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Orlando Espín’s compelling book reminds us that Christianity is neither a collection of abstract doctrines nor a rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is the lived faith of real, everyday Christians. For Espín, the principle content of the Christian way of life is the audacity of a “subversive hope” in the truth of Jesus’ preaching about the compassion of God and God’s correlative transformation of the world. We “bet on” hope in the act of faith, living radically according to the compassion of God, which militates against the dehumanizing and idolatrous doctrines and ideologies constructed for the benefit of those in power at the expense of those whom society deems “disposable”.

As the latest fruit of Espín’s ongoing conversation with the concept of tradition, this book expounds upon the idea of “traditioning” as the cultural process by which the People of God encounter divine revelation only in and through its appropriation within a specific historical-cultural context. The inescapably contextualized nature of revelation means that traditioning must be intercultural, pluralistic, and dialogical. Christian traditioning must be the act of the entire People of God guided by the infallible *sensus fidelium*. Theology is inseparable from the real experience of everyday life (*lo cotidiano*) and from the experiences, spirituality, practices, and beliefs of everyday Christians (popular Catholicism).

Christian doctrine is not exempt from determination by its socio-historical context. There is always the risk that doctrine may become an idol, a self-justifying object of obedience that purports to be an absolute and exclusive representation of the truth. Such an idol, rather than denouncing situations of hegemonic dominance and oppression, serves only to legitimate the abuse of power. Rather than claiming privileged access to the truth, we must encounter the ultimate mystery within the “effective analogy” of the crucified Jesus and all other victims of power (121).

Here, as in prior books, there is something ironic about the way Espín operates. His framework of “traditioning” and “popular Catholicism” provides ample grounds for utilizing the practices, spirituality, and beliefs of everyday believers as a source for theology, and yet Espín does not explicitly engage in this kind of retrieval. For example, for his portrait of Jesus, rather than presenting the views and spiritual experiences of everyday Christians, Espín relies heavily upon the ideas of certain reductionistic historical-critical biblical scholars. According to Espín, “Jesus’ interpretation of the Torah—this would perhaps surprise many Christians today—did not concern itself with an individual’s eternal salvation” (2). Jesus did not come to save souls because Jesus and his audience had no concept
of either “soul” or “heaven” (191 #49). Likewise, “the historical Jesus did not preach himself,” for he “did not regard himself as anything but a human being” (92).

Without disputing the historicity of these claims, it is surprising that Espin, who argues that theology is not reserved for academics and the study of texts, puts such weight on the textual criticism of certain biblical scholars. Seeing how he insists that the interpretation of the New Testament must accord with the faith of the real People of God (20-21), should he not consider how the specific practices and beliefs of the majority of active lay Catholics, who worship Jesus and look forward to heaven, contradict this portrayal? Espín does not deny the divinity of Jesus, nor does he teach that contemporary belief in the afterlife is necessarily bad, but he does leave out any consideration of how these beliefs might be positive factors in the lives and mission of real Christians today. Because they are later developments, these beliefs are not pertinent to the core message of Jesus’ preaching (89; 191 #49).

Although this book could have been deepened by an explicit retrieval of the popular Catholicism of a particular community, it still exemplifies the depth of insight that has for decades made Espín's theology highly influential for US Latin@ theology. Idol & Grace expands and develops Espín's pivotal concepts that have served as the conceptual basis for many theologians’ engagements with particular Christian communities and their socio-historical contexts and struggles. At the same time, this book is not written for an exclusively Latin@ or even Catholic audience. Its expansive approach aims at engaging in an inclusive and ecumenical conversation. It therefore has much to offer to readers of diverse backgrounds and interests, even those who are less familiar with the theology of tradition or US Latin@ theology. Idol & Grace serves as a compelling witness to the world-transforming compassion of God, to which we must respond with a subversive hope and an active faith.