

## THE SYMBOLIC REALISM OF U.S. LATINO/A POPULAR CATHOLICISM

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*[The author argues that Latino/a popular Catholicism in the United States embodies important aspects of a non-modern Catholic worldview that have been obscured, or even lost in modern, rationalist forms of Catholicism. Specifically, U.S. Latino/a popular religious practices reflect an understanding of symbol that is heir to the intrinsically symbolic cosmology of medieval and baroque Christianity. Its pre-Tridentine roots distinguish the Catholicism of Latin American and U.S. Latino/a communities from the post-Reformation Catholicism that initially came to North America. An appreciation of these differences could contribute to a retrieval of "lost" aspects of our common Catholic heritage as well as the development of a more fully "American" Catholicism.]*

The borders dividing cultures and nations in this hemisphere are becoming increasingly porous not only to the waves of new immigrants but also to economic forces, communications media, and information technologies unfettered by geographical boundaries. In his postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II challenged Catholics in the Americas to acknowledge this reality, recognizing both its dangers and its promise as a potential source of renewal for the Church in America. In this article, I suggest that U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism—or the way in which Latinos/as concretely live their Catholicism—offers the Catholic Church in the United States the possibility of recovering forgotten aspects of the Catholic tradition, thereby contributing to the development of a Church both Catholic and American in the fullest sense of both terms. More specifically, the religious practices of Latino/a Catholics represent the enduring, “subversive” presence of a religious worldview quite different from that of most modern (or postmodern) Western Catholics. If such

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a modern countercultural worldview is itself inevitably flawed and in need of critique, it nevertheless offers the possibility of envisioning a way beyond the conservative-liberal divide that cuts through the heart of the Church in the United States today.

At the same time, we all live amidst powerful sociocultural forces that distort or block a genuine encounter with Latino/a popular Catholicism. Thus I examine some of the ideological and sociocultural obstacles to such an encounter, particularly the obstacles represented, on the one hand, by a globalized market economy and, on the other, by an ideological rationalism. Both often function to undermine the transformative power of symbols.

### VARIETIES OF CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

To understand the present and future of American Catholicism, one must understand the different histories of the Catholic Church in Latin America and in the United States. The roots of Latin American Catholicism are found in Iberian medieval and baroque Christianity, whereas the roots of Euroamerican Catholicism are found in Northern European post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism. As historian William Christian has noted, the medieval Christian worldview and faith were not seriously threatened in Spain “until . . . the late eighteenth century.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Iberian Catholicism was not forced to develop a response to the Reformers’ arguments or to rebut them point by point—as, also, European Catholics in the United States would later be forced to do.<sup>2</sup>

In order to defend itself against the Protestant “threat” to orthodoxy, Northern European Catholicism would become increasingly rationalist, demanding a clarity, precision, and uniformity in doctrinal formulations that were simply unnecessary in areas where “Catholic” and “Christian” continued to be essentially interchangeable terms. In Spain, there was no urgent need to define, clarify, and distinguish Catholic belief, especially in the wake of the *Reconquista* and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.<sup>3</sup> (It is no coincidence that Thomas Cajetan, a “father” of modern neo-Scholasticism, was also the papal legate to Germany who, in the 16th century, examined Martin Luther and helped draft the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* that condemned Luther.) It would be the more rationalist, northern European Catholicism that would take hold in the English colonies. It

<sup>1</sup> William A. Christian, Jr., “Spain in Latino Religiosity,” in *El Cuerpo de Cristo: The Hispanic Presence in the U.S. Catholic Church*, ed. Peter Casarella and Raúl Gómez (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 326–27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 327.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Macy, “Demythologizing ‘the Church’ in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3 (August 1995) 27.

is this understanding of Catholicism that continues to inform the U.S. Catholic establishment to this day, whether conservative or liberal.<sup>4</sup> As Allan Figueroa Deck has pointed out:

Anglo American Catholicism is rooted in the experience of the eighteenth-century English Catholic settlers of Maryland. These people were truly English. They were also Catholic, yet imbued with the culture of modernity that Great Britain disseminated through its legal system, burgeoning commerce and industry, and its relatively democratic ideology. . . . Even when huge waves of working-class or peasant-class immigrants began to swell the ranks of the U.S. Catholic church, its Anglo American character remained. . . . These Catholics struggled throughout the nineteenth century to achieve recognition and status in an overwhelmingly Protestant land. In several important ways these Catholics *did* become American. They assimilated.<sup>5</sup>

This might be one reason, suggests Figueroa Deck, why Latino/a Catholics in the United States have often (ironically) experienced greater support from Rome than from the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops:

It is interesting to review today the Americanist controversy of the late nineteenth century in light of the growing literature on inculturation. From today's vantage point it seems that North American progressives like Isaac Hecker and Archbishop Ireland may not have had a sufficient grasp of the difference between certain U.S. cultural values (that they championed) and countercultural gospel values. Perhaps Rome's views of American culture were informed not only by self-interest and restorationism but also by a certain intuitive awareness of the non-evangelical aspects of some of our most touted North American values. Some of the concerns and issues of importance to U.S. Hispanics (such as respect for a more symbolic, intuitive, ritualistic, and corporative faith) may well be better understood in Rome than in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, rationalism neither originates with nor is it exclusive to post-Tridentine European Catholicism. Its Western roots can be traced to the ancient Greek pre-Socratics. From its earliest forays into the Gentile world, Christianity came under the influence of various forms of Platonic and neo-Platonic rationalism. A historical analysis of that influence is beyond the scope of this present article. For such analyses, see, for instance, Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995); *Neo-Platonism and Early Christian Thought*, ed. H. J. Blumenthal and R. J. Markus (London: Variorum, 1981); *Christianity and the Classics: The Acceptance of a Heritage*, ed. Wendy E. Helleman (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Allan Figueroa Deck, "At the Crossroads: North American and Hispanic," in *We Are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 4–5. See also Allan Figueroa Deck, *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Cultures* (New York: Paulist, 1989) esp. 42–45, 121–25.

<sup>6</sup> Figueroa Deck, "At the Crossroads" 11.

The differences between Catholicism in the English and in the Spanish colonies were reinforced by the fact that, like the Iberian colonizers as a whole, Iberian Catholicism interacted—even if often violently—with an Amerindian culture whose cosmivision was not completely dissimilar to that of medieval Christianity. What might, with five centuries of hindsight, appear as incommensurable worldviews nevertheless shared (despite their undeniable differences) certain presuppositions about the inherently social nature of the human person and his or her place in an organically ordered cosmos. “The medieval Catholicism of the Spanish and the magical-religious expressions of the indigenous,” writes the Peruvian philosopher Juan Acha, “had many points of contact, which today have not only disappeared but are incomprehensible for us.”<sup>7</sup> Conversely, like the English colonizers as a whole, Anglo American Catholicism in the English colonies generally rejected any such intermingling with the indigenous culture, preferring to expel and exclude rather than subjugate and subdue that culture.

If U.S. Catholics are to understand the contemporary context of American Catholicism and address successfully the challenges and opportunities of the future, therefore, the Catholic Church in the United States should essay a critical retrieval of its historical roots, not only in the English colonies but also on the shores of what is now Florida, in the deserts of what is now New Mexico, and, indeed, in the first voyages of Columbus. Without rejecting either of these histories or any of those that came afterward in subsequent waves of immigrants, American Catholics could begin to forge a future rooted in that polyglot, multicultural past.

### THE MEDIEVAL AND BAROQUE ROOTS OF U.S. LATINO/A POPULAR CATHOLICISM

In his research into the historical origins of Latino/a popular Catholicism, Orlando Espín observes that the Iberian Christianity brought by the Spanish to Latin America “was medieval and pre-Tridentine, and it was planted in the Americas approximately two generations before Trent’s

<sup>7</sup> Juan Acha, *Las culturas estéticas de América Latina* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1993) 63. On the enduring indigenous influences in U.S. Latino/a culture and popular religion, see Jeanette Rodriguez’s article in this issue. On the conflict between indigenous and Iberian worldviews, and the disastrous consequences of that conflict, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper, 1992); Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “The Other” and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and the classic work by Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove, 1985). Like indigenous (and medieval Christian) cultures, the African cultures that have influenced a Latin American *mulataje* had a premodern, organic cosmivision. On Afro-Caribbean religion and its influence in U.S. Latino/a

opening session.”<sup>8</sup> He continues: “While this faith was defined by traditional creedal beliefs as passed down through the Church’s magisterium, those beliefs were expressed primarily in and through symbol and rite, through devotions and liturgical practices . . . . The teaching of the gospel did not usually occur through the spoken, magisterial word, but through the symbolic, ‘performative’ word.”<sup>9</sup> As yet, in their everyday lives, Christians did not clearly distinguish creedal traditions from liturgical and devotional traditions; both were assumed to be integral dimensions of *the Tradition*. Espín avers that “until 1546 *traditio* included, without much reflective distinction *at the everyday level*, both the contents of Scripture and the dogmatic declarations of the councils of antiquity, as well as devotional practices (that often had a more ancient history than, for example, Chalcedon’s Christological definitions).”<sup>10</sup> According to Espín, the clear distinction between dogma, i.e., the *content* of tradition, and worship, i.e., the *form* in which that tradition was embodied in everyday life, did not become crystallized until the Council of Trent. He goes on to suggest that, “on this side of the Atlantic the Church was at least in its second generation, and it took approximately another century for Trent’s theology and decrees to appear and become operative in our ecclesiastical scene.”<sup>11</sup>

Liturgical theologian Mark Francis observes that:

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culture, see, for instance, Miguel A. de la Torre, “Ochun: (N)either the (M)other of all Cubans (n)or the Bleached Virgin,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (December 2001) 837-61; Andrés Pérez y Mena, “Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodún, Puerto Rican Spiritualism: A Multiculturalist Inquiry into Syncretism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1998) 15–27; Thomas Tweed, “Identity and Authority at a Cuban Shrine in Miami: Santería, Catholicism, and Struggles for Religious Identity,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4 (August 1996) 27–48.

<sup>8</sup> Orlando Espín, *Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

<sup>10</sup> Orlando Espín, “Pentecostalism and Popular Catholicism: The Poor and Tradition,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3 (November 1995) 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* This is not to suggest that the evangelization of the Amerindians was not also essentially oral, but the “word” itself was understood as intrinsically contextual, embodied, and relational—as *spoken*, or narrated by one person to another. (This, indeed, is the biblical understanding of the word: e.g., the Word of God *is* God.) In this sense, the spoken word is a “performed” word, i.e., the *way* in which a word is spoken is as essential to its meaning as is the content which the word conveys. With modernity the “word” becomes separated from its interpersonal context (i.e., interpersonal performance, narration) and thus only extrinsically related to the speaker and hearer; words are no longer expressions of personality and instead become mere concepts. Meaning is reduced to content (i.e., information; *what* is said) and is thus divorced from context (i.e., *how* the word is spoken). On the distinction between these two disparate notions of “word,” see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free, 1990).

[D]uring its formative period and even after the struggle for independence from Spain, Catholicism in Latin America never underwent the systematic standardization that was brought about by the Council of Trent elsewhere in the Catholic world. North American Catholicism, for example, was largely dominated by clergy drawn from European ethnic groups who immigrated to this country along with their people in the nineteenth century and who were inspired by the norms and centralized pastoral practices of Tridentine Catholicism. In contrast, Hispanic Catholics, except perhaps those from large cities, have never been historically so influenced. The first period of evangelization of Latin America antedates the Council of Trent; and even after the decrees and norms established by the council were promulgated in Europe, their implementation was slow and sporadic, even into the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

This history also helps underline not only the similarities but also the differences between Latin American and European popular Catholicism: "Because it adhered more strictly to the spirit of the Council of Trent, the devotional life of most of the European immigrant groups . . . was regulated by the clergy, who were instrumental in its revival during the nineteenth century. Latin America never had a history of such clerical oversight, both because of a lack of native clergy and a policy toward popular religion that was much more *laissez-faire* on the part of the Church."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Euroamerican popular Catholicism has a different ecclesiastical history from that of U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism, even though they share a similar emphasis on symbol and ritual as defining the way in which the faith is lived out.

As Catholicism in the United States becomes increasingly *Pan-American*, the historical argument of scholars such as Espín and Francis becomes increasingly relevant for understanding our context both theologically and pastorally. The Catholicism that originally came to Latin America was Iberian, medieval, and (later) baroque in character; the Catholicism that came to the English colonies was Northern European and, as Jesuit historian John O'Malley has argued, essentially modern in character. Despite the emergence and evolution of a mestizo popular Catholicism that reflected from the outset the violent encounter of cultures, the distinction between the different types of European Catholicism that invaded the "New World" has had important historical ramifications.<sup>14</sup> For in-

<sup>12</sup> Mark Francis, "Popular Piety and Liturgical Reform in a Hispanic Context," in *Dialogue Rejoined: Theology and Ministry in the United States Hispanic Reality*, ed. Ana Maria Pineda and Robert Schreier (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995) 165–66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

<sup>14</sup> To the extent that contemporary scholars underestimate the significance of this historical "varieties of Catholicisms," thereby tarring all European Christian invaders with the same brush, the complexity of the issues confronting the Catholic Church in the United States will be underestimated. Moreover, efforts to deny the enduring legacy of Iberian Catholic culture because of the all-too-obvious destructive consequences of that legacy may unwittingly support another centuries-old

stance, the distinction helps explain why U.S. Latino/a Catholics, being of little real interest to either liberal or conservative “mainstream” Catholics, are generally invisible to scholars of “American Catholicism” whether these scholars are liberal or conservative. Whether liberal or conservative, Euroamerican Catholics in the United States share an essentially modern worldview that tends to view Latino/a Catholicism with suspicion.

Ironically, the reasons for the suspicion are similar to those that legitimated anti-Catholic, nativist sentiments *against* Euroamerican Catholics not long ago. In both cases, an underlying modern prejudice against anything “medieval” (the word itself connoting “backwardness”) has engendered violent reactions against any group perceived as embodying a worldview, values, or beliefs that in any way resemble those of medieval Christianity, which are themselves perceived as naïvely materialistic, superstitious, and infantile. Thus, if today an Irish American Catholic financier in Boston is wary of Mexican American Catholics, it might be because these latter embody a type of Catholicism similar to that which its Catholic forebears had long tried to live down, so as to be accepted as full-fledged members of our modern democracy. Arguing that the prejudice against medieval Christianity is based on the anachronistic assumption that medieval Christianity was identical with post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism, historian Gary Macy has perceptively diagnosed the problem facing Latino/a Catholics in the United States: “If the Church in the Middle Ages was tyrannical, corrupt, and immoral, and the Church in the Middle Ages was (and is) Roman Catholic, then Roman Catholics are immoral, corrupt, and tyrannical. Hispanics, as mostly Roman Catholics, can therefore be expected to be devious, immoral, lazy, technologically underdeveloped, and ignorant.”<sup>15</sup>

The point here is not to suggest either that U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism can simply be equated with medieval Christianity, which of course it cannot, or to suggest that anyone can or should somehow “return” to some romanticized version of medieval Christianity—which, after all, was also characterized by a great deal of horrific violence, oppression, and corruption. Rather, I mean to suggest simply that, while not sufficient, an understanding of the historical influences of medieval Christianity on Latino/a popular Catholicism is certainly necessary in order to understand the

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form of xenophobia, namely, the prejudice against Iberian culture reflected in the defamatory British propaganda campaign known as “the Black Legend.” See William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1971); Juan Luis Beceiro, *La mentira histórica desvelada: ¿Genocidio en América?* (Madrid: Editorial Ejearte, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Macy, “Demythologizing ‘the Church’ in the Middle Ages” 40.

present and future of American Catholicism. And, I submit, a critical retrieval of the medieval Christian worldview might offer resources for addressing the challenges confronting the U.S. Catholic Church.

### A SYMBOL IS REAL: UNDERSTANDING U.S. LATINO/A POPULAR CATHOLICISM

As Espín and other Hispanic scholars have repeatedly observed, the faith of the Hispanic people is primarily embodied and expressed in and through symbol and ritual. Yet that statement itself begs the further question: What precisely does one mean by symbol and ritual or, more precisely, what do Hispanics mean by symbol and ritual? It is here, in differing notions of symbolic expression, that we find the source of conflict and, hopefully, the possibility of mutual understanding and unity.

U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism embodies an understanding of religious symbols and, therefore, of religious faith rooted in the medieval and baroque popular Catholicism first brought to the “New World” by the Spanish and Portuguese in the late-15th and early-16th centuries. Such an understanding differs radically from the modern notion of symbol that, I suggest, has influenced Christianity since the late Middle Ages and became normative in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent, the Catholic Reformation, and the neo-Scholastic theologies that reached their apex in the 19th century. Indeed, one might even argue that it is precisely the Latino (and medieval) “realist” or “materialist” notion of symbol and ritual that modern Western Christians find most distasteful among Latinos/as, dismissing such ideas as mere infantile superstition in the face of more rationalist (read “mature”) understandings of religious symbol and ritual.

At the very heart of the historical and cultural differences between Latino/a and Euroamerican Catholics, therefore, are fundamentally different ways of conceiving the relationship between symbol, or “appearances,” and the symbolized, or “reality.” One of the great differences between medieval and modern Catholicism is found in their different understandings of religious symbols. As the Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré has observed, the roots of this key difference can be traced back to the rise of nominalism in the late Middle Ages. Medieval Christianity had a unified, profoundly sacramental view of the cosmos. Creation everywhere revealed the abiding presence of its Creator, a living presence that infused all creation with meaning. In turn, “the *kosmos* included humans as an integral though unique part of itself.”<sup>16</sup> As the place where one encountered the living,

<sup>16</sup> Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993) 94.

transcendent God, all creation was intrinsically symbolic, that is, creation re-presented God, made the transcendent God present in time and space for us, here and now. That God had not made the world only to withdraw from it, leaving it to its own devices. Rather, the Creator remained intimately united to creation. All creation was thus assumed to be intrinsically meaningful and intelligible by virtue of the fact that creation was graced from the beginning. The Sacred would therefore be encountered, not “above” or “outside” creation, but in and through creation.

Most systematically articulated in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, this organic, sacramental worldview was reflected, above all, in the religious practices of medieval Christians. To them, matter mattered. Religious life was sensually rich; the believer encountered God in the physical environment, through the five senses. The Christian faith of the Middle Ages was firmly anchored in the body: the body of the cosmos, the body of the person, the Body of Christ. Contrary to the modern stereotype of the medieval Christian as having a dualistic worldview antithetical to the human body, the Christian of the Middle Ages “assumed the flesh to be the instrument of salvation” and “the cultivation of bodily experience as a place for encounter with meaning, a locus of redemption.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, as in every age, the view of the body was also profoundly ambiguous and conflicted.<sup>18</sup>

This organic, intrinsically symbolic worldview also implied a particular understanding of the relationship between the individual person and the cosmos: the person was integrally related to the rest of creation and its Creator. Knowledge of reality thus presupposed and implied relationship. It is through interpersonal interaction that we could come to know God, ourselves, other persons, and creation.

According to Dupré, this organic, holistic, integral, sacramental worldview began to break down during the late Middle Ages. Afraid that too intimate a connection with material creation would compromise God’s absolute transcendence, nominalist theologians “effectively removed God from creation. Ineffable in being and inscrutable in his designs, God withdrew from the original synthesis altogether. The divine became relegated to a supernatural sphere separate from nature, with which it retained no more than a causal, external link. This removal of transcendence fundamentally affected the conveyance of meaning. Whereas previously meaning

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, “Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bunnell and Lynn Avery Hunt (Berkeley: University of California, 1999) 251–52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

had been established in the very act of creation by a wise God, it now fell upon the human mind to interpret a cosmos, the person became its source of meaning.”<sup>19</sup>

The nominalist coin had another side, however. Such an understanding of God’s autonomy and freedom implied the autonomy and freedom of creation itself. Paradoxically, then, the Christian attempt to safeguard God’s transcendence from creation laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern rationalism and secularism. In order to protect God’s immutability and transcendence, nominalism posited an absolutely inscrutable God and, as a corollary, an absolutely inscrutable creation. It was thus left up to the human subject alone to construct meaning.

Likewise, neo-Scholastic theologians such as Thomas Cajetan began to read Thomas Aquinas through a modern, dualistic lens. Their theology “detach[ed] the realms of nature and faith from each other.”<sup>20</sup> The birth of modern Christianity is thus characterized by the splitting, or dichotomizing of reality: as God is severed from creation, the natural and spiritual realms are separated, and, in the end, the human person—now as an autonomous “individual”—is severed from both God and nature: “modern culture . . . detached personhood from the other two constituents of the original ontological synthesis.”<sup>21</sup> Henceforth, the autonomous individual would stand outside God, who is far removed from everyday life, and outside nature; God’s autonomy vis-à-vis the human person implies the person’s own autonomy vis-à-vis God. If, eventually, secular humanists would preach a world without God, it was only because Christians had already been preaching a God without a world.

The breakdown of what Dupré calls the “medieval synthesis”—a world-view in which God, the cosmos, and the person were integrally related—also had important consequences for the Christian understanding of symbol. Medieval Christians had looked upon creation as intrinsically symbolic, making present its Creator in our midst. In the wake of nominalism and neo-Scholasticism, however, the ultimate meaning of creation could no longer be encountered *in* creation, which could exist independently of its Creator. Now, meaning would have to be imputed to creation or imposed on it from without. From without, the rational mind would impose a meaningful order on a world that itself lacked intrinsic meaning. Physical existence no longer “revealed” a God who lived in its very midst. Now, physical existence “pointed to” a God who related to the world extrinsically. Creation-as-symbol became simply “an extrinsic intermediary, something really outside the reality [i.e., God] transmitted through it, so that strictly

<sup>19</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 179.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 163–64.

speaking the thing [i.e., God] could be attained even without the symbol."<sup>22</sup> The symbol and the symbolized were no longer really united; they would now have to be "mentally" united (to use Karl Rahner's phrase). If there was a relationship between God and creation, it would have to be one forged and explained by the human intellect. The locus of revelation would no longer be the cosmos (including though not reducible to human subjectivity) but the human intellect, which alone could impute meaning to the "external" world.

The medieval Christian world had been pregnant with symbolic meaning, for the world of matter was recognized as the locus of God's self-revelation. From sometime in the 16th century on, the world-as-symbol could only point away from itself to a God who remained impassible and aloof. Creation would no longer be a privileged place of encounter with the Sacred but a mere sign pointing elsewhere, to the spiritual realm where God resided transcendent and impassible.

It is important to note, however, that even as post-Tridentine Catholic theologians were making God evermore distant, the popular faith continued to reflect a stubborn insistence on God's abiding, concrete nearness to us in every aspect of life. That nearness was embodied above all in the elaborate religious symbols and, especially, the explicitly dramatic character of communal religious life that flowered during the baroque period. Theologian Thomas O'Meara describes baroque Catholicism as follows:

There was a universality in which Catholicism experienced God in a vastness, freedom, and goodness flowing through a world of diversity, movement, and order. Christ appeared in a more human way, filled with a personal love, redemptive and empowering. . . . The Baroque world was also a theater . . . Liturgies, operas, frescos, or palatial receptions were theatrical, and Baroque Christianity was filled with visions and ecstasies, with martyrs, missionaries, and stigmatics . . . The theater of the Christian life and the kingdom of God moved from the medieval cosmos and the arena of society to the interior of the Baroque church and the life of the soul. In the Baroque, light pours down through clear windows into the church and states that God is neither distant nor utterly different from creatures. God is actively present in the church and in the Christian.<sup>23</sup>

### THE GOD OF U.S. LATINO/A POPULAR CATHOLICISM

It is impossible for a contemporary Latino/a Catholic to read those descriptions, without hearing resonances to the ways in which the Catholic faith is lived in our own communities. Neither the Christian medieval synthesis nor the dramatic faith of the baroque has, in fact, been com-

<sup>22</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations* 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1966) 244.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas F. O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1999) 115-16.

pletely destroyed—at least not yet. Their enduring influence can still be witnessed in, among other places, the lived faith of the Latin American and U.S. Latino/a Catholic communities.

The same deep faith in God's nearness reappears in Latino/a popular Catholicism, where dramatic reenactments such as the Way of the Cross, the *Posadas* (reenactment of Mary and Joseph's search for a resting place in Bethlehem), or the *Pastorela* ("shepherds' play" depicting the shepherds' pilgrimage to the Nativity site) serve as constant expressions of God's solidarity. It reappears in the polyphonic ambience of Latino/a churches, where angels and demons, saints and penitents, celestial stars and spring flowers are fully incorporated into the lives of the faithful. Having been brought to Latin America by the Spanish, and having interacted with indigenous religions that often embodied similar beliefs in the nearness of the divine, Latino/a popular Catholicism is the embodied memory of the integral worldview, with Jesus Christ at its center, that is at the very heart of the Catholic tradition and that evolved in the Iberian Catholicism of the Middle Ages and the baroque era.

The God of Latino/a Catholics is one whose reality is inseparable from our everyday life and struggles. It is in the very warp and woof of everyday life, what Latino/a theologians have called *lo cotidiano* (the everyday) that God becomes known to us. For Latino/a Catholics, our faith is ultimately made credible by our everyday relationship with a God whom we can touch and embrace, a God with whom we can weep or laugh, a God who infuriates us and whom we infuriate, a God whose anguished countenance we can caress and whose pierced feet we can kiss. This, as Salvadoran Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino avers, is no vague God but a very particular, incarnate God, the God of Jesus Christ:

A vague, undifferentiated faith in God is not enough to generate hope. Not even the admission that God is mighty, or that God has made promises, will do this. Something else besides the generic or abstract attributes of the divinity is necessary in order to generate hope. This distinct element—which, furthermore, is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian God—is something the poor have discovered viscerally, and in reality itself: the nearness of God. God instills hope because God is credible, and God is credible because God is close to the poor. . . . Therefore when the poor hear and understand that God delivers up the Son, and that God is crucified—something that to the mind of the nonpoor will always be either a scandal or a pure anthropomorphism—then, paradoxically, their hope becomes real. The poor have no problems with God. The classic question of theodicy—the "problem of God", the atheism of protest—so reasonably posed by the nonpoor, is no problem at all for the poor (who in good logic ought of course to be the ones to pose it).<sup>24</sup>

Because Jesus Christ walks with us, we know he is real. Because we have

<sup>24</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 166–67.

come to know him as our constant companion, we know that he is indeed who he says he is: “the way, the truth, and the life.” “Be the problems of the ‘truth’ of Christ what they may,” writes Sobrino, “his credibility is assured as far as the poor are concerned, for he maintained his nearness to them to the end. In this sense the cross of Jesus is seen as the paramount symbol of Jesus’ approach to the poor, and hence the guarantee of his indisputable credibility.”<sup>25</sup> This is indeed a God who stayed with us, who resides in our midst—not just “spiritually” but concretely in every aspect of our world. That is how we know this God is real. It is not our Christian belief that makes God’s nearness credible. Rather, it is God’s nearness that makes Christian belief, especially the paschal mystery, credible.

The Christ of Latino/a Catholics encounters us through his wounded, bleeding, holy countenance, the *Divino Rostro* (Holy Countenance) seen on the walls of millions of Latino/a homes. He encounters us through his body, beaten and broken as it hangs lifeless from the crucifix. He encounters us, above all, as he accompanies us on the Way of the Cross, the innocent victim who continues to cry out to God even at the moment of deepest anguish.

No doubt, popular religious expressions such as the Way of the Cross sometimes reflect distorted, simplistic, even dangerous views of God or the self.<sup>26</sup> At least as great a threat to true faith, however, is the relegation of God to a distant corner of our world by emphasizing the immaterial, absolutely transcendent, and inscrutable nature of God. The danger of reducing the paschal event to a Cross without a Resurrection, for instance, is matched by the danger of preaching a Christ without a face, without a body, without wounds, a cross without a corpus.

If the medieval Christian worldview posited an intrinsically symbolic cosmos that makes present “God for us,” then that worldview posited an intrinsically relational cosmos insofar as the symbol makes the Other present for us. The same can be said about the worldview expressed in Latino/a popular Catholicism. If our lives have meaning, it is not because we ourselves have constructed that meaning and imposed it on creation, but because we have been empowered to cultivate a meaning that we first received from others, ultimately from God, but that we help shape through our creative response to that gift—a meaning whose origins are outside ourselves, in God’s creation and, especially, in those persons who have

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>26</sup> One should avoid romanticizing popular Catholicism, even while acknowledging its liberating potential. Particularly Latinas and Latino/a youth are often profoundly sensitive to the danger of romanticization, since they have often suffered the consequences of distorted views of the body, suffering, or divine providence. See, for example, the articles by Jeanette Rodriguez and Gary Riebe-Estrella in this issue.

incarnated, or made present for us the concrete reality of God's abundant love. Before reality can be "constructed" it must first be received as gift, as it becomes present to us in creation. Indeed, the act of reception is the first truly free, constructive human act.

Hence, the symbol's intersubjective meaning and its normative truth are interdependent dimensions of this worldview. As Sobrino insists, in the citation just quoted, "a vague, undifferentiated faith in God is not enough to generate hope."<sup>27</sup> What generates hope is the reality of this particular God, the Crucified and Risen Christ who can be encountered and known in the world. In and of itself, a vague "belief" is insufficient to generate the hope of which Sobrino speaks. The symbol of the Crucified and Risen Christ is not sufficient . . . unless that symbol actually makes present for us the reality of Christ. As Figueroa Deck suggests, therefore, an appropriate understanding, critique, and evangelization of U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism demands a theologically robust Christian vision.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the view of Susan Sontag, such a vision would in no way "deny the infinite variety and complexity of the real," for it would not presume a separation between the universal real (the symbolized) and the its particular mediations (the symbol).<sup>29</sup>

### THE POSSIBILITY OF A TRULY "AMERICAN" CATHOLICISM

The future of American Catholicism as both "American" and "Catholic" will depend on our ability and willingness, as Americans and as Catholics, to affirm the wisdom of the *whole* Catholic tradition, in all the Americas. At its best, Latino/a popular Catholicism offers us a fundamentally sacramental, organic worldview that affirms an ultimate interconnectedness—ontological, if you will. Latino/a Catholicism reminds us that one indeed is not alone. At its best, modern Euroamerican Catholicism, on the other hand, holds before us that promise that is at the heart of the gospel message but which has all too often been obscured, namely, the promise of human freedom and the creative possibilities inherent in the rational human person. After all, the modern rejection of meaning as something that is primarily "given" but is instead "constructed" has made possible the unleashing of incredible creative energy in every area of human endeavor, from the arts to science and technology. Yet each insight needs the other; it is together that they represent the richness of the Catholic Tradition (with a capital "T").

American Catholics are heirs to both of these currents in the larger

<sup>27</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* 171.

<sup>28</sup> See below the article by Figueroa Deck, "A Latino Practical Theology: Mapping the Road Ahead" 275–97.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Figueroa Deck, *ibid.* 281.

Catholic tradition. They can affirm the value of a world, a cosmos that reveals the God who remains with them. Against a materialism that enslaves human persons by denying the possibility of transcendence and exploits nature by denying its character as “cosmos,” as God’s creation, American Catholics can affirm a genuinely Christian “materialism,” a genuinely Christian humanism.

In other words, the very possibility of realizing the promise of the Enlightenment as this was embodied in the founding documents of the United States may well depend on a retrieval of that history which, though rejected as “premodern” and “unenlightened,” endures among those communities, such as the Latino/a community and other communities from economically challenged countries which constitute the “underside” of modernity.

The danger of medieval sacramental or symbolic realism was that, by locating the supernatural within the natural, it could lead to an identification of the natural with the supernatural. When symbolic truth—the most profoundly real truth—is mistaken for empirical truth, the result is idolatry. And such idolatry has had horrific, violent consequences in Europe and America when, for instance, the Church as symbol, or sacrament of the kingdom of God on earth, has been simply identified with the empirical kingdom of God on earth.<sup>30</sup> Symbolic truth is not merely empirical truth, not because the former is not “real” but precisely because it *is* real in the deepest sense.

As a needed reaction to the idolatry that, in the Middle Ages, led to so much corruption and bloodshed, modern Christianity has attenuated if not completely severed the relationship between the symbol and what it signifies, so that, for example, we have become exceedingly uncomfortable with any mention of the kingdom of God in relation to the Church, aware as we are of the patent discontinuity between the reign of God and Christian history, a history that has not always been particularly Christian.

The opposite danger of idolatry, however, is a neo-gnosticism that severs the intrinsic connection between religious faith and its necessarily particular, concrete, historical, social embodiment. The two possible results of this fragmentation are: (1) an individualistic rationalism that identifies faith exclusively with individual assent to theological propositions; or (2) an individualistic, privatized, and disembodied “spirituality.” Each of these options has its “conservative” and “liberal” versions. Many current attacks on modern individualism have tended to place the blame for the fragmentation of the Catholic organic worldview on post-Enlightenment liberalism, with its glorification of reason and individual autonomy. However, if it is

<sup>30</sup> See n. 26 above. This temptation to idolatry remains a persistent danger in any truly incarnational spirituality, including that embodied in Latino/a popular religious practices.

true that, as I have already suggested, modern Christian nominalism and neo-Scholasticism are the handmaidens of modern atheistic secularism, then theologies that reduce Christian faith to propositional assent or that attempt to impose a preconceived uniformity on the Christian community through a standardized, centralized, and bureaucratized authority are as prototypically modern as those that are criticized in so many harangues against modern liberal individualism and subjectivism. Both seek to impose meaning on symbolic reality from *outside*. Both, for instance, feel compelled to impose a “supernatural,” rational meaning on the “faith of the people,” who are assumed to be so alienated from God that they cannot be trusted to worship God without explicit directions or instructions.

As sociologist Robert Orsi notes in his analysis of the decline of Euroamerican popular religion in the 1960s, liturgical reformers “insisted that if popular devotions were to remain a feature of Catholic life, they would have to be surrounded by *words* . . . the saints and the Virgin Mary were to be reimagined in the languages of friendship, morality, or mythology, deemphasizing what the reformers considered an inappropriate and extravagant emphasis on the miraculous and the material.”<sup>31</sup> The saints and the Virgin Mary would have to be rationalized, explained to the people. The obsession with words also helps us understand the ongoing obsession with the reform of liturgical texts—a concern that, again, characterizes both liberals and conservatives. The implicit identification of orthodoxy, or “correct worship (*doxa*),” with correct wording, correct texts, simply reinforces the marginalization of the people’s faith, a faith lived out not primarily through texts but through embodied relationships and practices. The character or validity of religious worship cannot be reduced to the words or texts one uses. Though these are important, they are not sufficient. While symbols and rituals must indeed “give rise to thought” and theological propositions (in the words of Paul Ricoeur), they cannot be simply reduced to such propositions without divesting the symbols and rituals of their power to make God present. As the primary expressions of religious faith, symbols, and rituals demand theological explanation and critique, but theology can never forget its roots in the symbols and rituals that embody the lived faith.

In their need to rationalize the faith, what distinguishes conservative from liberal Catholics is often simply the identity of the person authorized to impute meaning on religious symbols and rituals from without: for conservatives, the rationalizing agent who imposes meaning on religious symbols is the ecclesiastical authority, while in the second case, the agent is the professional expert, the theological, liturgical, or pastoral expert (whether

<sup>31</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996) 33–34.

lay or clerical). What both share is a worldview that presupposes a separation between theological propositions and the concrete, lived faith embodied in symbol and ritual.<sup>32</sup> What defines modernity is the dichotomy between faith and reason, between nature and supernature, between the material and the spiritual, between the individual and the collective, between the symbol and the symbolized. As Orlando Espín reminds us, post-Tridentine Catholic theology “responded to the reformers’ arguments by assuming as valid many of the latter’s premises.”<sup>33</sup>

### THE MARKET: OBSTACLE TO A SYMBOLIC REALISM

A major obstacle to the retrieval of a more integral, organic notion of symbol is the fact that the global Market economy depends precisely on the infinite malleability and interchangeability of symbols. Economic growth demands that the symbol that today represents “human fulfillment” or “social acceptance” will tomorrow be deemed passé, obsolete. For the economy to grow, today’s symbols of social prestige and personal success must be infinitely replaceable. A laissez-faire economy demands disembedded symbols; it demands free competition among symbols and images, all of which must be perceived as potential expressions of “reality.” More than ever, “planned obsolescence” is a term applicable not so much to products as to symbols; what is marketed is not a product but a brand, an image. “Even economics,” argues social critic Thomas Frank, “is no longer concerned with the production of things but with the manufacture of imagery. . . . Notions of objective social reality have themselves become objects of easy retro derision . . . .”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the only reliable, objective reality is the Market itself, with its eternal laws.

Consequently, the only religious faith acceptable for a consumerist society is precisely that which presupposes symbolic malleability and interchangeability (separation of form and content) since, lacking a social body that distinguishes such faith from its environment, it is the kind of faith most easily subsumed within the social body that we call the Market. A disembedded, disembodied, deinstitutionalized spirituality will become de facto the spirituality of the thoroughly embedded, embodied, institutionalized global Market of late capitalism. The structural embodiment of post-modern spirituality and morality is the Market, which becomes, in our 21st-century United States, the social “body” that an anti-institutional,

<sup>32</sup> Again, note Figueroa Deck’s call for an explicitly Christian and *theological* critique of Latino/a pastoral ministry; such a critique is intrinsic to Christian praxis itself.

<sup>33</sup> Espín, “Pentecostalism and Popular Catholicism” 26 (see n. 10 above).

<sup>34</sup> *Commodify Your Dissent*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 258.

disembodied spirituality takes on, whether wittingly or unwittingly. Free-floating religious symbols are invariably coopted by the Market.

As theologian Harvey Cox has noted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, the established Church in this country is the Market, with its temple on Wall Street and its vicar Allan Greenspan, whose every pronouncement, awaited with baited breath and hand on wallet, has the power to either bring about the kingdom of God on Wall Street or destroy the entire global economy. Thomas Frank makes a similar observation:

Read a handful of the sharp-edged editorials of the *Wall Street Journal*, scan the pages of the latest business advice books: The market is eternal, the market is unchanging, the market is all-solving, the market is all-seeing, the market is everywhere. . . . Most importantly, though, the market is a fantastically jealous god, deeply offended by the puny efforts of mere mortals to improve on its creations with government, tariffs, unions, or culture. . . . Its booms and busts are as natural as earth and sky, and our duty is not to engage in insolent schemes by which we might control the market, but to reconcile ourselves to its majestic ways . . . The market is not something we can alter, but an elementary force of nature that stands outside history altogether, 'a vast river' that floods and recedes regardless of our petty desires. But it's a well-meaning deity, if its ways seem whimsical: When it fires people, puts other on twelve-hour shifts, and smashes wage scales, we must remember that it is acting in the best possible interests of all. . . . Our response to these petty misfortunes should not be to challenge the market's omnipotence, but to reconcile ourselves to its overarching wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

Having long ago rejected as passé any belief that there might be such a thing as an intelligible "natural law" revealing a God beyond the whims of the individual consumer-believer, we are left to ponder the wonders of the single remaining natural law, that incontrovertible law written into the very essence of reality, that single transcendent and universal law accepted by all right-thinking peoples, namely, the law of supply and demand. The Market is the only symbol that *is* what it symbolizes and makes present what it symbolizes.

In the face of a consumerist materialism that reduces everything to the status of a marketable commodity, a socially disembodied faith will be simply more grist for the Market's mill. Disembedded from their concrete, social, material forms, Christian symbols become fodder for advertisers and Internet entrepreneurs, book publishers and screenwriters, self-help experts and diet gurus, those whom Michael Budde calls "symbolic predators."

The process of economic globalization represented, above all, by the internet demands precisely the decontextualization of all reality, including religion. "Globalization," writes Orlando Espín, "has turned 'God' and religious experience into products to be marketed at a global level. . . . If

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 260, 262, 263.

religions can be the great potential adversaries of globalization, then it should not be surprising that the forces of globalization . . . will attempt to separate religion from religious experience: the desirable product is marketed (= religious experience, "God") as the borders (= religious identities) and institutions (= religions) that might obstruct the advance of 'progress' are destroyed." Insofar as a particular religious faith maintains any links to a particular history, a particular way of life, particular symbols and rituals, or a particular institution, that faith remains limited in its marketability. Such a faith impedes the freedom of the Market.

In this context American Catholics will be living as they enter the new century. Like the dawn of modernity, the current historical context offers unimagined possibilities for promoting human freedom, development, and community. Some of these possibilities are already being realized, in the form of dramatically enhanced global communication, economic growth, capacities for artistic expression, and even resistance to oppression—as was evidenced by the crucial role played by globalized communications media and economic markets in the downfall of Eastern Bloc Communism. American Catholics must be able to engage this historical process creatively and constructively, from within our religious faith and traditions. To pretend simply that all this is not happening, or to wish that the Internet, cable television, Microsoft, and AOL disappear will be no more successful or fruitful than the Church's intractable resistance to modernity. Moreover, like attempts to resist modernity, our attempts to resist the "information age" and the new postindustrial economy will likely result in our becoming more and more like those individuals and institutions whom we presume to reject. This simply reflects the fact that we are as much products of our age as Pius IX was a product of modernity.

In order to have an impact on what John Paul II has called the "culture of death," one must be able and willing to engage that culture critically. In order to do so, American Catholicism must be able to take seriously its culture's ideals, especially those of personal freedom, while at the same time demonstrating how the way in which those ideals are actually embodied in the culture distorts them and undermines their realization. At the same time, one must make publicly visible—in both one's personal and institutional lives—a faith that witnesses to an alternative understanding of personal freedom, a freedom rooted in that organic, integral worldview that is perhaps the most important resource Catholicism can offer U.S. society. If contemporary humanism and materialism reduce creation to its material dimension, the antidote is not, instead, to reduce creation to its spiritual dimension. Nor is spiritualism the answer to rationalism. The answer to those who claim that human beings are nothing but complex animals or complex machines is not to claim, instead, that we are angels.

What is called for, then, is an American Catholicism that rejects neither

its American nor its Catholic character but, instead, an American Catholicism that is more inclusively and thus more truly both “American” and “Catholic.” And it is my contention that taking seriously, both theologically and pastorally, the increasingly Latino/a identity of American Catholicism will make it possible to understand the adjective and the noun as mutually implicit rather than mutually opposed.

The challenge is one that confronts not only Euroamerican Catholics but the Latino/a Catholic community itself. It is the challenge confronted by every immigrant group, especially in succeeding generations: to integrate without assimilating, without losing one’s distinctiveness and, thus, one’s ability to engage the larger U.S. society not only effectively but also critically. Unfortunately, it is not only some Euroamerican Catholics who consider Latino/a popular Catholicism infantile and regressive. Many among our own Latino/a communities are today ashamed of these practices and actively reject them. Others have simply assumed the larger society’s attitude toward religion: neither commitment nor opposition, but simply the relegation of religion to a social accoutrement, irrelevant and immaterial to everyday life, the life of the Market. Latino/a Catholics, therefore, face the same challenge. Yet this would be their most important contribution to both Church and society.