ON TRAGEDY AND HUMOR
The Witness of Luis Rivera-Pagán at Princeton Seminary

When President Torrance's Office called and invited me to offer this tribute for Luis, I thought it might be my chance to try to explain a statement I made to him and Anaida soon after his appointment to this Faculty in 2002. I said then, "With Luis's appointment I feel like all the windows of the Seminary schoolhouse have been thrown open allowing fresh breezes to blow through from all directions." As I worked through Luis's life and writings, I realized, "No, this is my chance to bear witness to a man, Luis Rivera-Pagán, who is so much more than my experience of him, more than what Princeton Seminary has been graced to know over his years of teaching here. You may suspect me of hyperbole on this night for honoring him, but he belongs not only to his family and to Puerto Rico, but to this country, to the full church – to the world.

I

Luis first came to Princeton Seminary to fill for one academic year, 1999-2000, the post of the Mackay Professor of World Christianity. He had previously taught at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico for seven years, and then at the University of Puerto Rico for 18 years, where as a historian he taught in its Humanities Department.

When he assumed the Mackay Chair, he followed such distinguished scholars as Karoly Tóth of Hungary, Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana, Yasao Carl Furuya, and others. Luis, though - and un-ordained Baptist though he be - brought a special illumination to the Presbyterian theologian for whom this Chair was named, John Mackay, also third president of Princeton Seminary. Luis focused on Mackay's still strong influence in Latin America. In a special noon-time forum and in his classes, he explained how unusual it was for this Reformed scholar, Mackay, to write a book that has remained since the 1930s an important contributor to Latin American theology, and who also presciently and wisely called for the interplay of Protestant theology and Latin American literature. Even the trenchant criticisms of Mackay that Luis proffered were illuminating. Luis placed Latin America and the Caribbean on the agenda of the Seminary's present, but also re-emphasized and clarified how Latin America is part of our Seminary's history, how this Seminary is part of *its* history.

Luis's rigorous, sparkling and inspiring teaching style, and a human concern that spread across the ranks of students, teachers, administrators and workers on our buildings, grounds and in food service – made him an unusually welcome presence. This was the time, too, when the Seminary community learned to love his family – primarily Anaida, Anaida Pascual Morán, a full professor of education also at the University of Puerto Rico. She is an author of a number of books and educational series on human rights and education, with her 1989 book, *Precursor to Education for Peace,* and more recently, *Nonviolent Civil Action: Force of Spirit, Force of Peace.* In Spring 2006, Anaida taught a course that many of us heard excellent reports about, "Emergent Liberation Pedagogies: Theory and Practice in Context."

Luis's and Anaida's ' family was an always-on-the-move, blending work, and as Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp wrote in her delightful essay on Luis for *InSpire,* constituted by "six grown children, a Spanish-speaking German shepherd, and a commitment to academic careers that are fully engaged with the modern struggles of Latin American life." (Winter 2000, "Publications" *InSpire.*

Even that German Shepherd, named Hatuey Mackandal Ernesto, is implicated in Latin American struggle, named as he is for three of Latin America's greatest resisters to colonial repression (Hatuey, the indigenous Taino chief who fought the Spanish in the early 1500s, Francois Mackandal, Haitian vodou priest who led the maroons against the French in the 1750s, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara). I hope some of you knew Luis and Anaida's German Shepherd, Hatuey, before he passed just a few years ago. I always suspected Hatuey was on assignment from Anaida to protect him when she couldn't be here, or when Luis couldn't fly to Puerto Rico (which he did often enough, spending a fortune). But I came to discern that German Shepherd Hatuey carved out his own role. He designated himself protector of both, and of other noble causes, too. Taking commands only in Spanish, he could often be seen escorting both Anaida and Luis, especially Luis, around the quad from Mercer Street, to Library Place, to Stockton, and back to Mercer. If you were among the many who visited their home, you know that Hatuey might allow your bare knuckles to box with his canine teeth during a playful romp on the floor, provided you didn't get too raucus, and provided, especially, that none of your motions could be read as threatening to Anaida or Luis. I always tried to be on my best behavior when visiting *their* apartment!

II

With his intellectual contributions, and his supportive presence in our community, it was no surprise that when the Seminary needed to fill a new post in Ecumenics and Missions that he would be recalled, in just two years time, being appointed to the Henry Winters Luce Chair of Ecumenics and Mission, in 2002. [This Luce Chair was created and funded by Henry Luce, III, the grandson of Henry R. Luce who began Time, Inc. and was Editor in Chief of Time Magazine. The Chair, though, was to honor his grandfather, Henry Winters Luce (class of 1896) who, with his wife Elizabeth, was a long-time missionary to China.]

The first holder of the Luce Chair was M. Richard Shaull, and when Luis assumed the Chair he dedicated his 2003 inaugural address to him. Shaull served 18 years on this faculty and well known for his courageous and prophetic work in Latin America. Luis knew Shaull, and also visited him shortly before his death in Philadelphia in 2002. Shaull's wife, Nancy, attended Luis's inaugural address in 2003.

In the approximate 7 years that Luis has been with us, we have been able to tap into a particularly profound, recent phase of his career, one marked by the increasing attention he has given to the interplay of literature and theology. He seeks to rectify a lacuna in Latin America's theology, noting in his groundbreaking book, *Myth, Exile and Demons*: (1996), "It is surprising that theologians have not paid attention to what their

literary colleagues have written about the dilemmas and mysteries of men and women of the continent" (p. 9). This literary turn, combined with the lyrical intensity with which he taught, might give the impression that he was reducing theology and reflection about Christian faith to what is found in many a North American university as "religion and literature."

Not so; in this turn there was preserved the theological depth, his pastoral heart, and the sophisticated analysis of over 40 years of teaching, writing and, how do I say it…of activism, bearing witness with his life.

Let me comment briefly on three of his fifteen (15) books – among some 97 conference presentations, and 78 published articles – that highlight the rich variety of work and insight he brought to us. (A very recent article, just-penned, is a contribution to the volume in support of theologian Jon Sobrino recently censored by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.)

Each of these three books symbolizes a distinctive perspective that Luis integrated into his research and pedagogy.

III

As a first signal book, we might take, *A la sombra del armagedón: reflexiones críticas sobre el desafío nuclear/In the Shadow of Armageddon: Critical Reflections on the Nuclear Challenge (1988)* . This work can mark, it seems to me, Luis' life-time of work on peace issues, fueled especially by the Cold War and by the nuclear arms race, but also by war that breaks out anywhere. I would put it this way, Luis took war, and even more, peace-making, so seriously that he allowed it to interrupt his life, to alter business as usual.

For example: He had finished his seminary degree at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico in 1966 and then his Ph.D. degree with Jaroslav Pelikan in History at Yale University four years later in 1970. The final dissertation write-up occurred while conducting research at the University of Tübingen, 1969/1970. With this impressive credentialing behind him, he returned to his home in Puerto Rico, and witnessed in 1971 the Puerto Rican Island of Culebra subjected to 180 continuous days of bombing, from U.S., NATO and other Latin American navies' conducting artillery practice.

The toll on the lives and well-being of neighboring peoples and habitat was severe. Luis and other activists engaged in nonviolent civil acción to try to halt it. They did this by building an ecumenical chapel on the artillery range. Luis went to jail for 3 months, along with others, including a number of fishermen and also Ruben Berrios, then President of the Party for an Independent Puerto Rico. Luis and other resisters were precursors to the struggle that continued into recent times, on behalf of the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques, which has experienced similar bombardment. His wife Anaida's book on *Nonviolent Civil Accion* is a rich commentary and guide to this mode of peace work,

as it has been forged on the anvil of Puerto Rican people's struggle with militarist agendas of the U.S. mainland government.

But the book – and other books and articles – on war and peace, also grew out of his travels in Europe, where he was part of international discussion of the Christian Conference for peace in 1968, in Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Hungary, the Soviet Union, and India. He was a key counselor and participant in dialogues with other international organizations seeking peace: the Harvard program on Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control, the Evangelical Academy of Berlin, the Council of Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Central American Confederation of Higher Education, the Center of Third World Social and Economic Studies, the Conference of NGOs of the Social and Economic Council of the UN, Pax Christi International, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, the Council of British Churches, and more.

Among some 45 presentations are titles of his publications like these (I want to read them all!): "The New Doctrines of Nuclear War" given to the World Conference of Religions to Preserve Peace in Moscow, 1982. "Wars of the Third World and the Third World War," at the Univ. of the W. Indies in Jamaica in 1988, "Christian Theology in the Light of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Conference on Psychology and Pastoral Theology, Czechoslovakia, 1988; and "Liberation and Peace: Ethical Imperatives of the Gospel," for the Third Congress and Assembly of Christians for Peace, Havana, Cuba, 1987. Continually, Luis was integrating these concerns into his theology, clarifying their relationship to Protestant theology and Christian faith, not only in Puerto Rico, a vanguard island of dignity and freedom within the U.S., but also, increasingly, he did this for U.S. Latino/a theology that works on the dominant U.S. mainland. His books that do this would include *Theological Pathways: Evangelical Thought in Puerto Rico* (1989), and *Faith and Culture in Puerto Rico* (2002).

Luis carried this peace work on in our midst at the Seminary in small and larger ways. In the lead-up to the 2003 war in Iraq, a well-meaning student activist preached a sermon against the invasion, proclaiming instead that we should love our enemies, not make war upon them; to which Luis said, "but the Iraqis are not even my enemies." Since the lead up to the war in Iraq in 2002 and 2003, he has also participated in the campus Teach-Ins organized here by George Hunsinger and Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger. At a press conference that five of us faculty organized in the first week of the actual bombing in March 2003, he was one of five speaking out with special conviction and wisdom. Nearly all of us received our hate mail for that event, but Luis got it with a special vengeance and racialized animosity from an anonymous critic. Notes and emails targeted his home and life. His inaugural address in Miller Chapel that April was delivered still under the shadow of that threat. It's the only time I know of that a Seminary security officer donned plain clothes and went undercover in the Miller Chapel to provide security for a full professor's inaugural address. Happily the event came off without incident.

IV

The second signal book would have to be his magisterial and meticulous work, *Violent Evangelism: The Conquest of America*, written in 1990 and appearing in English in 1992 for the 500 years observance of the conquest of the Americas. Samuel Silva Gotay has suggested that this book will probably be re-issued when the 600 years is observed in 2092. This is a book of 450 pages, with extraordinary scope and carefully-culled detail, relating laws, practice and ideas. He documents the legitimating role played by the church in the conquest and exploitation against Indigenous peoples. But Luis also examined the resistance, the prophetic work of the defenders of the Indians, starting with the priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, to whom he also devoted his inaugural address as full professor here.

This signal book symbolizes, I think, Luis's distinctive activity in our midst as a historian, well-versed intellectually and personally with all of Latin America. Examples of this activity are many.

- He has been – and I don't know how many know this – a kind of informal liaison with the Princeton University Latin American Studies Program. The breadth of his scholarship has transcended the Seminary/University divide.

- Students in his doctoral seminars at the Seminary have learned that Church History does not have to give the lion's share of attention to Europe, remaining silent about Latin America and other regions of the world South, or relegating them to secondary status.

- Luis has been instrumental – perhaps essential – to the work of the Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI), helping to mentor and guide U.S. Latino/a students' their doctoral studies.

- When events like 9/11 were debated, he brought fresh perspective one day, reminding us, of that "other 9/11," when in Chile, a U.S.-backed coup on September 11, 1973, led by Augusto Pinochet, toppled the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende. When many are shocked by U.S. practices of torture today, Luis reminded a student forum how often U.S. practices of torture have been meted out to Latin America's citizens before.

- Most strikingly, perhaps, he has kept before us the claims and concerns of Latino/a immigrants in the U.S., and especially those most near to us. In another essay for *InSpire*, Luis recalled a Princetonian saying "we would like you to come, because we don't have too many Latinos or Hispanics here." And he immediately replied, "Oh yes, you have lots of Hispanics and Latinos here." And then he named some of those working in our midst…He continued: "They are the people who cut the grass, who wash the dishes, who mop the floors. They are your new *douloi.* They are not here tonight, but they are part of this community, and I am telling you, they want to converse with you. They want you to hear

about their dreams, why they are here, what their hopes are. Have you talked to many of them?" Some of these workers appeared in a photo with Luis' photo in that same *InSpire* magazine. Luis' has also had his finger on the pulse of the larger community of immigrant workers, especially when they were traumatized by midnight raids here in Princeton by INS, FBI and local police authorities. In an age when the presence of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean has grown in both significance and number, and when the movements for immigrants' rights today have become perhaps the largest in this nation's history of civil rights movements, Luis's voice has been that of scholar, prophet and builder of new community.

V

The third signal book, I think, has to be, *Los sueños del ciervo: perspectivas teológicas del Caribe/Dreams of the Red Deer: Theological Perspectives from the Caribbean* (1995). Maybe it should be supplemented by *Mito, exilio y demonios: Literatura y teología en América Latina/Myth, Exile and Demons: Literature and Theology in Latin America* (1996). Here the signal activity is that of engaging the theological dimension of literature, and not only of Latin American literature. My faculty colleagues will recall Luis's homily at last Fall's conference/retreat that offered us an interpretation of a short story by Chekov. This reminded me of a few years ago, when on the way to another Fall conference in the Poconos, Luis was reading Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. (What is it about Princeton Seminary's Fall faculty conference/retreats that would drive one to the great Russian writers?)

As I read Luis on literature and theology, and listen to his friends talk and write about his turn to literature, I can surmise a reason why he does so; it is for solace and creativity, to preserve humanity and world amid history's bloody record. Literature, like the arts generally, is a place where we can nourish ourselves, even experience that which we dream for humanity and ourselves, even when, and in spite of, the brutal ways of empires, leaders, and the powerful everywhere. It sustains, it bears witness to hope amid tragic failure. Luis's friend, Samuel Silva Gotay, points us to Luis's book, *Dreams of the Red Deer,* where the struggle for hope emerges for Luis against the backdrop of the hard reality of history that often leads to sadness, weariness and despair. Luis cites the perhaps depressing words of León Felipe's poem, "The Red Deer/*El siervo*:"

History has always been
and it will continue being, eternally,
the pack of a bastard and animal king
persecuting without ceasing, the red deer

To this, however, with a resilient stubbornness – perhaps it's the indomitable spirit of Hatuey – Luis juxtaposes these verses of Psalm 85:

Steadfast love and truth will
meet;
justice and peace will kiss
each other.
truth will appear from the earth
and from the skies justice will look down.

And note the literary passages that Luis placed at the beginning of his 2003 inaugural address here at Princeton Seminary. From James Joyce's *Ulysses:* "We were always loyal to lost causes…success is for us the death of the intellect and of the imagination." From Jorge Luis Borges' *This Craft of Verse*: "Perhaps there is a dignity in defeat that hardly belongs to victory." And from V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival,* "To see the possibility, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation, it was my temperament."

This ironic tension, of brutal tragedy and artful hope, has been manifest, according to every student report I've heard, in the way he treats literature, with academic seriousness, and also a bold and daring humor, celebrating its ironies and pleasures. *Facing the brutality of history honestly, with stories and humor – that feels to me, as I'm sure it does for others, like Luis Rivera-Pagan.* His friend Samuel Silva Gotay says that in spite of Luis' gigantic academic and international experience and renown, he is a "timid and simple person. But do not be mistaken," he continues. "I have seen him defer respectfully to a Caribbean historian, but I have also seen him be like a tiger toward arrogant European intellectuals who cavalierly would dismiss the scholarship of Latin America.

VI

Luis, I solicited some student evaluations of your teaching; no, not those forms from the Dean's office, just some quality reminiscences. Here are what some of the students wrote to me. I will let their words close out this tribute. (These were lengthy and generous. I have had to shorten them for brevity tonight, and lest I embarrass you too much.)

- *Dr. Rivera-Pagan is a man who will always have a place in my heart, because he has touched my heart with his presence and with his teaching. Luis Rivera-Pagan teaches not only through his words but through allowing his students glimpses into himself. My experience of this gifted teacher is that he is at once a brilliant, world- renowned theologian and a man with the soul of a poet.*

- *As for me, Luis has been more of a friend and a mentor than simply a professor. His presence on this campus is one that is irreplaceable. He not only remembers names, but notices when individual students are in need of support.*

- *Dr. Luis Rivera Pagan will remain in my memory as the one and only PTS professor who kindly included me in an invitation to his home with a small group of students. He is*

the only professor I know who will show up to student gatherings with a bottle of wine and a selection of Rilke or John Donne to enrich an evening.

▪ *I'm not exaggerating Luis when I tell you that your sublime wit, intellectual and practical wisdom, and big German Shepherd, provided me with a level of learning, security, and caution that I shall remember fondly. I want to thank you not only for welcoming me into your classroom and for being a wonderful mentor, but also for the numerous times you extended to me a deep welcoming into your home — even when my showing up was unannounced.*

▪ *I have a remark about Luis-- He always approached issues with the heightened complexity of a keen historian, in that every discussion had rich, multilayered meanings attached to it, reverberations of other events--so the death of a priest recalled Oscar Romero, or the writing of Simone Weil recalled Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He desired to speak frankly about human beings' deep and irresistible motivations, about power and fear, about desire and fulfillment, and whenever the opportunity arose, about sex.*
He is also the first professor who invited us into his home, the only professor who always graciously accepted our invitations to join us for a glass of wine and conversation, and certainly the seminary professor with the keenest sense of personal narrative, whose wild and beautiful stories have enhanced our own.

▪ *Dr. Rivera-Pagán is a brilliant professor whose mischievous smile and quirky sense of humor breathe inspiration into the conversations he has with his students. He arouses in them the curiosity to engage in erudite research which invites introspection at the same time as it critiques history, theology and culture.*

Then, this student asks, intoning for us all, *"Can I just say how much I am going to miss him?"*

This isn't good-bye. We mark your transition to other great works. So, Luis, we'll see you on up the road, around the next bend - at the next skirmish, where reality must be faced with a bold humor. Thanks for showing us the way!

Mark Lewis Taylor
Princeton, NJ
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