

Interview with Justo L. González
Author of *The Mestizo Augustine:*
A Theologian between Two Cultures
(IVP Academic, 2016)

Interview conducted on October 10, 2017.

Transcript prepared by Martha Nehring.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Today we are delighted to be speaking with Dr. Justo González, author of the highly praised, three-volume *History of Christian Thought* series; he previously taught at the Evangelical Seminary in Puerto Rico and the Candler School of Theology of Emory University. Born in Havana, Cuba, Dr. González became the youngest person to earn a doctorate in historical theology at Yale University when he graduated with his Ph.D. in 1961. We will be discussing his new book today, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures*. Thank you so much, Dr. Gonzalez, for your time this morning.

Justo L. González: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here with you.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Dr. Gonzalez, you explain in the introduction of your book that you will be looking at Augustine's theology through the lens of a *mestizo*. Would you be willing to explain this term for us briefly?

Justo L. González: The word *mestizo* was originally a pejorative word, similar to the English "mongrel," and it was a way to refer to people of mixed race, in a Spanish-speaking situation in which, as in many other places, there was an emphasis on the part of some people on purity of race and all that. And a *mestizo* was a person despised because they were neither a Spaniard nor an Indian, and they were both at the same time. In other words, a *mestizo* is a person whose ancestry and whose culture is Spanish and also Indian, but at the same time, neither. That word was given a different twist some time back by a man who was a famous philosopher in Mexico, who began claiming that Mexico's whole nature was *mestizo*, and that that was its pride, and that Mexico was the heir of these two cultures, and so somehow bringing them together into a new reality. It was brought into the theological discussion by a Catholic priest in Texas by the name of [Virgilio] Elizondo, who while he was in Texas experienced being called a Mexican. He was always eager to go to Mexico, and when he went to Mexico he found out he was not a Mexican either. And so that tension of being both and being neither of the two is part of the experience of *mestizaje*. And most of it is not a conscious situation, it's a struggle that people experience within, of different traits of their upbringing, their heritage and so on, that doesn't come to a head every time, but that produces behaviors and tensions that are more easily understood once one comes to see that.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Dr. González, Monica, that is, Augustine's mother, of course, may well have been Berber. What are the elements of the portrait that Augustine gives her in the *Confessions* or elsewhere in his literature that point toward this Berber identity?

Justo L. González: Well, first of all, apart from what he says, her own name is of Berber origin. Secondly, there was a very large population in the town where they lived, where most of the local inhabitants were Berbers. Thirdly, in that whole area, Christianity had been originally a Berber religion. The Romans had been persecuting the Christians, but there were also racial tensions between Romans and Berbers, and therefore Christianity grew much more rapidly among the Berbers. Now, her own traits, I don't know, because I find it difficult to say there are certain traits that necessarily belong to a particular ethnicity. Sometimes we say that, we say, "Those people are emotional," or "Those people are—whatever," and I think that that's one of the things we have to leave aside.

Now, there is a difference between Berber and Roman understandings, for instance, of the ordering of society. And we might come back to that later, but the Berber understanding of the ordering is that whoever has the power has the right. The Roman understanding is that whoever has the right is given the power, so that if you are an ineffective emperor, you are still the emperor. And if you are an ineffective Berber chief, somebody else takes your place. And that's part of the discussion that take place later, where we can see Augustine oscillating between those two.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Thank you. And does Augustine ever explicitly acknowledge his feelings of being a *mestizo*, that is, a person between two cultures?

Justo L. González: No, not explicitly. But he, on occasion, defends one or the other. It's clear that he was very much interested in Greco-Roman culture; he was interested in rhetoric, he became a master of the Latin language, and so there is no doubt that he is affirming that. But at the same time it is interesting that when some people began criticizing the Punic or the old African language and culture, he came to the defense talking about the great authors they had, and the great figures and so on, which is typical, I think, again, of a *mestizo* today.

You have to realize I'm writing this book as a Latino living in the U.S., myself of genetic *mestizo* origin. I think we all are, by the way, but anyhow, that's not the issue; the issue to me is more living in a culture that is not my own and having to negotiate it, and claiming it, claiming it's good, and so on, but at the same time, going the other direction. And it's clear to me that one of the things that happens to many Latinos living in the U.S. is that they try to be as American as possible, but if somebody starts criticizing their culture they immediately jump. And they know that there is something here that has to be preserved and valued, and so on.

And I think this is what is happening with Augustine. He is as Roman as they come, he wants to be as Roman as they can be, but he still defends his own culture. One thing that is not quite clear is, when he was made a priest and then a bishop, quite against his will—he was just visiting a church and the bishop there said, "Perhaps the Lord will send us somebody," and looked at him, you know, the way preachers look. And so the church decided to make him a presbyter and then a bishop. Apparently, one of the reasons why that happened is that the bishop did not know the Punic language, and he was hoping to have a preacher who could somehow connect with the Punic population. We have no indication how well Augustine knew the ancient language of his mother, but it is clear that many of the popular sayings that he quotes come from that tradition.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: That's absolutely fascinating. Dr. Gonzalez, Augustine was a man who prized deep friendships. Did Augustine seek out the company of other *mestizos*—those who could identify with him especially as Berber-Romans?

Justo L. González: We don't know. Among his closest friends were always the friends that he had had from the little village of Thagaste where he grew up in Numidia, where most of the population was Berber. Now, I say we don't know, because it is not clear whether his parents, including his mother, in their typical eagerness to move up in society, discouraged connections with the local population. All his friends from Thagaste have Roman names, but that doesn't mean anything; he himself has a Roman name. So it is quite possible that some of those people were *mestizos* themselves; we just don't know.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: In the story of Augustine's conversion to Christianity, how do we witness him struggle in a way that particular reflects the spiritual journey of a *mestizo*?

Justo L. González: Well, Augustine, in a way, always believed the religion of his mother. When talking about his conversion—that's a different thing, we have to clarify that. He always thought that somehow, what his mother was saying was important, that it was good. But at the same time, he found it incompatible with the tradition of his father that he was studying. Part of the difficulty is that, his mother, like many *mestizo* mothers, while wanting him to be like her and have her religion, at the same time was very eager to have him become as Roman as he could so he could move ahead in society.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Do we detect a particular *mestizo* identity in his conversion narrative?

Justo L. González: So part of his difficulty is that he does not understand, he finds no answer, to the intellectual difficulties in his mother's religion, and he thinks that those answers are not going to be coming from his mother's background; they're going to be coming from his father's background. And so he is seeking for answers for questions such as what is the nature of evil, the incorporeality of God, and things like that, that are crucial for his mother. But at the same time he finds contradictions, and it is his father's background—not his father himself; his father was not particularly intellectual—but the background of his father's culture and society that helps him eventually come to grips with his mother's.

And his conversion in many ways, I think, part of the difficulty that he has is that his mother's African Christianity is a very moralistic, very rigid type of Christianity, and he believes that if he ever becomes a Christian, he has to do all that. For instance, he is concerned about sexuality, he is concerned about the life that he wants to have, the career that he wants to make as a professor of rhetoric, and all of that will be very strongly questioned if he were to accept his mother's religion.

So his struggle is not just an intellectual struggle, in which the Greco-Roman background helps him eventually; the struggle is also that once he is even convinced that his mother's religion is right and that he has the response to the questions, that he still cannot decide to embrace his mother's religion with all its rigor. And the famous episode in the garden in Milan when he is told, "Take up and read," and he reads the passage from Romans; really it is a

conversion in the sense that now he decides that, yes, he is going to embrace his mother's religion and he's going to be celibate and he's going to devote himself to studying Scripture and Christian thought and doctrine and so on, and not the other kinds of things. So I think that it's a combination. It's an interesting process in which he is always enthralled by his mother's religion but at the same time he finds it uncouth, somewhat uncivilized, somewhat barbaric.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: In some ways, Augustine seems uncomfortable in Rome, and among the Roman elite; his stay in Rome as a teacher of rhetoric ends abruptly because of his inability to get on with Roman students, and he finally decided not to marry into a Roman noble family, although a marriage with a Roman noble girl had been arranged for him. Here, too, do we see Augustine's *mestizo* identity at play?

Justo L. González: Yes! I want to get to the question of the marriage in a moment, because I also think that's interesting. Yes, I think that part of the nature of a *mestizo* is that you find yourself uncomfortable in both settings that you come from, and therefore you have to negotiate those, and sometimes simply you give up on one of them, or one of them becomes unbearable. It's quite possible that what was happening to him in Rome was that. We don't know, but it's quite possible that that was what was happening to him.

Now, Augustine's marriage: we often hear about his mother's objection to his concubine and all that. When you begin reading between the lines and you see what Monica was doing and thinking, apparently it was not just the moral issue of whether he had a concubine or not. As a matter of fact, we know that among many Christians in Northern Africa, concubinage was considered almost like a marriage. And people were allowed to take communion, for instance. But her objection seems to be mostly that the woman apparently was socially unacceptable, which probably means that she was a Berber.

Now you have to remember that she herself was socially unacceptable to her mother-in-law, and when Patrick decided to marry her, his mother made life impossible for her. And apparently what she does later is that she makes life impossible for Augustine and his concubine, so that eventually he lets her go. So then almost immediately, she arranges for him to marry with a Roman noblewoman. When Augustine complains that he cannot live celibate, she agrees that she can have a concubine. So the issue is not so much as we usually think when we write these stories about saints and so on, the issue is not so much that he had a concubine; the issue is much more that she was afraid that he would be inclined to give away these possibilities for moving up in Roman society.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Thank you so much for those reflections. Dr. Gonzalez, where in Augustine's theology do we see him as most distinctly African, according to your own reading?

Justo L. González: I think especially in the anti-Pelagian controversy. Actually, in the controversy with the Pelagians is where you find people calling him the "African Aristotle," mocking him as the "African Aristotle." He thinks that he really knows a whole lot—he's an African! And I think the issue there is again the question of authority. As I was saying earlier, for a Roman, what makes someone the ruler is the law. For a North African, the ruler makes the law, and if the ruler is good, the law is good, no matter what the law might be. On the other

side, it is the law that makes the ruler, and if the ruler doesn't obey the law, then the ruler is no good. Now it seems to be that what Augustine is arguing for is God's sovereignty above the bounds of the guarantee which the Pelagians seemed to be relying on; in other words, that God has to do certain things when you do certain things, and God is not capricious and so on—that is very important for the Romans. Augustine is quite willing to end up with a capricious God. And that's where you get the whole question of predestination and so on; he's quite willing to end up with that, because otherwise he would be subjecting God to a law.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: And, Dr. Gonzalez, where do we see Augustine as perhaps most characteristically Roman?

Justo L. González: Well probably in the anti-Donatist controversy. Donatism was a movement that arose after the persecution had ended, that claimed that the bishops or leaders of the church who had in any way given way to persecution and somehow abandoned their faith—what they had done supposedly was to give the books; the order was that all the sacred books were to be given in. And some did, and some didn't, and some gave false books; there were all kinds of different solutions. But after the persecution passed, there was this group of people, mostly North African, and many of them of Berber origin, who said that any bishop who had betrayed and given the books no longer had any authority. They can longer practice as a bishop; they can no longer ordain anybody; anybody who is ordained by them does not have a valid ordination. The validity of an ordination or communion or baptism depends on the authority, the capability, the purity of the one giving it.

Augustine has difficulties with that. I think part of them were pastoral difficulties; I mean, if you don't know whether the person who baptized you is worthy or not, are you just going to get re-baptized and re-baptized again until you find somebody who is worthy? Or when you go through communion, are you worried about, "Well, this person, are they worthy to give communion or not?" So Augustine is worried about that, but I think also what Augustine is doing is saying, "No! The authority does not depend on the behavior of a person; the authority depends on the rule that the person is following, so that a bishop who has been properly ordained is a bishop, no matter whether the one who ordained him was unworthy." And that again goes back to what I was saying earlier; it is a position where it is not that the ruler determines the law, but the other way around: now it is the law that determines the authority of the ruler. So the bishop who is a legal bishop is a bishop. He may be unworthy, and Augustine found many of those. But he is still a bishop. And you may try to stop him, or whatever, but his authority does not depend—especially his authority to do the sacraments—on himself.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Dr. Gonzalez, some say that the Reformation is an extended argument between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics over the theology of Augustine. How do you respond to this claim?

Justo L. González: Well, first of all it's true. Before I go into that, let me say that that is nothing new. What you have in the New Testament is a struggle between some people who accepted Jesus and some people who didn't, about who owned the Hebrew Scriptures. What

you have between Augustine and the Pelagians is a struggle about who owns Paul. And what you have with the Reformation is a struggle over who owns Augustine.

Now, when it comes to that question, both sides are right. The Protestants very correctly insist that Augustine emphasized grace, that salvation is by grace; that it is not by one's work; that it is God who takes initiative in salvation. The Catholics on the other side pointed out that Augustine understood grace as a power that is given to you to help you do good things, and it is the good things that you do that then merit you salvation. And both things are true about Augustine, but the Catholics took one side of Augustine and emphasized that, and tried to play down the rest—actually, when some Catholics began emphasizing predestination and God's freely given grace, they were put down by the Catholics themselves. And the Protestants on the other hand emphasized another side of Augustine, the side that said: "It is God who takes initiative; you are saved by grace; it is not your own original decision." And so both sides, I think, are right, and both sides are wrong.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Dr. Gonzalez, if I may close with a question that I've been asking all of the interviewees on this program, and that is this: what would it mean for the church to be united today, how would we recognize this unity, and what can we as Christians do to pursue the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17?

Justo L. González: I would begin by saying that the unity of the church is not a work. The church *is* one. We may not see it, we may not like it. The church is one. I once overheard an evangelical leader in Buenos Aires saying: "If the church is the bride of Christ, Christ does not have a harem." There can only be one bride of Christ.

Now that doesn't mean we all think alike; it doesn't mean we like one another. I think it is almost like a family; you cannot declare that somebody is not your family. You may dislike them, you may hate them, you may try to deny them, but they're still your family. And I think the first thing we have to realize is that the unity of the church is not something for which we work; it is something that is given to us if we are a church.

Now having said that, then we have to express and live according to that which is given to us, according to that union. And that can be expressed in different ways. The way the early church expressed it for the first few centuries was by having a common communion; you might disagree, but as long as you accept one another in communion, you were the same church. We don't do that anymore, but that was one way that we did it. The problem we have today is, I think, precisely because of a Western tradition that emphasizes organization. So we tend to think of the unity of the church as a unity of an organization, that we have to have one organization: if not a pope at least some kind of a general council or some general catholic authority that includes everybody. I don't think that's the case. I think the unity of the church is something much deeper than that, something that subsists even when we have different organizations.

Now, what can we do? First of all, we have to recognize that we are not as open as we say we are. I belong to a denomination that is very open to other denominations; it is part of all the ecumenical organizations everywhere. But still when I go to our meetings, nobody talks about anything but the Methodists, which is us. Nobody thinks about what the other churches around are doing. At the local level, you do—a Methodist pastor may very well get together

with the Episcopal priest. But when we think about our own work, our own missions, we tend to think vertically (in relationship to the organization) and not horizontally (in relationship to the other Christians around us). So I think that one of the things that we have to do is to begin thinking that all these other people are still part of the same family, and that what makes us a family is not just our connection with the denomination, the higher dimension, but it's our connection with the Lord, who is the head of the church. Somehow we have to express that.

Having said that, I think that the other thing that is important to say is that unity is usually not found either through theological discussion to come to an agreement or through administrative conjunction; unity is properly found in mission. People set out to do the work of Christ in the world, and in doing that they find others that they work with, and they find that they are part of the same church even though they are not part of the same denomination. So I think that part of what we have to do is stress mission much more than we do the church as an organization.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Dr. Gonzalez, you've been involved in theological education for many decades now and also in many diversity initiatives. What would be your advice for theological education as you look forward? What ought to be done differently than it is today?

Justo L. González: First of all, we have to really find what we mean by theological education. In most conversations which I am in, people talking about theological education are talking about schools and seminaries, schools of theology and faculties of theology and so on. I think theological education is really all education that takes place in the church regarding its doctrines and its mission in the world. So theological education begins with catechesis, it goes through the entire process of educating all Christians, and what we usually call theological education is part of that. That's one thing.

The second thing I think we have to redefine is what our goal is in teaching. And I think our goal in teaching is to help others themselves be teachers. In other words, if theological education continues—going from catechesis all the way to PhDs, or whatever—then the purpose of each of those is to reinforce the others. I have now changed my mentality of teaching in evaluating a student. If I'm teaching a class on church history, for instance, on the Reformation, I am not interested in finding out how much a student knows about the Reformation. I am interested in finding out how that student explains and applies the Reformation in the place where he or she has their ministry. In other words, if they can give me all the dates of Luther's life, what does that mean for the actual mission of the church? But if they can somehow say, "now, the priesthood of all believers that Luther emphasized means this for us today," that is what is important to me. And I think part of the way we redo that is by reconnecting theological schools with that grassroots level and changing the way that we understand our purpose in teaching.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: It's been our delight today to be speaking with Dr. Justo L. González, author of many books, including the highly praised three-volume *History of Christian Thought* and also the text that we've been discussing today, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures*. Dr. Gonzalez, we've been honored to speak with you today!