

CHAPTER 18

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FOUR KEYS TO
UNDERSTANDING
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
IN LATIN AMERICA

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- C18.P1 THE various sociological definitions of religion encompass at least four dimensions: (1) institutional responsibility for administering and reproducing the goods of salvation; (2) content of beliefs and imposition of order on the world; (3) practical expressions and forms of belonging to the “moral community,” including prescribing and orienting behavior; and (4) representation of the sacred and its relationship to daily life.
- C18.P2 Over time, discussion of these aspects of religious experience has been enriched and refined by multiple schools of thought. This chapter seeks to outline the basic elements of Latin American religious experience with reference to the four dimensions just listed. It will argue that the most important religious expressions are “para-ecclesiastical agents,” or sociological figures who administer religious life; the contents of religious beliefs, which often arise from a confrontation between distinct cosmovisions and must be discussed in terms of—among other concepts—syncretism, *mestizaje*, and hybridization; the fiesta, both as a space for creativity and as a logic of religious practice that reproduces rituals; and, finally, practitioners’ relationship to religious images and other sacred elements.
- C18.P3 To that end, the chapter will make use of empirical observations from recent research as well as historical sources, particularly those from the colonial period, that shed light on the origins of certain interpretative challenges in the study of Latin American religion.

C18.S1 **INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND REPRODUCTION
OF THE GOODS OF SALVATION:
PARA-ECCLESIASTIC AGENTS**

- C18.P4 The classic typology of the religious sphere—as shaped by (Weber, 1987) in his analysis of domination, power, legitimacy, and the tension between charisma and doctrine, and as reinterpreted by (Bourdieu, 1971)—identifies the interaction among priests, prophets, magicians, and lay figures within a field whose objective is the control and monopolization of the goods of salvation. Although this basic schema was analytically effective, early studies of religious behavior in Latin America identified figures who did not fit within it, thus indicating a need for reexamination.¹
- C18.P5 Historical writings describe the lived tensions in colonial Mexico between *cofradías* (confraternities) and ecclesiastical authorities, sometimes involving battles over control of territory and religious identity, and more recent studies have confirmed this same tension. De la Peña shows that *mayordomos* and *cofradías* were in charge of popular religious festivals and that they “rejected any direct interference from the Church” (De la Peña, 1980, 2004). Giménez, in his study of small-town rural religion in the sanctuary of Chalma, stresses the “essentially lay character of all management of ceremonies” (Giménez, 2013). In his observations of the Andean world, Marzal identifies a “dual ritual system” that generated “two types of specialists: the Catholic priest and the Andean one” (Marzal, 1994, p. 160, 2002); Spedding speaks of three sorts of “Andean specialists”: the Catholic priest, the *yatiri* or *curandero*, and the evangelical pastor (Spedding, 2008).
- C18.P6 Several studies employ the notion of what I am calling “para-ecclesiastic agents” to identify those who “administer the symbolic goods without legitimate official membership in the ecclesiastical institution—but also without any radical break from that institution—and thus reconfigure, in a semi-autonomous manner, the contents, circuits, and forms of religious practice” (Suárez, 2008). These sociological figures are characterized by a monopoly on the administration of the goods of salvation and by their competition—and tense coexistence—with the ecclesiastical institution, without reaching the point of a complete breach; they also have a certain degree of autonomy to decide on the forms, content, and agendas of belief and are able to take positions about lay visions of the religious world (Suárez, 2008).
- C18.P7 Para-ecclesiastic agents are devoted to a physical religious image—an icon or saint—that they serve in different ways. Their sociological profile has four aspects. One, they have low cultural, educational, and economic capital, very similar to that of the believers, which brings them close to their parishioners and gives them a certain ability to channel their concerns and aspirations. Two, their occupation (whatever it may be) does not intersect with their religious calling; these are separate worlds, with their occupational duties allowing them sufficient time to care for the devotional images. Three, the image

manifests itself in an extraordinary way—effecting cures, making changes in the lives of the agents, offering escape from difficult situations, etc.—that solidifies the agents' faith and their commitment to promoting the saint. And four, the agents develop personal charisma, constructed over time, that makes their services—and their images—necessary to the believers in a variety of ways (Suárez, 2018).

C18.P8 There are hundreds of examples of such para-ecclesiastic agents. Don Francisco, for instance, is a worshipper of the Virgin of San Juan de Los Lagos and tends to an image of the Virgin in Guanajuato, Mexico.² On the one hand, Don Francisco, working with church authorities, incorporates this image into the National Caravan of Faith annually during January and February, merging with the thousands of pilgrims who come to San Juan from different parts of the country. On the other hand, throughout the year, Don Francisco is in charge of entrusting the image to various houses of Marfil, a grassroots neighborhood on the outskirts of Guanajuato; the image moves every three or four days from one home to another in accord with the demands of the laypeople. Along its path, the neighbors gather, forming a procession led by Don Francisco in which they pray and sing. The reception of the image is very emotional because the woman of the house prepares a special place for it, decorates the entrance to her home, and rents benches and makes food and drink for the visitors. While the image resides in a house, the doors remain open to whoever wishes to enter, whether to pray or to light a candle, and at night rosaries are prayed. The day the Virgin is scheduled to leave, Don Francisco arrives to carry her to the next temporary home.

C18.P9 In general terms, para-ecclesiastic agents display five characteristics:

- C18.P10 1. *Autonomous management of the goods of salvation.* In the most radical form, the owner of the image has autonomy over its operational use. The owner is in charge of the routines and of the choice of readings, chants, routes, etc.
- C18.P11 2. *Reconfiguration of the spatial aspect.* The route that the image travels through streets and homes configures a new sacred circuit that extends beyond the local church, re-semanticizes space, and dictates a new religious geography.
- C18.P12 3. *Reorganization of the calendar.* Although sacred time is governed by the official calendar, a parallel agenda is created alongside it, one that responds to the demands of the faithful in direct contact with the owner of the image.
- C18.P13 4. *Economic management.* Every neighborhood procession involves economic aspects that may vary in some aspects. The lay figure is in charge of money management, without outside intervention.
- C18.P14 5. *Effectiveness of the sacred in daily life.* The para-ecclesiastic agent takes charge of establishing a new sort of tie between the sacred sphere and the believer who welcomes the image into his or her home because the presence of the image makes it possible to attend to fundamental problems of daily life in the private sphere (Suárez, 2018, pp. 17–18).

C18.P15 In sum, the Latin American religious experience rests, to a large degree, in the hands of multiple para-ecclesiastic agents who regulate and reproduce the world of faith.

C18.S2

THE CONTENT OF BELIEF

- C18.P16 The content of belief forms an essential part of the religious experience. Since the Spanish Conquest, and as a result of its own history of victories and defeats, Latin America has experienced a complex process involving the overlap of three different matrices: the European, the indigenous, and the African. Each of these matrices also contains its own internal interactions. From the earliest campaigns of religious conversion and the brutal policy of “extirpation of idolatry”—that is, the prohibition and destruction of indigenous forms of religious expression—the religious authorities took note of the relative failure to canonically impose Catholicism. These authorities had their own disagreements about what strategy to follow and their own ideas about the “Indian,” as can be seen in the opposing positions of Bartolomé de las Casas, Bernardino de Sahagún, and Ginés Sepúlveda (Parker, 1993). Even the most enthusiastic visions of the successful diffusion of Christianity soon confronted a divergent reality. The most lucid thinkers of the era recognized the complexity, the fluctuations, and the interchanges of an era marked by cultural conflict, a conflict that was both violent and fluid. The “shock of conquest,” as Gruzinski calls it, made both American and European actors into “prisoners in a labyrinth,” compelled to adjust to a situation characterized by “complexity, convolution, and unpredictability” (Gruzinski, 1999). Therefore, the various competing groups had to “adapt to fragmented and fractured universes, to live through very difficult, unstable, and unpredictable situations, and to settle for often-rudimentary exchanges” (Gruzinski, 1999, p. 86).
- C18.P17 In the Andean world, Van de Berg’s research has demonstrated the tension involved in the overlapping of different beliefs: “The Aymara have not given up their own religion, but neither have they rejected Christianity. They have not abandoned their own beliefs to become Christians, but rather have accepted Christianity to integrate it into their own beliefs” (Van der Berg, 1990). This author finds a linked, two-way mutation, incomplete and tension-filled yet producing new beliefs: the introduction of the supernatural Christian world into Aymara beliefs and the Aymarization of those Christian supernatural beings. In this sense, the introduction and the Aymarization of the Christian cosmovision involves a movement in both directions (Van den Berg, 1990, pp. 233–250).
- C18.P18 From a different point of view, Bolívar Echeverría considers “really existent” capitalism in relation to Latin American culture (Echeverría, 2010) and offers an interpretation of the *Nican Mopohua* (a document describing the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the indigenous Juan Diego). He finds “two equally baroque projects of confronting the situation of the ontological crisis of identity: the basic project of the Indians orphaned by the destruction of their world, and the mirroring project of the Spaniards expelled from theirs” (Echeverría, 2010, p. 206). The tension created by this dual belonging is experienced, dramatically, in what the author calls a “baroque ethos”: “a state of linkage and interdependence between two projects that conflict in their forms but have the same objective” (Echeverría, 2011).

- C18.P19 A number of authors, both sociologists and anthropologists, have theorized this issue in a number of ways. Manuel Marzal employs the concept of syncretism “because it is a constant in the functioning of religions, one accentuated by the process of evangelization in Latin America” (Marzal, 2002). Recognizing the long history of this concept, which has also been employed to discuss contexts very different from that of Latin America, he asserts that
- C18.P20 [t]he prolonged contact between Iberian Catholicism and Andean, Mayan, and African religions spurred a complex process of continuities, losses, syntheses, and reinterpretations of the elements of the religions in contact—a process that, in spite of the diversity of cultural contexts, was very similar in all of them and led to the emergence of three syncretic religions. (Marzal, 2002, p. 198)
- C18.P21 Cristián Parker begins his book *La otra lógica* by explaining his perspective on this issue. He stresses the confrontation between European Catholicism (including the “spirit of victorious soldier-priests” that characterized the missionaries) and pre-Hispanic forms of religion, noting that the response of the indigenous groups was “diverse, depending on the type of relationship established with the conqueror” (Parker, 1993). He identifies four such relational types: (1) rebellious and loyal to the old deities, (2) submissive with integration, (3) active messianic resistance, and (4) partial syncretic submission, “accepting Christianity but assuring the survival of ancestral beliefs through syncretism.” The author argues that the latter is the most important in “understanding today’s expressions of a popular religion in the continent” (Parker, 1993, p. 27). Thus, for Parker, syncretism is an indigenous strategy of adjustment and reinterpretation that allows for subjugated peoples to survive (Parker, 1993, pp. 32–33).
- C18.P22 From another perspective, Jean Pierre Bastian analyzes the conditions and consequences of the tense interaction between Catholic culture and pre-Hispanic beliefs: “Upon the ruins of Pre-Columbian societies, liquidated both by demographic decline and by the clash of civilizations, Catholicism shaped the world vision and the symbolic practices of both the masses and the elites, who were able to preserve some elements of the original cultures by redefining them within the votive religious practices of baroque Catholicism through complex processes of mixing the two” (Bastian, 2004). In this way, Catholicism succeeded in its ecclesiastical project by administering the diversity of practice and belief across such a heterogeneous continent. However, unlike Marzal and Parker, Bastian argues that there was “a process of hybridization that has nothing to do with syncretism. . . . Hybridity is determined by a demand that is linked to the diversity of existing traditions and is capable of including new practices and discourses that are susceptible to awakening growing interest” (Bastian, 2004, pp. 163–164).
- C18.P23 Empirical studies carried out in urban areas toward the end of the past century show that this process of syncretism or hybridization did not die out either in the colonial period or in the interchanges of the indigenous peoples. Rather, it is still occurring. Salles

and Valenzuela, in their above-cited work on festivals and identities in Xochimilco, note that these “incorporate, in many and heterogeneous ways, elements both sacred and profane, novel and traditional, official and popular, involving integration and cultural resistance” and that, therefore, “such expressions represent forms of syncretism that combine the legacies of past cultures with contemporary traits” (Salles & Valenzuela, 1997). Portal, in her study of popular religiosity in the southern part of Mexico City, states that “what we have before us is neither an archaic phenomenon nor a memory of the past, but rather a hybrid religious practice representing one of the pillars of the construction of the image in the modern world” (Portal, 1995).

C18.P24 However, debate on this topic among scholars continues to grow. Lupe has made an exhaustive survey of the limits, errors, successes, and perspectives regarding the concept of syncretism, both in general studies of religion and culture and specifically in the Latin American experience (Lupo, 1996). Báez-Jorge, though he warns about the danger of using the concept “too broadly,” thoughtfully reviews syncretic scholars whom he believes to be rigorous and has used the term in his own research (Báez-Jorge, 2011).

C18.P25 Nevertheless, the socio-anthropology of contemporary Latin American religion has had to confront new phenomena and rethink the discussion around syncretism. It still generally involves the flow of beliefs, their interchange and synthesis, but it no longer occurs in a context of colonization but rather in a climate of globalization and migration in which multiple cultures come into contact. Thus, to cite only a few examples, the papers assembled by Argyriadis and colleagues (2008) and by de la Torre (2012) have shown that the transnationalization of religious beliefs is fundamental; de la Torre has coined the term “nomad religions” (2012) to describe this phenomena. Studies by Rivera, Odgers, and Hernández have concentrated on migration and religion (Rivera, Odgers, & Hernández, 2017), Juárez has studied the evolution of saints in Mexico City (Juárez, 2014), others have dealt with the varieties of New Age religion (de la Torre, Gutiérrez, & Juárez, 2013), and many studies have examined emerging practices such as the Santa Muerte cult (Chesnut, 2013; Hernández, 2016).

C18.P26 One of the most surprising findings of a study carried out in Mexico City’s Colonia Ajusco is that believers are able to employ devices of quite varied origins and to mix them freely without encountering any sense of contradiction. For example, one believer defines herself as “Catholic, but not very” and participates in the religious celebrations hosted by her local church, but she also attends meeting of the “Spiritual Brothers” (Espiritualistas Trinitarios Marianos), who help her to contact spirits from “Old Mexico,” incarnated by a medium, to cure her health problems. Similarly, a Catholic believer who participates in the Base Communities—the pastoral wing of Liberation Theology—admits to using homeopathic medicine as means to take care of her body, to criticize the unjust health system, and to understand divinity as a “vital force” that oversees the immune system (Suárez, 2015).

C18.P27 What becomes clear is that the intensity and forms of religious interchange in today’s society require us to rethink our analytical categories. As noted, some observers speak in terms of syncretism and others of hybridization or multiculturalism. In this context, Pierre Sanchis’s work on religion in Brazil, although not so recent, continues to shed analytic

light. Sanchis puts forward a sociogenesis of Brazilian religious history, identifying a “systematic plurality” that has brought about “porousness as mutual contamination” along three interacting matrices: Catholic, African, and indigenous. The three matrices must be analyzed using three cultural logics: premodern, modern, and postmodern, which involve complex interactions (Frigerio, 2005). He proposes that, in any confrontation between two human groups, there is a “tendency to use relations learned in the world of the other so as to re-semanticize one’s own universe.” This leads him to understand this confrontation as a “polymorphous and causal *process*, involving varied and unpredictable dimensions, that consists of the collective perception or construction of homologies of relations between one’s own universe and that of the ‘other.’” This involves a dimension that is simultaneously intellectual and emotional, conscious and unconscious, as part of two identities’ continuous capacity to perceive each other through a constant “flow of communication” (Sanchis, 1994). According to Sanchis, this interaction has a structure—a “dynamic principle of transformations”—that allows for “homologies between the system of the ‘I’ and the system of the ‘other’” (Sanchis, 1994, p. 7). Moreover, this process of syncretism is inscribed not only on the religious sphere but also on the cultural field, with its dynamic of domination and inequality.

C18.P28 Reexamining religious syncretism in Latin America requires focusing on the interchange among multiple alternatives that are present in a given sociocultural field. Cultural contact gives rise to new structural transactions of meaning in which “the potentially available symbolic traits are reappropriated in a partially new composition” (Remy, 1990, p. 131). Believers undertake this work on the basis of a strategic rationality, a renegotiation of the “interiorization of meaning” encountered in the course of their religious trajectories and reconfigured in accord with their particular needs (Hiernaux, 2005). These reinterpretations and re-semanticizations of religious content are not infinite. They operate within relatively stable cultural frameworks that allow, encourage, or impede particular combinations; that is, the new religious expressions must turn out to be legitimate and convincing both for the believers and for the world in which they live.

C18.S3 RELIGIOUS LOGIC AND ROOM FOR CREATIVITY WITHIN A PRACTICE: THE FIESTA

C18.P29 Another dimension of religious experience is the festival or fiesta. Many general articles cover different aspects of this topic. Authors throughout the continent have studied particular countries, stressing the fiesta’s multidimensional nature: it transforms borders while constructing new identities and social relations and re-semanticizing physical space.

C18.P30 In the Mexican experience, De la Torre (de la Torre, 2016) explains that the origins of the fiesta must be sought in two kinds of religious festivals, the pre-Hispanic *mitote* and

the Iberian *verbena*. Portal asserts that “the works of the first chroniclers are full of references to pre-Hispanic fiestas: processions replete with song, music, and dance that formed the main axis of pagan religious practice” (Portal, 1997). She details these pagan origins in depth, noting that “every month, rituals honoring the most important gods were carried out. The rites were linked to agricultural cycles, and, in the majority of cases, involved ceremonies to invoke rain, growth of corn and other crops, etc.” (Portal, 1997, p. 184). The Spanish authorities’ disapproval of these popular observances generated many tensions and a labeling of anything that came from the indigenous world as “pagan” or “idolatrous.” Consequently, they implanted new deities and built churches on top of previously sacred sites. Also, given the importance and strong roots of popular religious expressions, part of the missionary strategy was to “replace such ‘pagan’ festivals and repurpose their deep cultural content with Christian practices” (Portal, 1997, p. 186), which led to musical education programs linked to monasteries. In this context, the fiesta could serve as a refuge for laughter and mockery in response to the Conquest’s subjugation of popular religious expressions (Parker, 1993).

C18.P31 At the same time, Spanish authorities also imposed a pantheon and calendar of Catholic religious figures, linking church-sanctioned festivals to local “patron saints” (Galicia, 2017). This resulted in a profusion of saints and Virgins, and, over the course of centuries, these multiple images and celebrations acquired increasing autonomy and vitality.

C18.P32 In Latin America, the colonial assignment of patron saints from the missionaries’ well-stocked Catholic pantheon conferred on the preexisting towns and those founded by the Spaniards not only an image of devotion but also a local festive occasion recognized inside and outside those communities: the saints’ day fiesta (Arias, 2016).

C18.P33 At these saints’ day fiestas, traditional community rites—and their respective deities—mimicked and interacted with Spanish ones, acquiring new characteristics as well as new forms of economic distribution and power conferred to organizers (e.g., *mayordomos*).³ As Arias says, “The fiesta has been a privileged space in which public and private spheres intersect, and in which the relationships and commitment of the participating social groups are expressed. There, community belonging, the production of order, and the meanings of successive generations are not only expressed but also recreated” (Arias, 2016, p. 277).

C18.P34 Within the rural Mexican environment, the saints’ day fiesta calendar was fundamental to establishing a relationship with nature, constructing identities, and organizing social and symbolic life. In his above-cited study, Giménez concludes that the religious fiesta in a traditional peasant society has the following characteristics:

C18.P35 a) Rupture of normal time; b) collective nature of the festive phenomenon, without any sorts of exclusions, as the expression of a local community; c) comprehensive and wide-ranging character allowing the fiesta to include very heterogeneous and diverse elements without disaggregation or “specialization” (games, dances, rituals, music, etc., within a single celebration); d) a resulting need to take place in large, open, outdoor areas (the plaza, the church courtyard, etc.); e) strongly institutionalized, ritualized, and

sacred nature (the traditional fiesta is inseparable from religion); f) impregnation of the fiesta by the logic of use-value (the fiesta is participatory, not a spectacle to be observed); g) strong dependence on the agricultural calendar, within the framework of seasonal agriculture. (Giménez, 2013)

- C18.P36 The accelerated urbanization of Latin America in the 1960s and '70s brought important changes to the field of religion (Bastian, 1997; Houtart, 1959; Lalive d'Épinay, 2009; Parker, 1993), and, of course, affected the fiestas—transforming but not dislodging them. In her study of the outlying urban area of San Andrés Totoltepec de Tlalpan, Portal concludes that “the urban saints’ day fiesta is not a mere manifestation of a buried past, but rather the representation of practices now followed by a wide range of public employees, teachers, bus drivers, manual workers, construction tradespeople, peasants growing flowers for the national market, and a high percentage of young people with access to secondary education” (Portal, 1997, p. 34).
- C18.P37 Other fiestas bridge the gap between the urban and the rural. In Colonia Ajusco—a grassroots, religiously diverse Mexico City neighborhood—there are several types of fiestas, including that of San Luis Rey, the patron saint of Nahuatzen in Michoacán.⁴ Some migrants from Michoacán who came to Mexico City several decades ago still maintain ties to their place of origin and their tradition through the festivities carried out every August. Members of the Michoacanese Organizing Committee of Residents of the Federal District take charge of everything. While they do have a relationship with the local parish authorities (the devotional image of San Luis Rey, for instance, spends six months in the local churches and the rest of the year in various homes), they have a great deal of autonomy. The programmed activities last for two days, beginning in a private home with the presence of a band that comes from Michoacán. Then the image is taken on a pilgrimage through other houses and streets, until it reaches the church where *mañanitas* are sung in honor of the saint, the Eucharist is served, and participants clad in traditional clothing dance and celebrate—with great quantities of alcohol—until it is time to conclude with the fireworks display called the *quema del castillo* (burning of the castle).
- C18.P38 While the full array of fiestas cannot be described in this chapter, this example shows the institution’s cultural role and vitality, even in heavily urbanized areas. As we have seen, they involve not only religious and ritual aspects “but also a plethora of individual, family, and social meanings that have been changing over time” (Arias, 2016). De la Torre is correct in affirming that, in the fiestas, “the staging is no mere reproduction of the past, but rather a living and ever-changing syntax of meaning, re-semanticizing what is traditional and re-symbolizing what is new” (de la Torre, 2016). The fiesta, in Latin American religious practice, involves a moment in which the sacred enters into daily life; a platform for autonomous organization that strengthens innovation and allows for religious creativity to respond to the specific needs of believers, especially in the neighborhood; a re-territorialization that constructs a sacred geography distinct from the official one; and a ritual practice that underlines a style of personal belief that, although it develops within the universe of popular Catholicism, also goes beyond it and touches on other spiritual borders.

C18.S4 **THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SACRED:
THE RELIGIOUS IMAGE**

- C18.P39 The function of devotional images in religious life and their particular importance in Christianity is well known (Belting, 2009). However, to understand the particular nature of such images in Latin America, it is essential to consider some historical episodes from the time of Conquest that have shaped the region's past and present.
- C18.P40 Analyzing the role of the devotional image in Mexico since colonial times, Serge Gruzinski aptly titles his 2006 book *La guerra de las imágenes* (*The War of the Images*). Fraught interactions during the Conquest often centered around the role of the image and its indispensable place in religious and political life. He shows that, over the centuries, the Conquest was remarkably consistent in upholding a “program and policy about imagery” that involved everyone, with a variety of initiatives, rhythms, and accents (Gruzinski, 2006).
- C18.P41 It is important to remember that the colonial enterprise had specific characteristics. On the one hand, “the conquerors thought they were invested with a spiritual mission. Their flag, following the example of Constantine, bore the inscription, ‘We follow the sign of the Cross [and] with it we will win’” (cited in Gruzinski, 2006, p. 42). Political and religious goals went hand in hand. On the other hand, the populace developed an emotional relationship with the religious images that the conquerors introduced as part of their violent incursion (Gruzinski, 2006, p. 44). Nonetheless, the Spanish were most concerned with idolatry, and their obsession led to the destruction and replacement of indigenous images through a policy of “extirpation of Mexican idols” that was “increasing, long, and often brutal.” From 1519 on, the Spaniards conceived of a plan based on twin pillars of annihilation and substitution: “in principle, the idols were destroyed . . . and then the conquerors replaced them with Christian images” (Gruzinski, 2006, p. 41).
- C18.P42 It should also be noted that the function and nature of images was central to European Catholic debates in the sixteenth century. Protestants accused Catholics of being idolaters who exhibited a misguided adoration of images. This is the best way to understand the Church's reaction at the Council of Trent, at which “the abuses denounced by the Protestants were corrected, superstitious or lucrative practices associated with images were banned, and efforts were made to eradicate the apocryphal or profane iconographies that had led to doctrinal errors and that, in their immodesty, encouraged lasciviousness among the faithful” (Mujica, 2011, p. 22). One of the key goals of this effort was to counter the idea that sacred images had magical-religious power in themselves, to deny that “they were repositories of divine powers” (cited in Mujica, 2011, p. 22). On the contrary, it was argued that “figurative art” should seek to “instruct and affirm the people,” that it should become a tool of communication, a “weapon of persuasion” to fulfill a “purely instrumental function” in the task of evangelization. The post-Trent Church thus espoused images more conducive to pedagogy than idolatrous temptation (Mujica, 2011, p. 19).

- C18.P43 The indigenous perception of the religious image was quite different. As Gruzinski suggests, it involved a mixture of beauty and anthropomorphic realism (2006, p. 60). Also, the people had an intimate relationship with their deities, who “tended to be hidden in the darkness of the temples, far from the multitudes, being exhibited only periodically and according to strict rules, infraction of which was the equivalent of a ‘sacrilege’” (Gruzinski, 2006, p. 47).
- C18.P44 This complex interaction of cultures could be seen as a war that was both spiritual and visual, one permeated by intolerance toward the image of the other. The destruction of the other’s representation was imperative; the Spanish sought the “imposition of a visual order that required, above all, monopolistic representation of the sacred” (Gruzinski, 2006, p. 58). It is of fundamental importance to underline this monopolistic intent of the manipulation of religious imagery because it was a concern that lasted for centuries.
- C18.P45 However, despite the colonial attempt to regulate their relationship with images, the people followed their own paths. For example, the bishop of Quito, Alfonso de la Peña Montenegro (1596–1687) criticized the “grave doctrinal errors committed by the Indians” who practiced an idolatrous adoration of certain devotional images, whom they addressed “as they would persons who can see and hear” (Mujica, 2011, p. 18). In Latin America, effigy worship implied, from the beginning, the possibility of an exchange based on direct communication with the sacred that allowed for negotiating favors without intermediaries. The rules of this relationship sprung from efficacy more than doctrine and were the seeds of a tendency to freely interpret religious rites that would become more prominent centuries later.
- C18.P46 As a variety of studies have shown, images—of the Virgin of Guadalupe and of various other cults of the Virgin Mary, saints, Christ, and other expressions—have been at the center of religious life from the Conquest to the present day. Their presence and vitality are linked to the fiesta and the para-ecclesiastic agents discussed earlier.
- C18.P47 These images may have multiple implications and respond to specific needs. In the case of popular cults, Giménez explains that, in the village of Chalma, “the patron saint always constitutes the basis of social organization and symbolic consensus, and is a considered not only the local protector and advocate, but, above all the point of convergence of all social relations, the vital principle of the community and the key element in its identity” (Giménez, 2013, p. 174). In that village, the effigy combines dual cultural traditions: “both the protective god of the pre-Hispanic *calpulli* and the patron saint of a contemporary peasant village” (Giménez, 2013, p. 175).
- C18.P48 In cities, such images have other functions. In the case of Mexico City’s Colonia Ajusco, mentioned earlier, sixty different altars are distributed within the neighborhood’s two square kilometers. These are small, one-meter-tall constructions with roofs, glass showcases, and padlocked doors; they hold an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, or, more recently, perhaps some other Virgin or a saint. Alongside the image, the faithful tend to place multiple objects, from candles to glasses of water, medals, or photographs. The altars originate from the initiatives of local residents, which may be religious in nature (e.g., to recognize that some miracle has taken place on that spot) or practical (putting up an image to prevent the dumping of garbage). Management and care of the

altars falls to nearby families who inherit them or delegate the responsibility. On December 12—the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe—some but not all of the niches become sites for praying the rosary; chairs are set up around them and food and drink are provided. Around others, large neighborhood fiestas take place, which might include rodeos (with bulls brought in from the countryside), fireworks, mariachis, and the Eucharist ceremony. The organization of such activities is a year-round process on which large sums of money are spent (Suárez, 2015, 2017).

C18.P49 In such urban-popular spheres, the effigies may follow three models:

C18.P50 1. *The ecclesiastic model.* The images belong to the parish and are kept and cared for by the local church, resulting in less lay autonomy. The saints' day festivity is convened by the authorities, but the festival committee and/or its *mayordomo* are responsible for the actual organization of the event in all its phases.

C18.P51 2. *The intermediate model.* These are festivities with images that may be housed in the church, but the group responsible for their organization and promotion is not related to the official structure and thus maintains a semi-autonomous instrumental relationship.

C18.P52 3. *The autonomous model.* This involves images that belong to laypersons and, therefore, are managed by those individuals with complete freedom. Although there is usually some kind of connection to the church structure, the owner determines times, forms, and content with complete independence. (Suárez, 2016, 2015, pp. 124–227).

C18.P53 There are, however other possibilities for images outside these models. Odgers has examined the role of patron saints as spatial ties in the context of international religious mobility (Odgers, 2008); Gómez-Barris and Irazábal have studied the role of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the construction of space in Plaza México, California (Gómez-Barris & Irazábal, 2009); Arias examines processional images in the United States (Arias, 2017); research by Arias and Durand (2002, 2014) and Zires (2014) has shown the vitality of votive offerings and the new dynamics they create.

C18.P54 In addition, attention must be paid to the life of religious images in a world marked by new technological possibilities that give believers opportunities for freer and more autonomous manipulation. As noted earlier, a colonial concern was always that the Church control the image, its interpretation, and the visual order. In the current climate of religious transformation, and of increasing individuality and popular access to technology, images have exploded into a panoply of meanings which no institution is in any position to contain. We can look to the evolving image of the Virgin of Guadalupe for an example. Departing from her original appearance beginning in the 1980s thanks to the efforts of Chicano artists—as demonstrated by Zires (1992, 1994, 2007)—today she may take on the appearance of a TV star or cartoon character, or of emerging cults like that of Santa Muerte, or of such commercial forms as the “Virgencita Plis.”

C18.P55 In sum, the life of religious images continues to be one of the fundamental dimensions of the religious experience in Latin America today, in large part because of its complex local particularities: how communities administer the image, construct identities and social-religious ties, and seize opportunities for autonomous invention and manipulation.

C18.S5 CONCLUSION

C18.P56 This chapter has sought to develop a deeper understanding of the four keys to religious experience on the continent. It has covered the institutionalization and reproduction of the sacred, the content of belief as a result of the interchange between distinct cultural matrices, the function of the fiesta as a space for innovation and reproduction of practices, and, finally, the image and the diverse elements surrounding it.

C18.P57 Each of these dimensions is linked to the others, and together they offer a picture of the basic elements of Latin American religiosity. They also open up new analytic pathways in which new findings from different locations will be confronted and debated. The intention of this chapter is to sharpen the conceptual framework so as to understand the specificities of religious experience on the continent.

C18.P58 It is clear that the paths of faith are diverse, dynamic, and mutating and that increasingly refined theoretical tools are needed to account for them. This is the challenge in constructing a sociology of Latin American religions, which this chapter attempts to encourage.

C18.S7 NOTES

- C18.P59
1. Here I am returning to ideas and excerpts from three previous papers (Suárez, 2008, 2015, 2018).
 2. This case is explained at greater length in Suárez (2008); I am employing some excerpts from that narrative.
 3. The “Mayordomos” are in charge of the attention and care of the religious image and are also those in charge of the organization and management of the party. It is a rotating position that implies responsibility and prestige within the community.
 4. For further discussion, see the more in-depth treatment in Suárez (2015, 2016).

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