
Back to the *Zukunft*: *Mestizaje*, Hybridity, and the Loehe Legacy¹

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At Wartburg Theological Seminary we are upheld by the generations before us, even as those of us who are bearers of this tradition in our time link arms together for the race that is set before us. We recall the contributions of Bill and Helen Streng to this legacy, each pastoral, wise, and deeply grounded in the Christian faith. Pastoral: they taught and modeled what it means to “love the people” in word and deed. A few years ago while listening to cassette tape recordings of Dr. Streng’s teaching I was reminded again of the pastoral heart that informed his relationships and teaching, grounded in his own pastoral ministry at Immanuel in Rock Falls, Illinois, where he met and married Helen and where they had their children, and at St. John’s in Bliedorn, Iowa, where he continued to minister during the years he also served on the seminary faculty. Wise: both Helen and Bill were well-read educators: she, for example, through directing and teaching Sunday school and he by teaching, organizing the Luther Academy, reinterpreting catechism, and through his writings. Bill introduced students to the cutting-edge themes in theology. It was at his prompting that I first read Gustavo Gutierrez and Paulo Freire, authors whose work expanded my horizons and from that time on set me on an intellectual trajectory. Grounded: Helen and Bill were grounded deeply in the Christian faith, doing the great work of passing on the faith from one generation to the next.

There is a deep connection in the Streng family to the themes of this article. While Bill and Helen did not draw attention to this, I think it is appropriate to note that William Streng was himself a descendent of the Loehe family. In Helen’s words: Loehe’s sister “Barbara married a Fronmueller and had a daughter, Dorothea. Dorothea Fronmueller married John Georg Streng. Their son, Theodor, was Bill Streng’s father.” In my imagination this means the William D. Streng Professor becomes a godchild in this Loehe lineage, a meaningful connection.

This article aims to be in continuity with Dr. Streng’s great work of the generations, thinking about how we might take on

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responsibility for educating and renewing the church in our time. The essay is organized into three parts: first, recalling the matrix of the Loehe legacy; second, reflecting on the hybrid character of emergence Christianity in relation to that legacy; and third, proposing that we reimagine the face of the future church with *mucho gusto*.

“I Am an Impure Thinker”

In a book by this title, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy writes: “I am an impure thinker. I am hurt, shaken, elated, disillusioned, shocked, comforted, and I have to transmit my mental experiences lest I die. And I write a book lest I die. And although I may die. To write a book is no luxury. It is a means of survival.”²² Wilhelm Loehe was also an impure thinker. All of the characteristics here named applied also to him. He was shuffled around through a series of vicarages before landing as pastor in a backwards village, Neuendettelsau, where he did not want to be or stay. His beloved wife died at an early age, leaving him a widower with four young children, a bitter grief from which he never recovered. He was an opinionated person, subject to conflict with church authorities, probably someone not easy to get along with. Yet Loehe was beloved and effective as a pastor and persisted at this labor through trials and tumult to the end of his life. He had a global vision for the mission of the church. Through all his ordeals he remained a person compelled to let his thoughts be known through sermons, flyers, periodicals, devotionals, administrative instructions, liturgical resources, occasional writings, and books.

1. This article is based on an address given at the author’s installation into the William D. Streng Professorship for Education and Renewal of the Church.

2. Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *I Am an Impure Thinker*, intro. W.H. Auden (Norwich, Vt.: Argo, 1970), 2.

One characteristic of Loehé's work involves the impurity of his thought. Wilhelm Loehé constructed his life's work by juxtaposing themes that conventionally are held to be in tension.³ The Loehé legacy brings together a distinctive pattern of ecclesial commitments that are often viewed by others as contradictory or even mutually exclusive: liturgical worship and passion for mission, confessional orthodoxy and pietistic devotion, evangelical proclamation and diaconal servanthood, theological imagination and pragmatic skills in administration and financial management. Not only is such a configuration of ministry gifts of historical interest in relation to Loehé's own pastoral activity but these particular forms of service constitute a matrix of creative elements much needed for the ministry and mission of the church in our post-Christian age.

Liturgical Worship and Passion for Mission. A missionary theology of worship begins with the conviction that the Primary Actor at worship is the Triune God. The Three Persons of the Trinity exist in life-giving relationships one with another. The dynamic inter-personal relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, named *perichoresis*, constitute a divine dance into which the church as *communio* is invited to join.⁴ The life-giving relationships among the Divine Persons are extended through the church as a means of grace for the life of the world. It is at worship, following the pattern of the historic *ordo*, as researched and renewed by Loehé in his generation, that the members of the body of Christ are invited to learn the steps of this liturgical dance as a way of life. Worship is about the Triune God teaching the gathered people of God how to dance! This is what liturgical theologian, Thomas Schattauer, means by turning worship "inside out" for an age of mission.⁵ Loehé's vivid liturgical theology flows seamlessly together with this lively sense of Christian mission, "the one church of God in motion," "which flows through time and into which all people pour."⁶

Confessional Orthodoxy and Pietistic Devotion. In the interpretation of Protestantism in the centuries following the Reformation, a conventional distinction, if not conflict, has been made between "orthodoxy" and "pietism." Loehé was deeply influenced both by the traditions of Lutheran Orthodoxy, especially as transmitted by the faculty of Erlangen University, and by the enduring inspiration of Pietism in the nineteenth century, seen in his own Christian formation, approach to pastoral ministry,

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support for foreign mission, and administration of deaconess ministries in service to people in need. Loehé integrated a commitment both to Lutheran Confessional Orthodoxy and the renewal of living Christian faith as exemplified in the practices of Pietism. Loehé was insistent about the necessity of preserving Lutheran Confessional integrity against all attempts to impose a union of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions as it had taken place in Prussia in the early 1800s. He went so far as to claim Lutheranism as the best preserving the pure teaching of the one catholic church over time. Yet Loehé's commitment to Lutheran Orthodoxy always remained tempered by his concern for religious practices as these came to expression through Pietism. "Because of this we should not speak of Loehé as returning to a Lutheran orthodoxy interested only in correct doctrine for its own sake . . . Without corresponding practice, such a doctrinal position has no value."⁷ This is as true about Loehé's grounding in the practices of Pietism as it was true of his liturgical commitments. The Loehé legacy strikingly demonstrates the melding of Orthodoxy and Pietism in creative synthesis.

Evangelical Proclamation and Diaconal Servanthood. Even as Loehé was committed to the recovery and renewal of liturgy, he was fully engaged in the practice of evangelical preaching and teaching. This service to the proclaimed Word lived, however, in creative relationship with active diaconal service ministering to needs of neighbors, especially through the development of the deaconess community and institutions at Neuendettelsau. Evangelical proclamation and diaconal servanthood belong together in Loehé's concept. Loehé's opportunities to preach were regular and frequent. Services with preaching took place three times a week—Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. Loehé followed the established lectionary for Sunday preaching but would employ other texts on festival days or on special occasions.⁸ More than anything else, his sermons were attuned to the hearers, who often filled the village church—not only local parishioners but interested parties who chose to travel considerable distances to come and hear him, including students from Erlangen University.

Simultaneously, Loehé saw the need for *diakonia* and organized opportunities for training women for diaconal service to

3. The following description of the matrix of Loehé's impure thought is adapted from Craig L. Nessan, *Wilhelm Loehé in North America: Historical Perspective and Living Legacy* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming).

4. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

5. Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in Thomas H. Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), Chapter 1.

6. Wilhelm Loehé, *Three Books about the Church*, James L. Schaaf, trans. and ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 59.

7. Russell John Briese, "Wilhelm Loehé and the Rediscovery of the Sacrament of the Altar in Nineteenth-Century Lutheranism," *Lutheran Forum* 30 (May 1996): 33.

8. For the following, see Gerhard Ottersberg, "Wilhelm Loehé," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 49 (1952): 176–177.

others.⁹ While Loehe was well informed about the deaconess movements started by Fliedner and Wichern, he focused his efforts on developing a deaconess order along the Lutheran confessional line. A deaconess society was formed in 1854, the same year as the founding of Wartburg Theological Seminary. This deaconess work expanded in many directions: schools for the young, hospitals for men and women, homes for the mentally disabled, an industrial school, sheltered workshops, a home for abandoned girls, a home for single mothers, homebound nursing services, and a chapel. “Deaconesses were sent into service in various German states wherever demand for them arose; only gradually did sufficient demand develop in Bavaria to lead to the concentration of the work there.”¹⁰ To this day these deaconess institutions are the foundation for the social services provided by the Lutheran Church in Bavaria. Evangelical proclamation and worship lead the church into diaconal service of neighbors in need, starting with the least.

Theological Imagination and Pragmatic Skills in Administration. Theological imagination is the capacity to envision the world in such a way that God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is seen to be actively involved in human life and all of creation. Loehe exercised liturgical imagination, missional imagination, confessional imagination, pious imagination, evangelical imagination, diaconal imagination, and above all Scriptural imagination—each facets of theological imagination shaping Christian identity and vocation for the life of the world. Now more than 210 years after his birth, the legacy of Loehe continues to fund theological imagination for the church and mission in our time. Theological imagination, however, went hand in hand for Loehe with his dedicated work as a highly competent administrator and financial manager. Given the many facets of Loehe’s impure thinking, it would be easy to overlook his accomplishments as an organizer and administrator. Even though Loehe himself never earned more than \$250-\$300 per year during the entire thirty-five years of his pastoral ministry, not only did he manage his family household and local congregation but a vast array of complex mission and diaconal enterprises.¹¹ Loehe was an entrepreneur in the cause of God’s mission in the world! Loehe’s accomplishments as an administrator and financial officer are easily overlooked, underappreciated, and little researched features of his work, without which, however, little else would have been possible. Administration is the skeleton upon which the church as the body of Christ in its institutional forms is embodied. Theological imagination without administrative wherewithal remains abstract. When theological imagination and administration are held together, great things can and do emerge, as demonstrated by Loehe’s accomplishments.

As an impure thinker, Loehe held in creative tension diverse gifts needful for thriving ministry in service to others: liturgical

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worship and passion for mission, confessional orthodoxy and pietistic devotion, evangelical proclamation and diaconal service, theological imagination and pragmatic skills in administration. That Loehe was able to coordinate and sustain these varied contributions is one of his most notable accomplishments from which we can continue to learn.

After Christendom: Universal Priesthood, Hybridity, and Emergence Christianity

Theological literature in recent decades is replete with astute analysis that we are living at the end of Christendom and have entered into a post-Christian era (Douglas John Hall). This literature makes a compelling case that something dramatic has changed about the relationship between Christianity to Western societies in the twentieth century. This shift has involved increased critical distance between identifying Christian faith with nationalism, both in Europe in the aftermath of two world wars (dialectical theology) and in North America through a realignment of Christian loyalties in relation to the state beginning in the 1960s (liberation theologies). At the same time, the institutional structures upon which the Constantinian church was constructed, beginning in the fourth century and as these have evolved in various forms into the twenty-first century, are disintegrating.

Arguably, the Protestant Reformation (except in those churches identified with the Radical Reformation) did little to deconstruct the fundamentally Constantinian character of ecclesial life, even while we affirm that the Reformation certainly did contribute much theologically to a Christological recentering of the church by its insistence on justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. This Gospel recentering was a major contribution for which we can rightly give thanks 500 years after the Reformation. What has remained latent, however, is the dynamic significance of what Luther called the “universal priesthood of all believers.”¹² Luther’s teaching about the universal priesthood of all believers remains an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation. If justification and vocation are the twin pillars of the Lutheran Reformation, the bearers of this legacy over the centuries have granted prominent place to justification, while relegating vocation to a marginal position, never fulfilling the promise of Luther’s teaching about the universal priesthood.¹³

9. Roland Liebenberg, *Wilhelm Loehe (1808–1872): Stationen seines Lebens* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 57.

10. Ottersberg, 183.

11. *Ibid.*, 170.

12. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, “Universal Priesthood of All Believers: Unfulfilled Promise of the Reformation,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46 (Jan 2019): 8–15.

13. Cf. Mark Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minne-

The church in our time, at least in North America and Europe, faces a Babylonian captivity as all-encompassing and debilitating as that criticized by Luther in the sixteenth century. Today the Babylonian captivity of the church, although differently guised, is equally deadly for the vitality of the church's mission: the reduction of Christian ministry to that which is done in the name of the institutional church. Church members largely think that only what is organized by the institutional church or done within the confines of a church building really counts as Christian ministry. This compartmentalization of Christian existence, confining it mainly to those activities organized and conducted by congregations, represents a "churchification" of Christian ministry. Almost all of recent literature on "missional church" addresses the question of how congregations as the primary agents can become more missional; how leaders and members can become more welcoming and proactive in congregational outreach. While this development is salutary, the missional church needed in our time must develop far more focus on how congregations can serve as teaching and equipping communities, connecting faith with the many roles and responsibilities in which the baptized live out their ministries in daily life. The center of gravity for our living out "missional church" needs to shift from what we do as the church gathered to what we do as the church scattered.¹⁴

For Luther, "faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times."¹⁵ At the time of the Reformation the universal priesthood made a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the laity on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy. While leaders of the institutional church pay lip service to the universal priesthood of all believers, primary attention in most efforts at outreach involve securing financial resources and attracting new members for the sake of the survival of the church as institution. The divide between what happens in and for the institutional church, especially on Sundays, and living out one's faith the rest of the week in service to neighbors at home, work, in the local community, through citizenship, and globally has become enormous. Whereas in North America and Europe a deep rift exists between what happens in the name of the institutional church and the rest of people's lives, in other parts of the world, especially in the Southern Hemisphere and Asia, Christianity as an entire way of life remains more integral and unified.¹⁶ The churches of the North have much to learn from the churches of the South and the East about validating and equipping all the baptized for their vocations in daily life. How can we participate in God's renewal of the

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church in the sense of the universal priesthood of all the baptized?

In her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle describes a transformation of epic proportions through which Christianity is presently being re-formed. Many aspects of this re-formation are being experienced by us as the decline of the institutional church and elicits fear for the future of the Christian faith, leading us to ask: "And yet, when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). Tickle describes how new configurations have been emerging among four existing forms of North American Christianity. She labels the four extant categories as the "liturgicals" ("Roman Catholics and Anglicans, along with a few Lutheran congregations of a more liturgical bent"), "social justice Christians" (mainline Protestants), "renewalists" (Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians), and "conservatives" (evangelicals, including those once called fundamentalists).¹⁷ She claims that what we see unfolding is the reconfiguration of these four camps, drawing constructive elements from each category into the new synthesis named "emergence Christianity."

Emergence Christianity is hybrid in character. Hybridity as a term originates in evolutionary biology and has been reinterpreted in post-colonial discourse to analyze the dynamics of oppression and liberation at the interface between diverse cultures.¹⁸ Here the term is employed to describe diverse factors that are mixing together to form new expressions of Christianity through theological cross-pollination and ecclesial crossbreeding. The future always is created from the fragments of the past; only God creates something out of nothing. The new matrix of emergence Christianity, according to Tickle, involves realigning the four preexisting forms, drawing them into "a swirling center ... picking up ideas and people from each, sweeping them into the center, mixing them there, and then spewing them forth into a new way of being Christian, into a new way of being Church."¹⁹ While there is backlash from some representatives of the four previously separable categories, the church's future involves a new matrix constituted

apolis: Fortress, 2016), 164.

14. Dwight L. DuBois, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015). See also Life of Faith initiative: Trusting Jesus. Serving Our Neighbors. <http://lifeoffaith.info/> 1 June 2019.

15. Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," LW 35:370-371.

16. Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

17. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 125-127.

18. Cf. Vitor Westhelle, *After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Post-Colonial Theologies* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2010), 159-160.

19. Tickle, 135.

of key commitments from all four traditions: new embodiments of ancient historical liturgical practices, insistence on engagement for social justice in the world, new appropriation of classic spiritual practices, and grounding faith deeply in Scripture and the great Christian tradition.

The hybrid shape of emergence Christianity involves liturgical sensibility, social justice activism, attention to personal spiritual vitality, and solid biblical-theological grounding. We can see the attraction of such a construal in the ministries and writings of several figures identified with emergence Christianity.²⁰ Imagine a church directing its energies toward this fourfold construal of Christian faith for the education and formation of the universal priesthood of all believers to live out baptismal vocation in all their roles and responsibilities in daily life! Now imagine, too, the convergence of the impure, hybrid commitments of Wilhelm Loehe in relation to the matrix of emergence Christianity: theological imagination and practical wisdom directed at creative retrieval of liturgical resources, diaconal servanthood, pietistic nurture of a living faith, and evangelical proclamation, grounded in Lutheran confessional heritage and directed outward with passion for mission.

The Future Is Mestizo

It belongs to human history that we interpret the world in binary categories, primordially as self-other, us-them, safe-dangerous. While such binary calculations may have contributed to human survival under the conditions of a threatened existence in our evolutionary past, such binary thinking now has become itself a threat to human existence. Rosemary Radford Ruether has analyzed how dualistic thinking permeates philosophical discourse (subject-object, reason-emotion, individual-community, immanence-transcendence) and religious discourse (sacred-secular, soul-body, spirit-matter, good-evil).²¹ Dualistic thinking based on binary categories leads inexorably into hierarchical structures of domination and subjugation: male-female, rich-poor, old-young, white-black, hetero-homo, abled-disabled, human-creation, in-group-out group. We understand ourselves in terms of “I am this, not that.” Dualistic thinking according to binary categories undergirds all forms of structural injustice: the “isms.”

One binary requires particular attention for the future of mission. Lutheran churches in the U.S. originated through the immigration of Lutheran peoples from different Northern European ethnic backgrounds: Germans, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns as the major ethnic groupings. African, Latino/a, Asian, or other ethnic and culture groups have always been marginal to the Northern European Lutheran mainstream. While ethnicity and language initially were uniting features in North American Lutheran history, an identity based primarily, and often exclusively, on these identities constitutes ethnic idolatry when particular

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ethnic and cultural traditions take primacy in defining what it means to be Christian or Lutheran.²² Often ethnic idolatries are so concealed from our own eyes that we fail to recognize the obstacles that prevent welcoming others. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, understanding that others need to become “like us” instead of embracing how we are going to be transformed by the gifts of others is a major barrier to building a more ethnically and culturally diverse church. Baptism into the name of Jesus Christ is the basis for an identity that makes all other identities relative, including those based on ethnicity, and transcends all binary categories.

Virgilio Elizondo named the emerging reality of our society with foresight in 1988 with the title of his book, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*.²³ The experience of the German founders in the Iowa Synod was *mestizo* from the very beginning as it took root on North American soil, although Loehe did his best to influence them to remain true to their German origins, traditions, and language. While the early decades of Wartburg Theological Seminary were devoted to preparing teachers and pastors to work among the German-speaking immigrants flooding into the Midwest in the late nineteenth century, by the second generation those raised in North American culture began to address many questions about theology and church practices in this context, including about the use of English. The immigrant experience is always *mestizo*, no matter how much an elder generation might try to preserve its ethnicity.

While Elizondo focuses on the process of *mestizaje* (the process of interracial and/or intercultural mixing) in the history of Latin America among indigenous, African, and Iberian peoples—and in particular at the interface between Mexico/Texas and North America—his proposal about a *mestizo* future involves something far more all-encompassing, expansive, and promising regarding our fundamental identity as human beings. What we fail to acknowledge in our proclivity for binary categories and adherence

20. Cf. the work of Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Peter Rollins, Tom Sine, Rachel Held Evans, and Nadia Bolz-Weber.

21. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist, 1972), 6, 255–256.

22. Cf. Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 118–119.

23. Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*, revised ed. (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2000).

to dualistic thinking is how *mestizo* we already are—biologically, culturally, and religiously. Every person is genetically constituted by the mixing of genes in a long evolutionary process. Every person is culturally *mestizo*, influenced by complex combinations of cultural experiences based on personal history, external influences, and chosen affinities. Every person is religiously diverse, incorporating multiple faiths into idiosyncratic patterns, even among those who profess a particular faith tradition.²⁴

We are hybrids more than we are pure types. This is not a brief for new attempts at assimilation and domination-subjugation. We must intentionally and persistently dismantle every manifestation of colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and classism that renders harm in human relationships and societies. This is, however, an appeal that we think about ourselves differently. The changing demographics in the U.S. give us an occasion and opportunity to claim the strengths of human hybridity, instead of seeing it as a threat. Hybridity is an inherent consequence of increasing exchanges among persons, cultures, and religions in the accelerating process of globalization. Hybridity breeds diversity and thereby new strengths in the evolutionary process through which God has set creation in motion. Hybridity deconstructs all definitions of the human based on the fundamental binary: “this, not that.” Elizondo writes: “The new *mestizaje* that is taking place in diverse forms every place on the globe represents a breakthrough to a new humanity. Diversity in the various historico-geographical regions of the world will continue to be evidenced and strengthened through the quest for roots and continuity with our ancestors. Yet there will also emerge a great common unity that will not be homogeneity, a humanity without differences; it will be a new mosaic of the human race.”²⁵

The promise of God to Abraham and Sarah was that “... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). At Pentecost the Spirit poured out blessing on all peoples, beyond the

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distinction between Jews and Gentiles, in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:1–36). “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:19–23). The impure thinking of the Loehle legacy resonates strikingly with the hybridity of emergence Christianity for the renewal of a *mestizo* humanity on the way to God’s new creation.

24. Cf. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, eds., *Many Yet One? Multiple Religious Belonging* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016).

25. Elizondo, 101–102.