

**Brown Church***Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*

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Robert Chao Romero (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles; JD, University of California at Berkeley) is associate professor in the departments of Chicana/o studies and Asian American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. He is the author of the award-winning books, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*, *Jesus for Revolutionaries: An Introduction to Race, Social Justice, and Christianity*, and *Mixed Race Student Politics*.

Constructing a “Brown Christian Identity”

What particular need do you see *Brown Church* as addressing?

Robert Chao Romero: Many Latina/o Millennials and Gen Z's feel trapped in the “borderlands” of institutional religion and social justice activism. Within the realm of institutional Christianity, their concern for social justice is often misunderstood and squelched; within the world of ethnic studies and activism, their Christian faith is often disparaged as the “religion of the colonizers.” In the age of Trumpism and white nationalism, this tension has reached a new fever pitch and thousands are losing their faith and walking away from the church every year. In response to this disheartening trend, which is occurring on college and university campuses throughout the United States, this project asks:

How might one construct a “Brown Christian identity,” which is rooted in the 500 year history of Latina/o Christian social justice activism in Latin America and the United States, as a means of drawing Latina/o Millennials and Gen Z's back into fellowship in the church of North America?

As a means of bridging the academic and spiritual divide between the church in North America and university activism, *Brown Church* seeks to tell the little known history of Latina/o Christian social justice activism in the United States and invites readers into a “Brown Christian” identity, which encompasses their love for Jesus, their rich, God-given cultural heritage, and their passion for social justice.

What is your main thesis in *Brown Church*? What is distinctive about your approach?

Robert: Through the telling of this history, *Brown Church* creates an academic and spiritual bridge between the largely hitherto disparate worlds of Chicano/Latino studies and Latina/o theology.

Drawing from critical race theory, I assert that spiritual capital has served as a crucial component of Latino community cultural wealth from Latin American colonial times to the present. From Juan Diego, to Guáman Poma de Ayala, Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, and Las Casas, to the iconic civil rights movement of Dolores Huerta and César Chávez, to the sanctuary movement of the 1980's, and the contemporary immigration reform movement, spiritual capital has been a central component of Latino community cultural wealth.

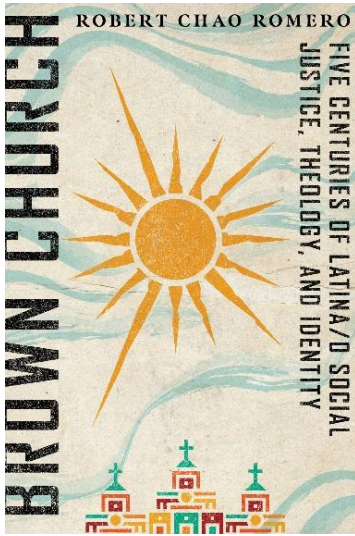
I argue that these many Latina/o Christian social justice pioneers, as well as their respective movements, form what may be called the Brown Church: a prophetic ecclesial community of Latinas/os that has contested racial and social injustice in Latin America and the United States over the past 500 years. Brown Church is a multivalent category, encompassing ethnic, historical, theological, spiritual, and socio-political dimensions. In every instance of racial and social injustice in Latin America and the United States over the centuries, the Brown Church has arisen to challenge the religious, socio-economic, and political status quo. Collectively, the Brown Church has challenged such great evils as the Spanish



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Q & A



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Conquest and Spanish colonialism, the “sistema de castas,” Manifest Destiny and US settler colonialism in the Southwest, Latin American dictatorships, U.S. imperialism in Central America, the oppression of farmworkers, and the current exploitation and marginalization of undocumented immigrants.

As a natural outgrowth of its prophetic advocacy efforts and praxis, the Brown Church has developed a unique and consistent body of social justice theology based upon the Christian Scriptures. I call this Brown Theology.

The unique contribution of *Brown Church*, I believe, is bringing together the largely disparate literatures of Latino history, ethnic studies, critical race theory, and theology into a new type of academic “brown jazz.” The meaning comes in the intersection—in the “brown.”

What do you hope your book contributes to the study of and discussions regarding theology and Chicano/Latino studies?

Robert:

- One unique contribution of *Brown Church* is that it bridges bringing the largely disparate literatures of Latino history, ethnic studies, critical race theory, and theology into a new type of academic “brown jazz.” Ethnic studies and critical race theory have largely ignored theology; theology has largely overlooked ethnic Studies and critical race theory. *Brown Church* is a unique synthesis.
- Within Chicana/o studies and Latina/o studies, *Brown Church* represents one of the first macro histories of Christianity, social justice, and the Chicano/Latino community.
- This book coins the terms “Brown Church” and “Brown Theology” for the first time. This nomenclature provides a way of referring both to the tradition of Latina/o Christian social justice movements and the theology that has been produced by these movements.



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