**Constructive Theology**

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**Profile of Christian Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz**

**Biography**

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz was born in Havana, Cuba on March 22, 1943. She was one of eight children of Josefina Diaz de Isasi and Domingo G. Isasi-Battle, a civil engineer. The family immigrated to the United States in 1960 to avoid political persecution. Her family settled in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where her father was employed by several sugar refineries. She considered herself to be, in her words, “politically exiled,” [[1]](#endnote-1) and she characterized her liberative theological work with grassroots Hispanic women as “growing a Hispanic garden in a foreign land.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The major influences in her life and in the development of her theology were family, religion, and feminism. She credits her family and Catholic religion for instilling in her, “…a commitment to service, honor, and the dignity of the person.”[[3]](#endnote-3) She credits her mother for teaching her what it means to daily struggle for justice and freedom from oppression. She became a feminist due to the oppression by the church that she and other women faced. Although she became a novitiate in the Ursuline Order, in Santa Rosa, California, which sent her to work as a missionary in Lima, Peru, she left the order in 1969 before taking her final vows and became involved in working towards securing ordination of women as Roman Catholic priests[[4]](#endnote-4); which she had hoped to become.

After serving as a missionary to the poor in Lima for three years, Diaz’s theology began to take on an “activist orientation” of standing in solidarity with the poor and working to promote justice.[[5]](#endnote-5) Her belief was that “…if the poor are not free, then no one is free.”[[6]](#endnote-6) She earned her doctorate in theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1990.[[7]](#endnote-7) She was a professor of ethics and theology at Drew University in Madison, N.J., from 1991 until her retirement in 2009. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz died in New York on May 13, 2012 at the age of 69.

**Signature Ideas & Innovations**

Isasi-Diaz is widely known in North and South America as the chief theorist behind Mujerista (womanist) Theology and praxis. “Mujerista” Theology is based on the “lived” experience of Latinas as they struggle daily to survive unjust treatment within their own culture and dominant society, as well as the oppression by their religion which she says has been used to control women, silence women and keep them submissive.[[8]](#endnote-8) Isasi-Diaz argued that poor women, by the nature of their roles in their families and communities, have "exercised their moral agency in the world more profoundly than any other group of the faithful.”[[9]](#endnote-9) She believed that, "Hispanic women's experience and our struggle for survival, not the Bible, are the source of our theology and the starting point for how we should interpret, appropriate and use the Bible.”[[10]](#endnote-10) She strongly argues that poor Hispanic women are moral agents, and are perfectly capable of articulating the meaning of religion in their own lives.[[11]](#endnote-11) Through her Mujerista Theology Isasi-Diaz has given Hispanic women the opportunity to name themselves and to determine how they act in the world rather than being named by others. She says that letting themselves be named by others silences and marginalizes them and renders them “invisibly invisible”. [[12]](#endnote-12)

Even though Isasi-Diaz and other Latina academics struggled/struggle to be recognized as true scholars as a result of profound ethno-racism, sexism, and classism, one of her largest contributions to theology is that she connected the academic world and the Latina worlds through her writings and teaching.[[13]](#endnote-13) She urged both the church and theologians to listen to the voices of those not usually heard in theological circles and by doing so she says they can gain, “…a privileged and unique interpretative perspective on theology.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Her liberative theology is grounded in the “kin-dom” of God (la familia de Dios) rather than the “kingdom” of God which she believes implies maleness, monarchs, and rulers. She emphasizes “kindom”, because she does not want grassroots Latinas to continue to feel subjugated by priests and their interpretation of the Bible. Instead, she wants Latinas to ask themselves, “…what must I do today in my life in response to the Gospel message of justice and peace?”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Rebecca Chop has observed that the telling of the life stories of Latinas enables them to live and survive. It also empowers them to take action for themselves, their children and their communities. She believes the stories should challenge the moral sensibility of the listeners and result in an adequate response to their situations. For Chop, Isasi-Diaz has issued a testimonial call to join her en la lucha (the struggle) and Chop recommends that we answer the call.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Continuing Relevance**

I would argue that Isasi-Diaz’s presents a very unique and original approach to focusing on the feminine process of seeing and thinking about Life and the Bible. Mujerista Theology is a theology for today and the future. Its purpose is to bring about justice; it is a liberative process with the goal of not only liberating Hispanic women, but all of humanity. The goal of her theology is not to assimilate the views of our diverse existence into the current theology of the church, but to honor, learn, and incorporate views from the theology of various races, ethnic backgrounds, gender, and socio-economic locations that make up our society into the full theology of the church by forming personal relationships, being in solidarity with one another, and taking action together for justice and liberation for all. Isasi-Diaz declares, “Justice is a Christian requirement. One cannot call oneself a Christian and not struggle for justice”.[[17]](#endnote-17) I fully agree and support these views. In her and my view, coming together in relationship and working towards a common cause, gives all peoples the opportunity to become a vital part of the “kindom” of God.

**Major Works**

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’s most notable works include:

1988 Letty M. Russell, Kwok Pui Lan, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Katie Geneva Cannon, eds. Inheriting Our Mother’s Gardens, “A Hispanic Garden in a Foreign Land”. (Louisville: Westminster Press).

1989 Marc H. Ellis & Otto Manduro, eds., The Future of Liberation Theology, “Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own”.

1990 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite & Mary Potter Engel, eds., Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, “The Bible and Mujerista Theology, & “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s”.

1992 Ava Maria Isasi-Diaz with Yolanda Tarango, Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church.

2004 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, En La Lucha/In The Struggle: Elaborating A Mujerista Theology, 10th Anniversary Edition, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press).

1. Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, eds., A *New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 236. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lisa Isherwood. “An Interview with Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz”, *Feminist Theology* 20 (2011): 8-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Musser, 236. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, 69, Dissident Theologian”. Obituary; Biography, New York Times, Jun 9, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Musser, 236. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Obituary [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz & Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Hispanic/Latino Theology Challenge and Promise (*Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 326. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Obituary [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kwok Pui-lan. “The Politics and Poetics of Ada María Isasi-Díaz”, *Feminist Theology* 20 (21011) 33 –38. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Musser, 238. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Isherwood, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kwok Pui-lan, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ada Marie Isasi-Diaz, “En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology” (1993), 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)