Christians in the United States to reckon with the whole complexity of our non-innocent history. That reckoning will necessarily be a matter of small and tentative steps, of relearning the lessons of the past as we revisit our history with new and urgent questions, in search of models and metaphors that can shape our current

quest for the sort of authentic *convivencia* that will be more than grudging tolerance of proximate others.

I would submit that two pieces of the Iberian legacy that call for further attention include, first of all, the very notion of *convivencia* itself. A second element I would invite us to retrieve from history for the sake of reconfiguration and re-deployment is the engagement of Christians and Jews in serious discussion with each other about matters of faith—even (and perhaps especially) those that divide Christians and Jews—an engagement for which I would invite us to take another look at the disputations between Jews and Christians that took place in medieval Spain, with a view toward moving from disputation to dialogue.

Reconsidering Convivencia

María Rosa Menocal reflects on the payoff of history's learned and unlearned lessons in the light of the events of September 11, 2001. She writes that after the events of that day, "It seems impossible to understand the history of what was once, indeed, an ornament of the world without seeing reflections of that history right at our own front door" (283). She observes:

The complex problem at the heart of the cultural history of medieval Europe was first and foremost how the great monotheistic religions of the Children of Abraham . . . struggled to define what they were and what they might become. When they managed to find it within themselves to be truly first-rate, admirable achievements followed. . . . But when, instead, the centers of such tolerance did not hold, irreparable damage often followed." (Menocal, 283)

These are especially important lessons for Latino/a Christians in the United States in the twenty-first century, where intolerances of many sorts have caused and continue to cause irreparable damage.

Many historians of medieval Spain have sought to debunk a romanticized notion of the *convivencia* between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain, suggesting that the notion of peaceful coexistence is more a matter of wishful thinking than of reading the evidence at hand. For example, Joseph Pérez insists:

We need to challenge the preconception of a Spain in which the three religions based on sacred books—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—existed tolerantly together throughout the first centuries of Muslim domination and continued to do so in the Christian Spain of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Tolerance presupposes an absence of discrimination against minorities and respect for the points of view of others. In the Iberia of the eighth century to the fifteenth, such tolerance was nowhere to be found. The Christians and the Muslims were equally

convinced that it was they who held the truth and that their own respective faiths were incompatible with the faiths of all others. If they acted with tolerance, that was because they could not do otherwise: unwillingly, they accepted what they had no means of preventing. It was the force of circumstances that made possible the presence of Christian communities in Islamic territory and Mudejars (Muslims) in the Christian kingdoms—not to mention the Jews, who were to be found everywhere. The idea of a tolerance peculiar to medieval Spain thus calls for qualification. It was a *de facto* tolerance, suffered rather than desired. (1–2)

In his study of the Spanish Inquisition, Henry Kamen makes it plain that in medieval Spain, “The communities of Christians, Jews, and Muslims never lived together on equal terms; the so-called *convivencia* was always a relationship between unequals” (4). That much, at least, is clear. Yet I believe that the claim Pérez makes—that is, “If they acted with tolerance, that was because they could not do otherwise: unwillingly, they accepted what they had no means of preventing”—should be rethought. The givenness of the situation in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain found themselves *did not* determine in some inevitable way the ways in which they would necessarily behave toward each other. Quite the contrary, the givenness of the coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Iberian peninsula was the setting for a variety of different intergroup and interpersonal responses. While a romanticized understanding of the *convivencia*—the several centuries of *de facto* religious heterogeneity in the population of the Iberian peninsula—overlooks the difficulties that these centuries of coexistence entailed, a realistic appreciation of the *convivencia* as *tiempos mixtos* of extraordinary opportunity as well as extraordinary tension, might well offer lessons for twenty-first-century Christian Latinos/as and twenty-first-century Jews who find ourselves living side by side in the United States.

I would suggest that from the standpoint of contemporary U.S. Latina/o Christian theology, the category of lived daily experience, the experience of *lo cotidiano*, makes it possible to take the small steps that will lead to greater Latino/a-Jewish understanding as we reconsider the *convivencia* and its implications. The category of lived daily experience, *lo cotidiano*, is crucial to making sense of the ways in

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which Latinas/os make our way in the world (Nanko-Fernández). The fact that the lived daily experiences of ordinary women and men rarely leave their footprints in the documents through which history gets written does not mean that the small steps of ordinary people past and present are not of considerable significance. As we begin to reconsider the *convivencia*, the faint traces of those footprints call for our careful attention. For the sake of our discussions today, one example will have to suffice. As Kamen notes: “Diego González remembered that in Huete in the 1470s when he was a poor orphan, as a Christian he received alms from ‘both Jews and Muslims, for we used to beg for alms from all of them, and received help from them as we did from the Christians.’ The kindness he received from the Jews, indeed, encouraged him to pick up a smattering of Hebrew from them. It also led him to assert that ‘the Jew can find salvation in his own faith just as the Christian can in his’” (Kamen, 5, citing Parrondo, 103). Sadly, the story of Diego González did not have a happy ending. Kamen reports that “twenty years later when he had become a priest,” González “was arrested for his pro-Jewish tendencies and burnt as a heretic” (5). What González learned on the basis of his own lived daily experience—“the Jew can find salvation in his own faith just as the Christian can in his”—may have been a lesson that was centuries ahead of its time (as his subsequent arrest and execution evidences). Yet it is precisely this sort of experience, and the important insight that came as its result, that suggests a way in which the givenness of the religious heterogeneity of medieval Spain led ordinary people to achieve interreligious understanding that moved well beyond mere tolerance toward authentic insight.

From Disputation to Dialogue

I would also suggest that Latino Christians in the United States have much to learn from revisiting the history of the disputations that took place between Christians and Jews in medieval Spain, particularly from the disputations of Barcelona (1263) and Tortosa (1413–14), the two about which the most documentary evidence has survived (on Tortosa, see Baer, 170–243). Robert Chazan underscores an important fact:

Surely, the first step toward proper understanding of the Barcelona debate is a simple one—recognition that there was no equality in the encounter. The Barcelona “disputation” was not an open intellectual engagement between two equal opponents operating under the same rules; it was in no sense a debate on the relative merits of Christianity and Judaism. This intellectual confrontation involved fundamental inequality, with the two sides operating under widely disparate regulations. Evidence of this inequality is reflected in (1) the obvious

Christian—more specifically, Dominican—initiative in calling the event into being, with corresponding Jewish reluctance to participate; (2) the offensive position accorded to the Christian spokesman and the correspondingly defensive position accorded to the Jewish representative; and (3) structuring of the engagement in such a way as to obviate any real embarrassment to the Christian side. (50–51)

The July 1263 encounter that brought together Dominican friar Paul Christian (a converted Jew) and Rabbi Moses ben Nahman of Girona (Ramban) in public colloquy in the presence of King James of Aragon was anything but a dialogue—in the way that bilateral and multilateral interfaith dialogues have taken place in the decades since the Second Vatican Council (for more about Friar Paul, see Roos). The Barcelona disputation was not staged in order to lead both sides to a clearer understanding of each other's beliefs and practices. Its intention was “that the truth of the [*Christian*] faith be made manifest in order to destroy the Jews' errors and to shake the confidence of many Jews” (Chazan, 64). For the Christian side, the working assumption was simple enough: “Were Jews brought to the point of questioning their received beliefs . . . the result would be acceptance of Christianity” (Chazan, 64). For its Christian instigators, the Barcelona disputation represented an effort toward missionizing, with an approach that was somewhat innovative inasmuch as it made use of Jewish sources, capitalizing on the convert Friar Paul's familiarity with the Talmud. As for debate's agenda, the opening statement of Rabbi Moses set the stage:

I opened and said: “The dispute between Christians and Jews concerns many issues in the customs of the faiths which do not involve essentials of belief. However, I do not wish to dispute in this honored court except over matters which are essential.”

They all responded and said: “You have spoken well.”

Therefore we agreed to speak first of the matter of the Messiah—if he has already come, according to the faith of the Christians, or if he is yet to come, according to the faith of the Jews. Subsequently we shall discuss whether the messiah is actually divine or if he is fully human, born of man and woman. Subsequently we shall discuss whether Jews possess the true law or whether Christians fulfill it. (Chazan, 65)

The insistence by the Jewish disputant at Barcelona that the debate attend to “matters which are essential” has important resonances across the centuries. These resonances are echoed in the 1413–14 disputation at Tortosa in what Hyam Maccoby calls “a plea for toleration” voiced by Rabbi Astruk that is “remarkably similar to modern notions of the inviolability of separate religious traditions” (86). Rabbi Astruk contended:

I say that all disputation about a principle of religion is prohibited, so that a man may not depart from the principles of his religion. It seems that only sciences should be made the subject of dispute and argument; but religion and belief ought to be consigned willingly to faith, not argument, so that he may not retreat from it. When we say, "We do not know," and cease disputing, we are doing what is right for every religious adherent. . . . Further, we do not say absolutely that we do not know any more; we mean that our previous arguments were sufficient to reply to the questions raised by Master Geronimo, and that at present we do not know any more. Therefore, with regard to this kind of ignorance we should not be regarded as defeated at all: firstly, because our declaration is due to faith, to which we are asserting our loyalty; secondly, because knowing more is not necessary for us with regard to the question raised. (Quoted in Maccoby, 86)

Maccoby correctly concludes, "Rabbi Astruk is saying here that religious disputation can be carried only so far. Eventually, the disputants must come to a point where there is nothing more to say, because bedrock principles of faith have been reached on one or both sides which are too axiomatic to be questioned" (86). This point, "where there is nothing more to say" can only be construed as an impasse according to the very limited rules according to which the disputations were conducted, rules under which the outcome of the encounter was predetermined, rules of a zero-sum game where there had to be a clear winner and a clear loser. The move from disputation to dialogue, I would suggest, involves a significant change in the rules. No longer is it necessary to marshal arguments that seek to unsettle or subvert the convictions of one's interlocutor, and no longer is it necessary to understand the aim of the encounter as a matter of winning the argument or converting one's interlocutors. Dialogue is not a zero-sum game. In some sense, all come out as winners in a successful dialogue, where the aim is a *convivencia* that is more than mere tolerance.

New Possibilities

I am not suggesting that a course in medieval Iberian history is the only answer or even the most important priority in advancing understanding between Latina/o Christians and Jews in the United States. By no means. On the other hand, the lessons this history offers—both by way of roads not to be followed and by way of doors it opens to new possibilities, ought not to be ignored. I would venture to suggest, though, that it is the lesson of Diego González, the orphan from Huete, that is the most telling. González arrived at the insight that "the Jew can find salvation in his own faith just as the Christian can in his" not through study or debate, but through the experience of daily life, through the daily generosity of

Jews from whom he received the alms that kept him alive. This is *convivencia* in the strongest sense.

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