

A YOUTHFUL COMMUNITY: THEOLOGICAL AND MINISTERIAL CHALLENGES

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[The Latino/a community in the U.S. is the youngest in the nation. Ministry to this youthful community demands that attention be paid to the acculturation process taking place among Latinos/as and its effect on their religious worldview. While it is true that Latinos/as, especially the youth, are accommodating in many ways to the values of the dominant culture in the United States, still their religiosity, birthed out of the peculiar circumstances of the Conquest, continues to play a unique role in the identity of Latino/a Catholics. Effective ministry will need to develop new strategies that acknowledge shifting values yet respect the resilience of popular religion.]

THE LATINO/A¹ COMMUNITY is the youngest in the nation, with a median age of 26.3 years.² In 2002, 34.4 percent of Latinos/as were under 18.³ This means that of the 37.4 million Latinos/as in the U.S. population, 18.7 million are in their mid-20s or younger and 12.5 million are under 18. This predominance of youth in the Latino/a community presents significant challenges for U.S. society. What kind of health insurance and preventive care is available to insure that these youth become a productive part of

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¹ The term "Latino" is roughly equivalent to that of "Hispanic." I prefer the term "Latino" because it more clearly indicates the Latin American heritage of this population including the phenomena of *mestizaje* and *mulatez* than does the term "Hispanic" which privileges the Spanish root of this group.

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, March 2002," Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch, Population Division, (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/ppl-165/sumtab01.pdf>) (June 18, 2003).

³ U.S. Census Bureau, "The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 2002," (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pub/p20-545.pdf>) (June 2003) 3.

U.S. society? How can the quality of education for these young people be guaranteed, particularly when so many live in inner cities already notorious for their poverty of educational opportunities? What kind of job skills are being promoted among these young women and men that will allow them, many of whom come from families of unskilled laborers, to find gainful employment in the U.S. economy? How will those who are immigrants be brought into the mainstream of U.S. cultural life and identity? Numerous questions and concerns arise once one realizes the size of this segment of the U.S. population and its relative youthfulness vis-à-vis the non-Hispanic population that has a median age of 37.3 years.⁴ These questions and concerns focus not only on the welfare of this group of youth but also on how they can be a positive contribution to the welfare of the U.S. population as a whole.

The youthfulness of the U.S. Latino/a population is a source of challenge not only for U.S. society in general. Some 73 percent of the Latino/a population in the United States is Catholic.⁵ That means that approximately 13.7 million of these Latino/a young people are Catholic and compose a full 20 percent of the Catholic Church in the United States.⁶ The sheer size of this youthful population presents the U.S. Church as well with challenges for ministry. How can parishes develop the needed youth ministry programming to keep up with this population that is growing dramatically faster than the population as a whole? Can Catholic educational institutions accommodate the increasing numbers of Latino/a youth? How can those educational institutions be made affordable to young Latinos/as many of whose families are among the poorest in the nation? What can the Catholic Church do to make these young Latino/a Catholics a core segment of the Church's future in the United States when an estimated 100,000 Latinos/as in the United States are leaving the Catholic Church each year?⁷

What I would like to suggest here is that effective ministry to this youthful community within the Church will demand an understanding of two significant dynamics affecting the lives of these young people. The first is the acculturation⁸ process that they are undergoing and that is drawing

⁴ "Current Population Survey, March 2002."

⁵ 2004 *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003) 416.

⁶ These statistics are based on a total Catholic population in the United States of 66.5 million as stated in the 2004 *Catholic Almanac* 424.

⁷ *Ibid.* 416.

⁸ Acculturation refers to impact on a culture by its constant contact with a more powerful culture. The power of this second culture is usually defined by its control of the media, education, and the economy. The first two have as their objective to shape effectively values, while control of the economy determines how those values can be realized. Susan Keefe and Amado Padilla, *Chicano Ethnicity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987) 14–22.

them into the values of dominant U.S. culture.⁹ The second is the relation between this acculturation process and the religious worldview of these youth. These two dynamics considered together account for some of the most significant theological and ministerial challenges that these 18.7 million Latino/a youth present to the Catholic Church in the United States. Attention to these dynamics and to the challenges they present will also surface implications for ministry to all Latinos/as regardless of age and expose the tragic mistake made by the trajectory of Hispanic ministry in the U.S. Catholic Church in general.

THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS

Put simply, acculturation is the slow reconfiguration of a culture due to its prolonged and constant contact with a more powerful culture. Understanding the acculturation process is predicated on understanding what culture is and the basic dynamics of how cultures work. Culture can be described as the “entire way of life [of a people], everything about the group that distinguishes it from others, including social habits and institutions, rituals, artifacts, categorical schemes, beliefs and values.”¹⁰ Effectively it constitutes a people’s world of meaning and the ways that meaning is embodied in social relationships, in symbol systems, and in behavior patterns. As a world of meaning, the phenomenon of culture is pervasive in the life of human beings. Nothing in human life is acultural. Culture acts as the lens through which a given group perceives reality and through which that group interacts with the reality they perceive.

Perhaps because of our relative geographic isolation, people of the dominant culture in the United States tend not to see the pervasiveness and defining nature of culture in human life. With only one country to our north, most of which shares in the same original roots as dominant U.S. culture, and with only one country to our south with which our relationship has always been only tenuously positive, it is not uncommon for many U.S. residents to have a fairly superficial sense of culture.

Many would mistake language for culture. Language is symptomatic of culture. That is, it embodies some of the deep values and understandings that give shape to a culture but it is not the culture itself. In Spanish, for example, there is no word for “drop.” If one drops a plate, in Spanish one would say *se me cayó el plato*, which could be literally translated as something like “the plate fell itself and I happened to be there.” Spanish uses an impersonal reflexive construction in which the actor is indirectly men-

⁹ While others call this culture by the name “Euroamerican,” I generally use the term “dominant U.S. culture” in order to emphasize the power this cultural world exerts on minority cultures in the United States.

¹⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 27.

tioned rather than being grammatically portrayed as the subject because most Spanish-speaking cultures are shame cultures in which one does not place blame publicly on oneself or on another. While in English one says “a watch runs,” in Spanish the expression is *el reloj anda*, literally “the watch walks.” The Spanish language embodies a different sense of time than that reflected in the English use of the verb “run.” However, if a Spanish-speaker learns English and can say “my watch runs,” one would be rash to conclude that his or her sense of time has changed, that his or her world of meaning (read “culture”) has radically changed. Rather that person has simply learned a new set of linguistic skills. This mistaking of language for culture underlies much of the movement for “English only” laws in the United States. While almost never articulated as such, the assumption of this movement is that if public life is conducted in a single language it will force the cultural homogenization of the citizenry. And, therefore, in the face of the cultural diversity caused by the presence of so many immigrant groups in the United States, the country will be able to preserve a cultural uniformity, i.e., of the dominant culture that speaks English—as if language were culture.

Others mistake folklore for culture. By folklore, I mean the art, music, food, color preference, dress, and dance of a given group of people. And surely folklore is a part of one’s culture. Like language, folklore is symptomatic of a people’s culture as it gives expression to some of the values and understandings of a culture as embodied in certain aspects of a people’s life. But the folklore is not itself those deeper values, understandings, and patterns that determine a group’s self-understanding at its heart. Folklore is symptomatic of a culture but it is not that culture at its depth. If folklore were culture, then when a non-dominant cultural group in the U.S. begins to adopt music preferences, dress, and food reflecting those of the dominant culture rather than of the culture of the group of origin, one might think that these people have become a part of the dominant culture. Rather the change is reflective of the process of acculturation this people is undergoing but at a relatively superficial level.

In the mid-1970s in the barrio of East Los Angeles I founded a small residential seminary program for college-level Mexican Americans called Casa Guadalupe. This was a period when a number of seminaries, particularly in the West and Southwest of the United States, were beginning to receive Latino candidates in growing numbers, some for the first time in recent years. Many seminary rectors wondered how to accommodate these Latinos in predominantly Euroamerican seminaries. Rectors would often mention the steps they were taking: putting a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the chapel, throwing a sarape over the altar when Eucharist was celebrated in Spanish, serving tacos a couple of times a month. All these gestures were perceived, I imagine, as signs of welcome by the Latino seminarians. However, they were all adjustments only at the level of folk-

lore. Nothing at the heart of the life of the seminary changed: the perspective used in teaching church history, particularly of the Americas; the way meetings were run and the rules of social interaction; how the question of time was attended to; the role of the Latino seminarians' families in the life of the seminary. Changes in folklore were mistaken for profound changes in culture.

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF ACCULTURATION

Because of the pervasiveness of culture in the life of a people and because culture constitutes a true worldview, changes in culture generally occur slowly. Change in culture is a complex process. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, as Hispanics in the U.S. began to claim their identity more forcibly as culturally distinct from that of the dominant culture population, a fairly simple model was used. Hispanics in the U.S. were generally thought of as being either more American than Hispanic or more Hispanic than American. Their *latinidad* was measured on a single continuum, the poles of which were U.S. dominant culture on one end and the culture of their country of ancestry on the other (e.g., Mexico, Guatemala, Chile). The theory was that one could locate any Latino/a somewhere on this continuum.¹¹ Some were labeled as far more "American," often pejoratively referred to as *agringado* or even *vendido*. Others saw themselves as closer to the culture of their country of origin than to dominant U.S. culture and often referred to themselves as Mexicanos or Salvadoreños even though they were of the second generation born in the United States. For many, the proposed ideal for a U.S. Latino/a was to be exactly in the middle between the culture of the country of origin and dominant U.S. culture. That ideal place was thought of as being "bilingual and bicultural," speaking English and Spanish with equal fluency and having reconfigured one's cultural world by selecting the best of both one's culture of origin and of U.S. dominant culture and combining them together in the birth of a new cultural world, that of the mestizo.

More recent literature on acculturation has generally abandoned this single continuum theory because of a growing recognition of the complexity of the acculturation process. To a significant degree this recognition has been caused by a better understanding of the internal dynamics of cultural worlds. Cultural anthropologists such as Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne assert that a cultural world is made up of a series of elements, such as prescribed behaviors and taboos, social systems, and primary values. The uniqueness of a cultural world is determined by the way each of these elements is related to the other elements in that world since it is from their

¹¹ This single continuum theory for understanding the acculturation process was the predominant theory through the mid-seventies. See Susan O'Keefe and Amado Padilla, *Chicano Ethnicity* 16.

interrelatedness that each element gets its meaning. So, for example, the meaning of a given behavior is not intelligible unless one recognizes how it “fits” into the whole constellation of elements that make up a particular cultural world. And that constellation of elements, their relationship to one another, is not the result of whim, but is determined by what one might call organizing principles. These organizing principles form the internal logic of a cultural world.¹²

Therefore, a cultural world might be understood as a configuration of organized elements. When a cultural world is in prolonged contact with another, but more powerful, cultural world, the configuration of the less powerful culture experiences changes. Power may be exerted on the organizing principles themselves, which, if they are reconfigured, will cause enormous cultural upheaval in the less powerful cultural world and perhaps even the loss of identity for this cultural world and the people who inhabit it. More commonly, the process of cultural change initiated by outside influences is targeted not on the organizing principles of a cultural world but rather on the elements that those principles organize and to which they give meaning, that is, on elements such as prescribed behaviors and taboos, social systems, and primary values. This understanding of the role of elements and organizing principles and their interrelatedness has moved cultural anthropologists away from the single continuum model of acculturation used so prevalently in the early years of the struggle by U.S. Latinos/as to reclaim their cultural identity. The use of a multidimensional model of acculturation has proven to be much more productive in understanding how people experience cultural change.¹³

In the multidimensional model one still uses the two poles of dominant U.S. culture and the cultural world of the country of origin. However, there are a number of continua that describe a person’s life. These continua mark the variety of areas or elements that compose this person’s world, such as language, work ethic, music, family organization, food, religion, etc. The multidimensional model allows us to describe what empirical studies have demonstrated, that is, that a given person acculturates at different rates in different areas of his or her life. For example, Susan O’Keefe and Amado Padilla in their book *Chicano Ethnicity*, a multigenerational study of Latino families north of Los Angeles, have shown that the Latinos/as studied acculturated fairly quickly in the area of language. Their study indicated not just that these Latinos/as had learned English, but that English had

¹² See Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne, “Does the Concept of the Person Vary Cross-culturally?” in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*, ed. Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne (New York: Cambridge University, 1984) 118–55.

¹³ O’Keefe and Padilla, *Chicano Ethnicity* 16–22.

become their preferred language and the one in which they decidedly had the greater fluency. Spanish vocabulary became restricted to household words and ones dealing with familial relationships. Their work ethic began to look more like that of the dominant population, but this change occurred more slowly than did the preference for English as their operative language. Changes in family organization lagged far behind the shifts taking place in language and work ethic. Religion was found to be the area of life in which acculturation occurred most slowly. While O'Keefe and Padilla restrict themselves to explaining the dynamics of this multidimensional model on a sociological basis, our interest here takes us into a theological reflection on the function of religion which makes clear why it is that the religiosity of those studied would "naturally" be the area of their life most resistant to acculturation.

THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION

"The symbol of God functions," asserts Elizabeth Johnson in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*.¹⁴ Images of the divine are constructed from what a people consider to be their highest good, what is of paramount value. As such, images of the divine and the religion within which they exist serve to explain the current reality of the believers, that is, why things are the way they are. At the same time, images of the sacred shape a people's communal practice, that is, how, therefore, one should live in a world so explained. This does not mean that images and understandings of the divine, such as those that dominate Roman Catholicism, are simply human projections. Rather, Catholic systematic theology affirms that all language about God is analogical in nature. That is, Catholic theology asserts that when we speak about God the language we use is derived from experiences in which we have sensed the presence of God (what is of supreme value) but that those experiences do not capture the reality of God. Rather they point beyond themselves to what is more than the human mind can grasp, to what lies underneath, at the depth of, behind the experiences. Therefore, religious language is "directional" language which affirms that what we have experienced does tell us something about God, but that God is not the same as that "something" but different, and at the same time far more than what we have experienced of God.¹⁵

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 4.

¹⁵ Analogical language is constituted by three movements: 1) affirmation; 2) negation; 3) eminence. See Catherine Lowry LaCugna, "The Trinitarian Mystery of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 156-59.

As such, a people's images and understandings of God are drawn from their lives and so are culturally relative.¹⁶ As reflective of what that people, in their cultural world, believes to be of the highest good, these images come from and ground a people's self-understanding and so sit at the heart of the web of related practices, values, and social systems that make up their cultural world.¹⁷

Just as every cultural world is organic and involved in a process of change and development, so too the religious system of that world is not forever fixed but responds to the influences being exerted on the current configuration of that culture. Therefore, a community that finds itself engaged in a process of acculturation will experience changes not simply in the somewhat superficial areas of its cultural life such as folklore and language, nor simply in the more significant areas such as social systems and family organization, but even at the deepest levels of its self-identity, such as that of religion. However, as the multidimensional model of acculturation asserts, the changes in these cultural layers will take place at different rates, with the more superficial adapting most quickly to the impact of a more powerful culture and the deepest, such as religion, showing the greatest resistance to change.

In the case of U.S. Latinos/as the popular religious practices in which their culturally specific religious worldview is embodied are particularly closely linked to their sense of identity. As Orlando Espín and Sixto García write: “[Latino popular Catholicism] is probably the least ‘invaded’ area of any of the Hispanic cultures, one of the most ‘popular’ of our peoples’ creations, and the more deeply ‘ours.’ It can be seen as a font of Hispanic worldviews and self-concepts.”¹⁸ It is not surprising that O’Keefe and Padilla assert how particularly resistant to acculturation is Latino/a religiosity. This is due, in large part, to the historical circumstances of the birth of Latino/a popular religion.

LATINO/A POPULAR RELIGION

While there is a variety present in Latino/a popular religion as practiced in the United States by Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or Mexicans, the mestizo nature of Latino/a popular religion is a common characteristic.¹⁹ This mes-

¹⁶ This does not mean that they are arbitrary, but only that, because of the pervasiveness of culture, all images of God are “cultured.”

¹⁷ *Evangelization of Hispanic Young People*, ed. Carmen María Cervantes et al., vol. 2 (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's, 1995) 213.

¹⁸ Sixto Garcia and Orlando Espín, “‘Lilies of the Field’: A Hispanic Theology of Providence and Human Responsibility,” *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 44 (1989) 73.

¹⁹ Orlando O. Espín, “Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 63.

tizo nature has been variously described but refers fundamentally to fact that Latino/a cultures have their origin in the phenomenon of cultural hybridity, that is, they were created not so much by the slow acculturation of an indigenous population to the cultural world of the Spanish Conquistadors but rather represent the birth of a new cultural world through the violent collision of Spanish and indigenous worldviews.²⁰ Elsewhere I have argued that the resulting religious worldview is not simply a “version” of Roman Catholicism but constitutes an equally valid alternative just as Catholic but not “Roman.”²¹ It might be easiest to use the specific example of Mexican American popular religion to view the dynamics at work in the birthing of Latino/a popular religion.

THE MESTIZO NATURE OF MEXICAN AMERICAN POPULAR RELIGION

Mexican American popular religious practices find their origin in the peculiar mixing of the Nahua²² culture and its religious worldview and that of 16th-century Spanish medieval Catholicism. These two worlds met not in a pacific atmosphere but in one of conquest of the indigenous by the Spanish. Both cultural worlds were sociocentric or organic, a characteristic that is significant for the shape of the symbolic world that resulted. Each of these factors bears some investigation if we are to understand the originating symbolic world of Latino/a popular Catholicism that informs the way it functions.

Both Nahua and 16th-century Spanish cultures were sociocentric in nature, typical for pre-Enlightenment, pre-industrial, agriculturally centered people. Perhaps the easiest way to understand organic or sociocentric cultures is to contrast them with egocentric culture of which dominant U.S. culture is an example. In an egocentric culture the fundamental unit of society is the individual. The individual attains a healthy sense of self (or individuates) by distinguishing himself or herself from the other (usually called “independence”) and then, with this full self in place or at least in process, freely associates with others for one’s own and mutual benefit. As Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne write, an egocentric culture is one in which:

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of cultural hybridity and its relationship to *mestizaje*, see Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2002) 43–67.

²¹ Gary Riebe-Estrella, “Latino Religiosity or Latino Catholicism?” *Theology Today* 54 (January 1998) 512–15.

²² Nahua refers to the culture shared by a number of different indigenous groups who had settled in the central valley of Mexico by the time of the Conquest. The Aztecs, though perhaps the most well-known, were only one of the peoples who together shared the Nahuatl culture and its cosmovision. See Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma, 1963) xvii.

a kind of sacred personalized self is developed and the individual qua individual is seen as inviolate, a supreme value in and of itself. The “self” becomes an object of interest per se. Free to undertake projects of personal expression, personal narratives, autobiographies, diaries, mirrors, separate rooms, early separation from bed, body and breast of mother, personal space—the autonomous individual images the incredible, that he lives within an inviolate protected region (the extended boundaries of the self) where he is “free to choose” . . . , where what he does “is his own business.”²³

A sociocentric culture, on the other hand, is premised on the image of the group as the fundamental unit of society. One’s identity is rooted in the group (first, usually, in the primary group which is the family). One individuates by accepting and perhaps redefining one’s role *within* the group, but never by stepping outside the group. In a sociocentric culture:

the concept of the autonomous individual, free to choose and mind his own business, must feel alien, a bizarre idea cutting the self off from the interdependent whole, dooming it to a life of isolation and loneliness. . . . Linked to each other in an interdependent system, members of organic cultures take an active interest in one another’s affairs, and feel at ease in regulating and being regulated. Indeed, others are the means to one’s functioning and vice versa.²⁴

The principal consequences of a sociocentric culture’s understanding of the human person are threefold. First, relationship is primary. Maintaining harmony with the other members of one’s group and expanding one’s world by the inclusion of others in one’s group are primary motivators of interpersonal behavior. Secondly, institutional roles are secondary to roles defined by one’s group membership, these latter being relationships founded on trust, a trust that is inviolable since it is the glue in the mutual relationships of the members whose primary source of identity is precisely their membership in the group. Thirdly, what is harmful to the harmony of relationships is what is considered to be the paramount evil, that is, to cause another shame (or loss of face). Evil is not individualized (as in egocentric cultures), but is a public phenomenon. The enemy is shame, not guilt.

The second factor at work in the creation of the symbolic world of Mexican popular Catholicism and its function is the particular religious *mestizaje* that took place as a result of the Conquest. *Mestizaje*, a word made famous in the analysis of the Mexican-American reality by Virgilio Elizondo, is usually used to denote the mixing together of two elements

²³ Shweder and Bourne, “Does the Concept of the Person Vary Cross-Culturally?” 191–92.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 194.

(cultures, religious systems, races) in such a way that a new element is created (a new culture, a new religious system, a new race).²⁵ The two elements of the religious *mestizaje* addressed here are the indigenous or Mesoamerican world of religious imagination, and that of the Conquistadors of 16th-century medieval Catholic Spain. More recent studies in culture theory would nuance this understanding by emphasizing the element of ambiguity. The earlier notion of *mestizaje* proposes that the outcome of such a mixing is a synthesis. While some synthesis undoubtedly takes place, the resulting symbolic world also contains elements that are original to each of the originating cosmovisions. Because of the dissimilarities present in the worlds that come together a complete synthesis is not possible; rather the new symbolic world is made up of synthesis and interstices. In analyses of Latino/a popular Catholicism these interstices are sometimes described by using the Nahuatl word *nepantla* which means literally "middle place."²⁶ It refers to those places where no mixing has occurred, where different symbolic meanings remain unchanged by the encounter but are incorporated with their distinctness into a single new symbolic world. Practitioners of such a symbolic world negotiate the resulting disjunctions as a kind of "borderlands," crossing back and forth between the elements of the two originating symbolic worlds that have not been synthesized.²⁷ This should not be construed, however, as a static situation, but rather, as the root *nepan* of the word *nepantla* implies, there is a continuing transformative interaction between the disjunctions.

In the case of the birthing of Mexican popular Catholicism, the two originating symbolic worlds have a peculiar relationship to one another. The indigenous religious world is the underlay, what preexisted and was foundational for the Nahuas. The religious world of the Spanish conquerors and missionaries is the overlay, one imposed from above and foreign to the foundational underlay. This type of relationship is distinct from the meeting of two elements in a situation of equality, and has determining effects on the content and function of the symbolic world that results from the *mestizaje*.

²⁵ The classic work on *mestizaje* as it affects Latinos in the United States is Virgil Elizondo, *Mestissage, Violence culturelle, Annonce de l'Évangile: La dimension interculturelle de l'évangélisation*, 3 vols. (San Antonio, Tex.: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1978).

²⁶ Francis E. Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Austin: University of Texas, 1983).

²⁷ As James Lockhart writes: "Wherever Christianity left a niche unfilled, it appears, there pre-conquest beliefs and practices tended to persist in their original form" (*The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1992] 258).

Life, as experienced by the Nahuas, was seen as the result of opposing forces in tension with each other.²⁸ Life was unstable at its roots (perhaps from the predominately agricultural nature of Nahua life and from their development into a militaristic state), and tended to dissolution when left to itself.²⁹ This experience of life was understood as reflective of the world's origins, or the divine. In fact, the dynamism of the world was envisioned as a mirror of the world of the divine. Each world was composed of time and space. Like two sets of three interlocking wheels, the time and space of the divine intersected with regularity with the time and space of the human and natural world. At those times and in those places, the world of the divine and its power were accessible, with energy flowing in both directions. The tone of encounter was defined as reciprocity.³⁰ That is, the Nahua myths of creation told of secondary manifestations of the divine who sacrificed themselves so that the world could be. The human response to this divine self-sacrifice was penance and offerings, aimed to reciprocate for the actions of the divine and, in so doing, to feed the energy of forces held in tension, the origination of all that is. Acts of reciprocity accessed the divine power in order to bring it to bear on this life and the vagaries of this life. Existence beyond death depended principally on the manner of one's death, not on the ethical nature of one's life (a mirroring function). Religious rituals of reciprocity were conducted by the official and institutional religious structure, but were also conducted in the home, by the primary group. The rituals were highly affective and used an abundance of symbol. Since the human mirrored the divine in an interlocking relationship, religion for the Nahuas was primarily a social phenomenon (of individuals within society and of society with the divine).

The divine itself was characterized as social.³¹ Though there is plentiful scholarly debate on whether or not Nahua religion was polytheistic, the first god (Ometéotl) was dual (male and female) but one, dual in more than manifestation but still one. The sages, some scholars argue, understood all the other "gods" to be further manifestations of the one god (determined in their individuality by times and places), and all of these were also dual

²⁸ Sources for understanding the Nahuatl religious world are multiple. A good overview can be obtained in David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovisions and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

²⁹ See the myths of creation that embodied this pervading sense of the instability of life in Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* 25–48.

³⁰ Miguel León-Portilla, "Those Made Worthy by Divine Sacrifice: The Faith of Ancient Mexico," in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary H. Gossen (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 42–44.

³¹ For a helpful textual analysis that opens into the question of polytheism vs. monotheism (thought in duality) in Nahuatl religion, see Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* 83–95.

(male and female). The common people may have understood these secondary manifestations to be separate from the first god, but since the Nahua culture did not embrace a metaphysics as we understand that term, it is difficult to use Western categories to understand their beliefs. In any case, the divine was imaged as multiple, as social, as group; of that we can be certain.

Interestingly, 16th-century Spanish Catholicism was also shaped by opposing forces held in tension.³² The 900 years of the *Reconquista* of Spain from the Moors left their militaristic and triumphalistic imprint on the ethos of medieval Spanish Catholicism. At the same time, it is important to remember that the Catholicism of the Conquistadors and the missionaries was one almost untouched by the controversies of the Reformation. As Luis Weckmann alleges: “This amounts to saying that the thought and structure that define the Church in New Spain, in its beginning and for a very long time afterward, were the same as those that characterized its flowering in medieval Spain. And, in the last instance, they are essentially identical to those inherited from the twilight of the ancient world and the patristic period.”³³ Unlike the imaging of the Nahuas, for Spanish Catholics the divine intervened in this world, but resided in another. Divine power was characterized less as permeating reality than breaking into it. The divine worked often, if not predominantly, through intermediaries (Mary and the saints) who were the objects of intense devotion and subjects of miraculous interventions. The power of the divine was accessed through prayer, ritual, and sacrifice. These were understood as a kind of barter, or exchange of one good for another “that is so typical in the exchange systems of traditional societies.”³⁴ In this way divine power was brought to bear on this life and the next. Religion was practiced both by the institutional Church and in popular fashion. The popular version was particularly noted for its high affectivity and its abundant use of symbol. But, unlike for the Nahuas, religion for the Spanish was first an individual phenomenon, that is, it was directed at the salvation of one’s own soul, though it also had a social function.

Thus, there was an uncanny similarity between these two religious cosmologies, though with distinct differences as well. Both worlds of religious imagination had a preoccupation with avoiding disaster and with protection from evil (life forces/*reconquista*). In both worlds, the divine was

³² For an overview of the characteristics of 16th-century Spanish Catholicism, see Manuel M. Marzal, “Transplanted Spanish Catholicism,” in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary H. Gossen (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 140–69.

³³ Luis Weckmann, *The Medieval Heritage of Mexico*, trans. Frances M. López-Morillas (New York: Fordham University, 1992) 296.

³⁴ Manuel M. Marzal, “Transplanted Spanish Catholicism” 149.

readily accessible, though for the Nahuas it was by interpenetration, and for Spaniards by intervention. In both, one accessed a single divine source or power, but in multiple manifestations or through intermediaries. Access was achieved through ritual where there is an “interchange” between the human and the divine (for the Nahuas, it was understood as reciprocity, due to the divine initiative; for Spanish Catholics, it was seen as earning a favor). Both religious worlds had popular, as well as institutional versions, though for the Nahuas religious practice was primarily a social phenomenon, while for the Spanish it was foremost personal and secondarily social.

As we start to lay the Spanish religious imagination over the Nahua to see how the *mestizaje* begins to take shape, we need first remember the inequality of the relationship between the two elements. Visually, one might think of the Spanish world being pushed down over the indigenous. But the indigenous is the *materia prima*, the matrix, as it were, on which the Spanish imagination is imposed. Where there are similarities between the overlay and the underlay, Spanish imagery can be accepted, though it is still seen within a different matrix, or through different eyes. In this case, some of the religious symbols of 16th-century medieval Spanish Catholicism can be taken on by the indigenous, though their meanings will be at least somewhat transformed by the matrix. Where the worlds are greatly dissimilar, chances are that the indigenous perspective will prevail since it is foundational. As I have mentioned earlier, the result, therefore, is a combination of synthesis and disjunctions.

The third factor that has influenced the shape of the symbolic world of Latino/a popular Catholicism and its functions is the originating context of Latino/a popular religion, the Conquest itself. Whether one chooses to talk of the events following 1492 as “encounter” or “discovery,” the next decades were for the indigenous of the Americas decades of violence and vanquishment. More than simply an atmosphere of violence, the context of the religious *mestizaje* was one of vanquishment, of some peoples’ “having become the losing victims of someone else’s victory.”³⁵ The resulting sense of powerlessness and of marginalization serves to color the new symbolic world underneath Mexican popular Catholicism and shapes the ways it functions for its practitioners. In fact, it is the sociohistorical condition of being marginalized and disenfranchised that is both the cause of the development of popular Catholicism among Latinos/as vis-à-vis the institutional Church³⁶ and of one of its primary functions as a locus for self-preservation and resistance to domination.

³⁵ Orlando O. Espín, “The God of the Vanquished: Foundations for a Latino Spirituality,” *Listening* vol. 27, no. 1 (Winter, 1992) 74.

³⁶ Mark Francis, “Building Bridges between Liturgy, Devotionalism, and Popular Religion,” *Assembly* 20:2 (April, 1994) 637.

The characteristics of the originating symbolic worlds, the sociocentric contours of the cultures that collided and the context of vanquishment constitute the major features of the new symbolic world that took shape as Mexican popular Catholicism. However, it would be historically naïve to suppose that we know the exact shape of the synthesis and its disjunctions. As David Carrasco writes in *City of Sacrifice*:

On a different plane, the search for inter-relatedness, or what Alfredo López Austin calls a “Mesoamerican world vision” in his watershed study *The Myths of the Opossum: Pathways of Mesoamerican Mythology*, is and will always be especially difficult in Mesoamerican studies. Regardless of how long one studies, how expert in native and colonial languages one becomes, how new archaeological discoveries excite us, or breakthroughs in pictorial interpretation uncover new details and cognates, one obstacle that will always remain is the impact of colonialism on the pre-Columbian evidence and the difficulty of knowing what Mesoamerican peoples were up to, or thought they were up to, in their rites, myths, and stargazing between five and seven hundred years ago. What Inga Clendinnen calls the problem of *finding out*—whether finding out the world vision, the general model, or the patterns of actions—will be with us, in various manifestations, for the duration. Deeply aware of the impact of colonialism on the indigenous record, she asks (while describing the thick Spanish gloss and competing visions of Mesoamerican peoples, the destruction of indigenous records, and the need for new questions), how are we to be able to “discover anything of the views and experience of a people whose voices were hushed to a murmur more than 400 years ago?” The need, or as she says, “the trick is to strip away the cocoon of Spanish interpretation to uncover sequences of Indian actions, and then try to discern the pattern in those actions, as a way of inferring the shared understanding which sustains them.”³⁷

This same silence from the practitioners of Mexican popular Catholicism continues through the centuries following the Conquest. While anthropologists, ethnographers and other social scientists have studied the religious practices of the indigenous of Mexico in order to “find out” what shape the symbolic world of popular Catholicism is taking and how it is changing, these studies are all done by outsiders looking in.³⁸ The practitioners themselves are silent, in the beginning perhaps because of fear of recrimination by the Spanish missionaries, but pervasively because of the very nature of popular religion, that is, it is the creation of and is practiced by not the “virtuosi” (theologians and clergy), but by “the people.”³⁹

Adding to the difficulty of “finding out” is the catechetical training that

³⁷ David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1999) 93–94.

³⁸ For typical examples, see John M. Ingham, *Mary, Michael, and Lucifer: Folk Catholicism in Central Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986) and James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest*.

³⁹ See the distinction made between “popular” and “official” religion in Orlando O. Espín, “Popular Catholicism among Latinos,” in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 112–13.

the indigenous and later the mestizo population received. While they were able to repeat the doctrines taught them, their assimilation of the meanings of those doctrines depended on the categories of thought used by the missionaries themselves. In a case study on the doctrine of the Trinity, Orlando Espín argues persuasively that, though the indigenous at the time of the Conquest were able to repeat the formula of One God and Three Persons, they did not and could not think in the neo-Platonic and Aristotelian categories in which the missionaries presented trinitarian doctrine. What they understood by the Trinity from within the symbolic world of their own indigenous religious tradition can be surmised by their subsequent religious practices, but it cannot be known for certain.⁴⁰

When the boundaries of the United States crossed the Mexicans in California, Texas, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Utah at the end of the Mexican American War, the silence of the practitioners of popular Catholicism perdured. Latino/a popular Catholicism remained the symbolic world of the vanquished and disenfranchised, but this time the Conquerors were North Americans. Generally ignored by the U.S. Catholic Church in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the now Mexican Americans of the Southwest continued to practice popular Catholicism, preserving as best they could the traditions that had been handed down to them. However, as U.S. culture made inroads into the Mexican American community and as the Catholic Church began to develop ministry to these communities especially in the second-half of the 20th century, there unfolded a *segundo mestizaje*, a mixing of Latino/a popular Catholicism with its Mexican roots and U.S. majority culture Catholicism with its German-Irish roots redolent with post-Tridentine Catholicism and the project of modernity. Again two symbolic worlds clashed and a new synthesis and a new *nepantla* were created.

I have dedicated a significant portion of my article to an analysis of the birthing of Latino/a popular Catholicism in order to highlight its difference from the dominant culture Catholicism in the United States. The particularity of the nature of Latino/a Catholicism provides an understanding of its unique role in the identity of U.S. Latino/a Catholics as Latinos/as. This in turn explains why the religiosity of Latino/a Catholics is so resistant to the acculturation process.

ACCULTURATION OF LATINO/A YOUTH

As I have asserted earlier, Latino/a youth, those born in the United States as well as those recently immigrated, are experiencing acculturation.

⁴⁰ See Orlando Espín, "Trinitarian Monotheism and the Birth of Popular Catholicism," in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 57–59.

For the great majority, their operative language is English. While they may speak Spanish at home, or at least understand their parents who speak to them in Spanish (though they respond in English), English is the language they use in school. It is the language of their music, their movies, their radio. It is the language in which they communicate with their peers and friends. Because of their almost constant immersion in English outside of the family, their English vocabulary far outstrips in size and sophistication the Spanish vocabulary they use primarily to address domestic issues and tasks. In addition, for many, Spanish is an oral language. They can neither read nor write Spanish with any fluency.

The values of individualism and self-assertion to which they are exposed in education and the media, and that stem from the fundamentally egocentric configuration of U.S. dominant culture, challenge the family orientation and group identity that are hallmarks of the sociocentric character of their cultural worlds of origin. On this deeper level, Latino/a youth often experience significant tension. This tension is readily seen in their relationships with parents and less acculturated members of their families, as youth reject what they interpret as the “traditionalism” of older family members and as parents attempt to enforce attendance at family functions on the basis that this behavior marks those children who are *bien educados*. But the tension is also being experienced within the youth themselves. They struggle between the pull of dominant U.S. culture with its emphasis on the self and that of the obligations and perspectives of family allegiance that have been ingrained in them in their upbringing. The amount of accommodation to U.S. dominant culture by Latino/a youth on this deeper level of family systems depends in great part on the concrete mechanisms of resistance of the culture of origin.

Viewing Latino/a youth in the United States solely through the lenses of language proficiency and a movement toward individualism could tempt a pastoral minister to conclude that these young people are really as fundamentally “American” as the great majority of youth living in the U.S. today. On the basis of that assumption, then, the appropriate pastoral response would be to mainstream these Latino/a youth into the practices and organizations that are characteristic of dominant culture U.S. Catholicism with its predominantly German and Irish roots. However, as we have seen, the nature of U.S. Latino/a Catholicism is distinctly different in both its origin and in its function as a source of Latino/a identity from dominant culture U.S. Catholicism. Given the multidimensional model of acculturation we have explored, mainstreaming Latino/a youth into dominant culture youth groups most likely is the result of a rash judgment in Bernard Lonergan’s sense of the term, where the conditions for a correct judgment has not been fulfilled nor adequately verified. For, while the operative language of the majority of U.S. Latino/a youth may be English and their

cultural world may be moving decidedly in the direction of becoming increasingly egocentric, their religiosity, as that aspect of their culture most resistant to acculturation, is most likely still strikingly Latino/a.

Effective pastoral ministry to U.S. Latino/a youth must take into account the acculturation process that these young people are experiencing. This means locating them on the multidimensional model and so responding appropriately to the different rates of acculturation occurring in the different aspects of their lives.

When I was working in East Los Angeles in the mid 1970s through the early 1980s, most of the twelve Catholic parishes in the area had at most one eucharistic celebration on Sunday in English. This meant that the young people of the barrio whose operative language was English had to attend that Eucharist or attend Mass in Spanish. The latter was not a very attractive option since most of the youth spoke domestic or “kitchen” Spanish whose limited vocabulary kept them from understanding much of what was said during a Spanish Mass. In addition, the Spanish Mass was celebrated in the style of the people’s country of origin and reminded the young people too forcefully of the cultural world of their parents, between themselves and which they were attempting to put as much distance as possible. The only other option was to attend Mass at the Euroamerican parish in the neighboring community of Montebello. At Eucharists in that parish, the Latino/a youth could understand everything what was said and were not faced with the “traditional” world of their parents. But more often than not, as they were leaving church after Mass, they would comment to each other that they “didn’t feel like they had been to church.” That is, the dominant culture parish had made the Sunday celebration linguistically intelligible to them and had surrounded them with a dominant culture ambience, but the religiosity embedded in the celebration was foreign. The images of the divine, the way of relating to God, *la Virgen*, and the saints, the moral implications for their lives were those of Euro-American Catholicism and did not nurture their Latino/a religiosity. Bereft of a Catholic home where people spoke English but where God was still Latino/a, the majority of young people in East Los Angeles did not join fundamentalist groups. These groups generally held their services in Spanish and hewed closely to the major features of the sociocentric cultural worlds of the participants’ countries of origin. Rather, the majority simply stopped attending church at all.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HISPANIC MINISTRY

Recognition of the need to develop pastoral strategies that take seriously the complex nature of the acculturation process of Latino/a youth in the United States points to the tragic mistake made by the trajectory of His-

panic Ministry in the U.S. Catholic Church in general. By far, the majority of financial and personnel resources in Hispanic Ministry have been poured into programming for new immigrants. This means that most such programming is conducted in Spanish and adheres fairly closely to the cultural worlds of the immigrants' countries of origin. Certainly, the Church must provide culturally responsible services to those who are newly arrived in this country. However, these immigrants themselves and most surely their children enter into the acculturation process if they stay in the United States. The programs the Church designs to be of service to them must recognize the changes in language and cultural values they will experience if they are going to be effective. Yet little systematic work has been undertaken to develop models of ministry to second and third generation Latinos/as, young or old, whose operative language is not English, who have experienced significant cultural shifts because of their continued exposure to dominant U.S. culture, but whose cultural worlds contain particularly resilient aspects, such as Latino/a religiosity that remain firmly rooted in the cultures of origin. Rather, ministry to Latin American and Caribbean immigrants has passed itself off as Hispanic ministry, when in fact it represents ministry to a minority of U.S. Latinos/as. The youthfulness of U.S. Latinos/as should sensitize pastoral agents to new models of ministry that take into consideration the multidimensional nature of the acculturation process not solely for the sake of Latino/a youth, but for the sake of the whole U.S. Latino/a Catholic community. While many bishops fear that the Latino/a Catholic population will enter Protestant Pentecostal churches in increasing numbers, the lesson we are learning from Latino/a Catholic youth who are poorly served is that the greater risk is that the U.S. Latino/a Catholic population will become increasingly unchurched. And since they were once Catholic and will have experienced a Church unresponsive to their needs, it will be even more difficult to have them see themselves again as part of that Church.