



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## The Pedagogical Problem with White Professors

Miguel A. De La Torre, *Illiff School of Theology*

Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics  
December 21, 2017

A few years ago, during a search for a New Testament professor, I asked two questions during the interview – two questions I ask of every candidate for a position with our institution regardless of rank or discipline. The first is innocent enough: “How important is racial/ethnic diversity to you when teaching?” All candidates, to a fault, enthusiastically answer in the affirmative. Then I ask my second question: “Which scholars and/or books from racial and ethnic minorities do you include in your syllabus and why?” Here is when the squirming usually begins, revealing the lack of academic rigor of the candidate under consideration.

During this particular New Testament search, two separate candidates from different Ivy League schools provided problematic responses. The first responded that as much as s/he was committed to diversity, s/he could not think of any scholar of color off the top of their head who has written a credible text concerning the biblical text. Let the response of this biblical scholar sink in for a moment. The second scholar, grasping for straws, offered the name Paul Ricœur, and then proceeded to convince me why I should accept his answer. I didn’t. While these two particular individuals best illustrate the depths of the ignorance of many white scholars concerning the scholarship emanating from what will soon be – combined – the largest U.S. demographic group, others have provided slightly better answers, but no less ignorant. For example, often the names offered are of scholars whose works were well known in the last century. Although they name foundational thinkers, they lack knowledge of current contributors to the discipline. Other times Latin American liberationist scholars are mentioned

as if they are representatives of the U.S. Latinx context. Or white women use the term *mujerista* as the Latinx equivalent to womanist revealing their total lack of knowledge concerning the rich feminist discourse occurring among Latinxs.

One's pedagogy, or scholarship for that matter, can never be cutting-edge if one is ignorant of all aspects of their discipline. As a Latino man, my teaching must not just include the thoughts and writings of eurocentric and Latinx scholars; but also those of Indigenous, Black, and Asian-American scholars, as well as Queer and Feminist voices. Not to be familiar with the contributions of all marginalized communities does a disservice to my scholarship, and more importantly, to the students in my classroom. Many white scholars fall short of academic rigor because they can succeed, be published, and thus paraded as the fattened calf due to the prevalent institutional racism which continues to support a white affirmative action which protects their job opportunities and current positions from better qualified and more knowledgeable scholars of color.

As a Latino going through my Ph.D. program, not only did I have to master Eurocentric thinkers, methodologies, and theories (as I should have), but I was expected to also be fluent with the thinkers, methodologies, and theories arising from my Latinx context. And yet, it was my white colleagues who were considered among the "brightest and the best" who lacked any requirement or need to read or know anything about my context - or any other marginalized context. How can anyone ever be considered knowledgeable with such a limited understanding of a sliver of their discipline? Part of the problem is that so many of the so-called top schools promote ignorance because they lack scholars of color, especially Latinx scholars. All you need to do is count how many core Latinx faculty are present on the faculty of the so-called Ivies to prove my point. You can count them on one hand, and maybe have a free finger leftover to give. Simply stated: If the faculty fails to represent the diversity of the population, then that school - even if it claims to be among the Ivies - lacks academic excellence and rigor - regardless of how large their endowments may be.

Of course, this institutionalized racism is not limited to the Ivies. Gaze upon your own religion department. How many Latinxs are among your core faculty? Our presence may be requested to demonstrate a politically correct diversity; nevertheless, our scholarship remains confined to our *barrios*. Latinx, who comprise the largest ethnic group in the United States, remain the least represented group of all full professors in the academy, usually relegated to the "instructor" or "lecturer" rank where we possess little if no voice on how the academic institution structures itself, or in influencing doctoral students. The voices of marginalized scholars must be prevented from fully participating in shaping the academic discipline. For if they were truly given a seat at the table, they might reveal that the discipline which has been upheld for the past centuries as universal is simply a privileged eurocentric method of theological contemplation which in reality is but a very limited form of the particular.

Students sitting in classrooms of white professors are often prevented from obtaining a cutting-edge education because of the strategies employed by so-called top schools, either consciously or unconsciously, in maintaining and sustaining eurocentric academic supremacy.

Speaking only from the Latinx experience (although I suspect it may resonate with other marginalized groups), when some schools seek to hire Latinxs they often search for the brownest face with whitest voice. Quotas are thus met without having to deal with the scholarship being generated by *nuestra comunidad*; or worse, fuse and confuse Latin American theological scholarship with Latinx scholarship. Better yet is to find an actual white professor who can teach the Latinx context. A second strategy is to hire junior scholars (or in one case I know, a senior scholar), without tenure, to teach courses about the Latinx context while continuing the historical trend of seldom granting tenure. In this way, after seven years, the school can find a new Latinx to use, misuse, and abuse ensuring they will never amass the power to challenge, influence, or change the discourse at the institution. And finally, the school can invite well-known Latinx scholars to serve as visiting professors. Again, while the Latinx context is momentarily explored, the institution protects itself from structural change, because, after all, once the year appointment comes to an end – the scholar returns to their institution violence. As radical as they may have been, their absence quickly helps the institution forget whatever challenges may have been raised, and of course, if the challenges hit too close to home, they can always dismiss the Latinx as angry.

A pedagogical problem exists with white professors because of the continuous racism and ethnic discrimination prevalent in our schools that still relegates our voices, our thoughts, and our bodies to the margins. I leave it for you to ponder how racist your school might be. I, on the other hand, wish to close praising those white students and scholars who refuse the temptation of scholastic laziness and spend a good portion of their academic training learning about the context of their racial/ethnic Other. Although they can succeed in the academy without having to do this extra work, nevertheless, they have come to realize they can never truly possess scholastic rigor if they lack the breadth of their discipline. These are the white scholars I crave to call colleagues! Their integrity prevents them from speaking for us, or in place of us; rather, they master the contributions made on their margins so as to better inform their own thinking and become more effective in sharing our contributions in the classroom. They have come to realize they can never be good teachers if they are ignorant of the full scope of their discipline.

<https://wabash.center/2017/12/pedagogical-problem-white-professors/>