

# Mexican American Religions

*spirituality, activism, and culture*



GASTÓN ESPINOSA *and* MARIO T. GARCÍA, *editors*

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Spirituality, Activism, and Culture

*edited by* GASTÓN ESPINOSA *and* MARIO T. GARCÍA

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This book is dedicated to  
our hardworking Mexican American fathers—  
RAFAEL JIMÉNEZ ESPINOSA (1931–78) AND  
AMADO GARCÍA RODARTE (1909–86)





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## Preface

This book examines the important role that religion plays in the Mexican American/Chicano community in the United States. Although there is a growing literature on Black, Native American, and Euro-American religions, few books on Mexican American religions have been published from a pluralistic and nonsectarian perspective. This is remarkable given the fact that the vast majority of U.S. Latinos self-identify with some kind of religion, multiple religions, or a general belief in a transcendent power. Furthermore, many people outside of the Mexican American community are surprised to hear that Mexican American activists, authors, and artists such as César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Luis Valdez, Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and many other prominent figures have been deeply influenced by their religious backgrounds or beliefs. This book will not only analyze these figures, but also important symbols, traditions, and icons, including Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Los Pastores Shepherds' play, utopian communities, Pentecostal and *curandera* healers, and pop culture music icons such as Selena.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to examine the role of religion in the Mexican American/Chicano experience in the United States. Despite the fact that the vast majority of U.S. Latinos claim to be religious or spiritual, little has been written on Mexican American/Chicano religions from a multidisciplinary perspective.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars writing on religion have tended to focus on the larger U.S. Latino population, on theology, or on a specific denomination or tradition. However, the Mexican American community's rich history, large numbers, and variety of religious experiences warrant specific attention. Mexican Americans trace their roots back 400 years to the founding of New Mexico in 1598, and make up almost two-thirds of all U.S. Latinos.

There are external and internal reasons why no systematic attempt has been made to create and define the field of Mexican American religions in the United States. First, prior to the Chicano cultural renaissance of the 1960s, there were relatively few Mexican Americans with PHDs in the United States and in a position to conduct such scholarship. When theses, dissertations, and books did touch on Mexican American religions, they almost always did so in a field outside of religious studies, such as history, sociology, and anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Second, prior to the 1990s, few academic institutions and tenure-review committees considered Mexican American religions a serious and credible intellectual topic of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Third, most scholars assumed that the study of Mexican American religions was essentially the study of Catholic theology and the institutional church, two subjects that were politically incorrect to study and perceived as largely unimportant at secular research universities. This attitude is still prevalent.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, the field of religious studies was largely in its infancy and did not really begin to take shape until after the *School District of Abington v. Schempp* (1963) Supreme Court decision

made explicit the constitutional right to teach religion in public colleges and universities.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the external factors that retarded the growth and study of Mexican American religions, there were also internal factors. First, many Mexican Americans internalized the negative attitude toward their history, culture, and religious traditions and were thus anxious to avoid studying religion lest they be stereotyped as religious or nonacademic. This prompted many potential scholars of Mexican American religions to shift their focus to other more “respectable” and “legitimate” fields of inquiry—such as history, sociology, political science, education, anthropology, and literature. Still others made the religious component of their work subsidiary to another acceptable field of inquiry. Second, during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, a number of Mexican American intellectuals embraced or dabbled with Marxist, Socialist, or leftist social theories, many of which were critical of religion and suggested that it functioned as an agent of oppression, assimilation, or disempowerment. This prompted many scholars during the 1960s and 1970s to either avoid the topic altogether or use it only instrumentally in order to make a larger point.

Third, many Chicano intellectuals had negative experiences in the institutional church or practiced non-Catholic or non-Christian religious traditions. This has fueled a kind of *de facto* and *de jure* anti-institutional (though not antiritual) Catholic and Christian sentiment in some Chicano, Latino, and Latin American studies programs that exists largely to this day. Still others treat the study of religion as largely irrelevant. Although for some this bias is driven by a kind of disciplinary and methodological imperialism, for others it is based on negative personal experiences with the institutional church. In fact, the authors cannot think of a single major Chicano, Latino, or Latin American studies program at a major secular university that has to date made a conscientious decision to hire someone in Mexican American or Latino “religions” because of the important role that religion (both popular *and* institutional) itself plays in the community. In most cases, Latino hires that deal with religion do so under the disciplinary rubric of Chicano/Latino “culture,” “society,” or “history,” and often have a joint appointment in a department *other* than religious studies.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these historical obstacles today, the study of Mexican American religions is attracting increasing attention. There are a number of reasons for this development. First, a new generation of post–Cold War

and post-Chicano Movement scholars found Mexican American religions understudied. Given the practical need for MA and PhD students to find original subjects of inquiry, religious topics are plum for the picking.

Second, the rise of the academic study of religion within the social sciences created alternative ways of thinking about, talking about, and interpreting religion, ways that were generally nontheological, nonsectarian, nonnormative, and non-value-laden. This has helped to legitimize the study of Mexican American religions in the academy. The field of religious studies and study of Mexican American and Latino religions received a boost in the academy after the *Schempp* decision opened the door to the academic study of religion in American public higher education. It had a threefold effect on the study of religious studies in general and Mexican American and Latino religions in particular. First, it encouraged the academic study of religion in public and private schools, colleges, and universities across the United States. Second, it encouraged a nonsectarian, pluralist, and comparative approach to the study of religion. And third, by encouraging the academic, nonsectarian study of religion, it stimulated the study, growth, and patronage of religious studies in colleges and universities—including those that served the growing Mexican American and Latino population, such as the California State University, University of California, and University of Texas systems. Given the fact that most Mexican Americans and Latinos attend state rather than private universities, this in turn afforded greater opportunities for Latinos to study religion at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

However, a large number of Mexican American and Latino scholars of religion have historically received their methodological training and PhDs at religiously affiliated universities, largely Catholic (e.g., University Notre Dame, Boston College) and/or Mainline Protestant affiliation (Union Seminary, New York, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Boston University, Graduate Theological Union, Drew University). To this day, many of them take a decidedly theological approach (normally influenced by liberation theology) to the study of religion, while those scholars trained at secular private or state universities tend to take a nontheological, humanities or social-science approach to the study of religion, although still often influenced by liberation theology. There are clearly exceptions to this pattern, but it remains largely true to this day. This has led to minor disagreements over whether or not scholars should take a secular approach to the study of Latino religions and whether or not they should use only secular social and humanistic theories to frame their scholarship.

This conflict is largely generational and can in part be explained by the fact that many Latino scholars of religion were trained in PhD programs that did not expose them to the history and theories of secular religious studies in graduate school.<sup>7</sup>

The chapters in this book are the fruit of an intellectual dialogue on Chicano religions that has been going on with the Chicano/Latino intellectual community for many years. Although talk about Mexican American religions can be traced back to the conquest of the American Southwest during the war between the United States and Mexico (1846–48), a concerted effort was not made to begin delineating Mexican American religions until the 1970s and 1980s, with the work of theologians and writers including Virgilio Elizondo, Moises Sandoval, Andrés Guerrero, Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, Yolanda Tarango, and many others.<sup>8</sup> Their work was marked by a generally theological, liberationist, and Christian (almost exclusively Roman Catholic) orientation, which invariably led them to frame their work from a Christian theological perspective that sought to challenge and change the institutional Catholic Church and field of religious studies and carve out an academic niche. Although this book is indebted to their work, it also builds upon and expands their scholarship by taking a decidedly nonsectarian, noninstitutional, and nonnormative approach to the study of religion by exploring religious sentiments in literature, art, politics, and pop culture.

Taken as a whole, these chapters suggest that contrary to stereotypes, Chicano religions have played and continue to play critical, defining roles in the Mexican American community. Furthermore, the chapters also suggest unique religious expressions that have been shaped by the Mexican American experience. It is precisely the Mexican American blending, reexamination, and rearticulation of Mexican and American traditions, customs, practices, symbols, and beliefs that we call Chicano/a religious expressions or Chicano/a religions.

This blending becomes clearly evident in the interdisciplinary scholarship in this volume. In particular, the chapters on religion and literature and pop culture problematize any kind of essentialist methodological interpretations of Mexican American religions as being limited to institutional and/or organized religion. As the authors show, some of the most important insights into Mexican American religions are found in unexpected places: novels, political protests, art, poetry, pop music icons, and the like. Despite this fact, we believe that a historical framework is critical in helping delineate the trajectory of Mexican American religions in the United States. To this end, this book is broken down into six sections:

(1) History and Interpretations of Mexican American Religions, (2) Mexican American Mystics and Prophets, (3) Mexican American Popular Catholicism, (4) Mexican American Religions and Literature, (5) Mexican American Religions and Healing, and (6) Mexican American Religions and Pop Culture. Espinosa, in addition to his original chapter on Selena (chapter 15), contributed chapters on Pentecostal healing (chapter 11) and the history and theory in the study of Mexican American religions (chapter 1) at the request of the external reviewers. They had indicated that the volume needed at least one chapter on Pentecostal Protestantism, given its seismic growth in the community, and one chapter on the historical development of the field of Mexican American religious studies. The editors also added chapters by Luis D. León on *curanderismo* (chapter 12), Kay Turner on home altars (chapter 7), and María Herrera-Sobek and Laura E. Pérez on Mexican American religions, art, and popular culture (chapters 13 and 14, respectively)—all at the recommendation of the reviewers.

In part I, “History and Interpretations of Mexican American Religions,” Gastón Espinosa (chapter 1) examines the historical development of Mexican American religions over the past 100 years, with particular focus on the field since 1960. He argues that the modern academic study of Mexican American religions was birthed in 1968, although writing on the subject from various disciplines stretches back more than a century. The writings by César Chávez, Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Enrique Dussel, and others served as major catalysts in the future methodological and theoretical development of the field. Espinosa proposes an ethnophenomenological method as one of the many alternatives to interpreting Mexican American religions at secular colleges and universities, which are required by law not to teach or promote a theological worldview. This nonsectarian methodology combines race, class, gender, and phenomenological analyses and grounds them in their historical, social, theological, and political contexts.

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, in chapter 2, draws on the Chicano theorist Mario Barrera’s internal colonialism theory to explore the various ways Mexican Americans have used their faith traditions to resist a kind of religious internal colonialism imposed upon them by Anglo-American secular society and the institutional church. In fact, Stevens-Arroyo argues that one of the reasons why alternative Latino religious traditions have been overlooked is that the institutional Catholic and Protestant churches engaged in a kind of pious colonialism in their treatment of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Drawing on Barrera, he argues that in contrast to Spanish colonialism, which led to acculturation and cultural mixing



or *mestizaje* through intermarriage, Anglo-American colonialism did not lead to transculturation, because it sought to suppress and “despoil” Latino identity. Mexican Americans in the Southwest after the U.S.-Mexico war ended in 1848 were “subjugated” and treated as a conquered people. This subjugation took place simultaneously in Anglo-American secular society and the institutional church. Together Anglo-American society and churches attempted to impose the English language, repress many native popular religious traditions and practices, inferiorize Latino clergy, and stigmatize Latino culture. In reaction to this pious colonialism, Mexican Americans drew upon their popular religious traditions, which served as collective sites and symbols of resistance. However, they were not able to overcome the subjugation and marginalization until the Latino religious resurgence between 1967 and 1983. The emergence of a growing number of Latino/a priests, nuns, clergy, and lay leaders challenged and put an end to most of the pious paternalism in the churches, although vestiges continue in certain corners of the church even to this day.

The political struggle of Mexican Americans to define their own lives and future is evident in part II, “Mexican American Mystics and Prophets.” Rudy V. Busto, Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, and Mario T. García explore how religious ideology, symbols, values, moral teaching, and rhetoric empowered grassroots leaders and organizations. They analyze how Reies López Tijerina, César Chávez, and Ricardo Cruz and Católicos Por La Raza carved out a space of dignity and human rights for Mexican Americans living in the shadows of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Tijerina and Chávez drew upon their mystical experiences to justify their political, social, and religious activities. Rudy Busto, in chapter 3, explores the link between religion and utopian communities in his analysis of Reies López Tijerina, one of the principle leaders in the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. Busto analyzes Tijerina’s decision to create the Valle de Paz utopian underground community in the Arizona desert and subsequent political activism. This is one of the first religious Mexican American utopian community in the United States. He points out how intrinsic Tijerina’s religion was to his vision of society and that his visions, dreams, and altered states of consciousness shaped his subsequent activism.

In like manner, Stephen Lloyd-Moffett argues in chapter 4 that César Chávez fused his mystical religious experiences with his United Farm Workers political and social activism to rally the masses to his cause, or *la causa*. Like Father Antonio José Martínez in nineteenth-century New Mexico, Chávez drew inner strength and resolve from his Catholic faith and popular traditions, symbols, and rhetoric. Lloyd-Moffett argues that

his fasts, pilgrimages, and activism were inspired by Jesus, Saint Francis of Assisi, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and the African American Civil Rights Movement. He suggests that we do not hear more about the spiritual dimension of Chávez's activism because the liberal intelligentsia and militant Chicano activists have deliberately secularized his image to suit their own political and ideological goals.

Chávez not only influenced the outcome of the UFW, but also of student political and social activism. Mario T. García argues that Chávez inspired a new generation of Mexican American college students to engage in faith-based political activism through Catholic student organizations such as Católicos Por La Raza. He challenges the notion that the Chicano Movement was a largely secular affair, arguing that Católicos illustrates the critical role religion played in student activism and that students targeted religion in their focus on social justice and community organizing. The founder of the movement, Ricardo Cruz, who had protested with Chávez on the picket line, took the struggle for Chicano civil rights into the Roman Catholic Church. García explores the movement's attempted takeover of Cardinal Frances McIntyre's St. Basil's Church on Christmas Eve, 1969, and the conflict that erupted as a result. He also analyzes the list of student demands, and the subsequent impact their protest made on the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Part III, "Mexican American Popular Catholicism," explores how popular religious symbols, traditions, and practices can function as vehicles for personal, social, and political empowerment and resistance. This is evident in the work of Socorro Castañeda-Liles, Kay Turner, and Richard R. Flores. Castañeda-Liles, in chapter 6, argues that the symbolic significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe is hotly debated. Interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Mexican American community can be classified into at least four approaches. The first is theological and is exemplified in the work of Virgilio Elizondo and Jeanette Rodríguez. They affirm the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which according to Catholic tradition, appeared on 9 December 1531 to Juan Diego on Tepeyac Hill outside present-day Mexico City. They argue that the story and subsequent veneration are an authentic and collective expression of faith rooted in the needs of the people. In contrast, Louise Burkhart and Stafford Poole offer decidedly historical analyses of Our Lady of Guadalupe. They argue that the tradition has no basis in fact or history. Rather, the image was probably a pious invention by the criollo elite in the 1650s out of jealousy and disgruntlement at their treatment by the Spanish *peninsulares*, who thought they were better than the criollos because they were born in

Spain rather than the New World. Despite these authors' factual reading of the Guadalupe "legend," they recognize that for the pious believer, her historicity is largely irrelevant because she has become a symbol of Mexican identity, pride, and nationality. The Chicana feminist writers, such as Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, in turn, interpret her as a symbol, which can be manipulated by men to oppress women or by women to liberate themselves. More often than not, however, Guadalupe functions as a symbol of sexual empowerment for Mexican American women. This is especially true in the work of Chicana artists, Esther Hernández and Yolanda López for instance, who almost always reinterpret Guadalupe in the guise of the modern Chicana. Drawing on feminist notions of empowerment, Hernández, López, and others see Guadalupe as a source of social, cultural, and political empowerment and an agent of resistance to machismo and patriarchy.

Kay Turner, in chapter 7, further analyzes the symbolic significance of gender in the Mexican American community by exploring the ancient home altar tradition. She argues that the home altar practice is a women's tradition passed on from one generation to the next and that these altar practices build maternal and relational values. She interprets the home altar as an instrument of empowerment. At the most fundamental level, Turner argues that the creation and manipulation of this symbolic system validates the sacred tradition of mothering.

While Kay Turner analyzes the role of popular religiosity in the private sphere of the home, Richard Flores analyzes it in the public sphere. In chapter 8, he argues that scholars tend to interpret popular religion as either the result of "increased secularization" or as a reaction to "dislocation associated with modernity." He challenges this interpretation along with Marxist and feminist analyses, which claim that popular religious practices are associated with prescientific practices and patriarchal ideologies. Rather, gender roles in Mexican American plays such as *Los Pastores* need to be reread as sites of liberation and empowerment of the "gathered collective." Thus ritual practices such as *Los Pastores* serve as collective enterprises that can both oppress and liberate Mexican Americans living in contemporary society.

The role that women, gender, and sexuality play in Mexican American religion and culture is further analyzed in part IV, "Mexican American Religions and Literature." David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena, and Ellen McCracken explore the religious impulse in Chicana/o literature. Carrasco and Sagarena, in chapter 9, argue that Gloria Anzaldúa's *borderlands* is a religious vision and vibrant mythic consciousness and

shamanic space where empowerment is achieved through ecstatic trances that enable her to cast a vision of a new mestiza reality. They argue that personal suffering, conflict, ecstatic experiences, reported visitations by the spirit world, journeys to the underworld, and moments of illumination and healing fuel this shamanic space. Anzaldúa engages in “*loca*-centered” thought, which enables her to reveal the oppression, evil, and madness of the dominant, racist cultural narratives that have oppressed Chicanos/as. They contend that *loca*-centered thought highlights the important contributions of the contentious and melodious narratives and ignored histories and peoples of the borderlands. For this reason, one can interpret Anzaldúa as using ecstatic experiences and language to “challenge authority—white, brown, male—even her own as a writer.”

Similarly, Ellen McCracken argues that Chicana writers such as Mary Helen Ponce, Denise Chávez, and Sandra Cisneros use religious symbols, rhetoric, and values to reverse the melting-pot paradigm of integration and to resignify the Mexican American community. In so doing, they create a new moral vision and a new ethic that part company with institutional orthodoxy and instead spotlight the themes of social justice, immigrant concerns, feminists, the landless, and other marginalized groups. Although sometimes these authors juxtapose popular religious practices against official practices, in most cases popular religious practices are used to reread official doctrines and rites. Rather than simply reject official Anglo-American institutional Catholicism, McCracken argues, Chicana writers engage in a rearticulation of Catholic beliefs, rituals, and behaviors. In one sense, they employ forbidden practices, speeches, and visions as a way to reclaim religion in their fight for social justice.

The critical role that religion plays in Mexican American culture is not only evident in literature, but also in part V, “Mexican American Religions and Healing.” Gastón Espinosa, in chapter II, argues that healing is not only a widespread theme in Latino popular Catholicism but also in Latino Protestant Pentecostalism. His chapter points out that the Protestant Pentecostal movement has a healing tradition over 100 years old. Despite this fact, we know surprisingly little about it. The key to Pentecostal growth has been its practice of blending healing and evangelism. Healing-evangelists such as Francisco Olazábal conducted large-scale healing campaigns in barrios and *colonias* throughout the 1920s and 1930s in East Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, Houston, Chicago, Spanish Harlem, and Nogales, Arizona. He preached to over 250,000 people throughout his ministry in the United States, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. After participants were converted, he used them to help form new

congregations, which institutionalized and carried on the practice of mixing healing and evangelism. This religious practice might have been kept localized and marginalized had it not been for his emphasis on planting indigenous Latino churches in every location where he conducted large-scale evangelistic services. Contrary to the claim of some sociologists of religion, Mexican American Pentecostals such as Francisco Olazábal created large independent, indigenous, and autonomous Protestant churches as early as the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

One of the reasons healing has been such an important factor in Catholic conversion to Pentecostalism is because of the long-standing practice of popular Catholic healing in the Mexican and Mexican American community. Luis León, in chapter 12, analyzes the central role of healing in the Mexican American Catholic community in Los Angeles. He argues that the healing tradition known as *curanderismo* illuminates the various ways Chicanos and Mexicans seek to heal themselves and their loved ones and to negotiate suffering and injustice. He argues that it provides a way to “overcome the limitations of the material world” and to heal the injuries inflicted upon them in a capitalist society. His ethnographic study examines one contemporary site of *curanderismo* in East Los Angeles—the Sagrado Corazón botánica and proposes directions for further investigation. It is based on over a dozen interviews with women and men who came to the *botánica* seeking divine healing.

The pervasive role of religion is not only evident in the above leaders and traditions, but also in Mexican American pop culture. In part VI, “Mexican American Religions and Pop Culture,” María Herrera-Sobek, Laura Pérez, and Gastón Espinosa explore the fusion of religion and culture in their work on Chicano theater, art, and pop music icons. Focusing on the fusion of religion, political protest, and satire in Mexican American theater during and after the Chicano Movement, Herrera-Sobek, in chapter 13, examines the history of the *pastorela* and the critical role that religious symbols, metaphors, and art have played in Chicano theater, particularly Luis Valdez’s *La Pastorela*: “*The Shepherds’ Play*.” She argues that Luis Valdez used his play to engage in a savvy and shrewd form of political and social protest. His strategic use of theater and comedy made his Chicano militancy appear less threatening and subversive than it really was. He used four major strategies to subvert the traditional *pastorela* structure in order to promote an ideology that was congruent with Chicano politics and social justice: (1) portraying farmworkers as protagonists, (2) using Chicano jargon and linguistic code-switching, (3) drawing upon musical genres to drive home his points, and (4) representing the devil as wealthy

white California growers, Anglo-American Hell's Angels motorcycle bikers, and Middle Eastern Sultans. Thus far from serving as mindless entertainment, Valdez's *La Pastorela* was both transgressive and subversive because it empowered the poor and oppressed through an artistic production. Despite this fact, Valdez's play does affirm many traditional beliefs and values, such as love for one's family, respect for parents, and belief in the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church.

In contrast to Valdez, Laura Pérez, in chapter 14, argues that Chicana artists created a political spirituality after the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s that challenged the oppressive Western Christian patriarchal and traditional modes of religious expression. Chicana artists have attempted to decolonize the West through their political art by trying to re-create an egalitarian world that fights for justice against race, class, gender, sexuality, and environmental exploitation. In contrast to Western elite culture, which tends to trivialize spirituality, Chicanas engage in a kind of "cultural *susto*," which attempts to displace the spirit of Euro-American colonialism that has oppressed Mexican Americans. Chicana artists such as Amalia Mesa-Bains often structure their work like the painter-scribes of Mesoamerica. They create oppositional views of art and spirituality that are cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and beyond sexist and heterosexist myopias. They create alternative paths to wholeness, community, purpose, and meaningfulness. This art often leads to the creation of hybrid spiritualities and decolonizing cultural appropriations that can empower Mexican Americans. Postsixties Chicana feminist artists use spiritual beliefs and practices to fight for social and political effects that matter. Pérez argues that their "hybrid spirituality" is a "politicizing spirituality."

Like Herrera-Sobek and Pérez, Gastón Espinosa (in chapter 15) explores the symbolic connection between religion and pop music stardom. He discusses the reaction of the masses to Selena Quintañilla Pérez's death in 1995, and argues that Selena has become more popular in death than in life largely because of the timing of her death; her reconstruction by the Mexican American/Chicano intelligentsia, media, and youth culture; and because she functions as a collective and a symbolic counternarrative and as an agent of cultural redemption and resistance for some working-class Mexican American youth. She provides cultural redemption in the areas of race, gender, class, transnational cultural hybridity, and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Selena's reconstruction and pop culture beatification reveal the important function of religion in Mexican American and Latino pop culture. It also reveals, Espinosa notes, "the Mexican American

penchant for transforming its seemingly secular cultural heroes into pop culture saints” and its grounded aesthetic practices of materializing the sacred and sacralizing the profane in everyday life.<sup>10</sup>

Taken as a whole, these chapters represent the first attempt to explore Mexican American religions from a multidisciplinary perspective. The authors generally take a nonsectarian, nonnormative, nontheological, and social-science or humanistic perspective, although theological perspectives and frameworks are also included. Many break new ground because they are among the first essays to explore the critical intersection between Mexican American religions and literature, art, politics, and pop culture. It is hoped that this book will spur on a new generation of scholars to explore the dynamic relationship between religion and Mexican American culture and society in the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. The Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL) National Survey ( $n = 2,060$ ) found that fewer than one-half of 1 percent (.37 percent) of all U.S. Latinos self-reported being atheist or agnostic. Ninety-three percent self-identified with an existing Christian denomination or tradition, as Born-Again Christian, or as both. Fewer than 1 percent self-reported affiliation with a world religion (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.) and slightly fewer than 6 percent reported having no particular religious preference. Some reports on Latino religious affiliation differ because they count those who state they have “no religious preference” as having “no religion.” However, this is problematic, for example, because the majority of those in this category also self-identified with a Christian tradition or as a Born-Again Christian on other questions later in the HCAPL survey. For this reason, it is more likely that respondents in this category have no single religious preference (rather than no religion) or have multiple religious preferences. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life: Summary of Findings* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame, 2003), 14. Gastón Espinosa, “Methodological Reflections on Latino Social Science Research,” in *Rethinking Latino Religions and Identity*, ed. Miguel de la Torre and Gastón Espinosa (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 13–45.

2. This is evident in even a cursory review of masters and doctoral dissertations that touch on Mexican American religions between the 1960s and 1980s.

3. We know of at least three recent instances in which a Latino/a scholar of religion was denied tenure because he or she wrote a book on Latino religious topics that were not deemed “mainstream” by their departments. We are intentionally withholding the names of the people denied tenure to protect them from recrimination.



4. This sentiment was evident when the lead author of this book asked a U.S. history and women's studies professor why the colonial American history course he was a teacher-assistant for had no assigned readings on Latino history. She dismissively said it was "simply the study of Spanish missions" and was "largely unimportant given their time constraints."

5. For a history of the discipline of religious studies, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1994); Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). The most insightful book in delineating the difference between a theological and a religious studies approach to the study of religion is Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

6. The stories and anecdotes in this chapter are based on the personal observations of the authors and their conversations with Mexican American and Latino scholars. Names have been withheld to protect their anonymity.

7. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*; Capps, *Religious Studies*; Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*. The comments and observations in this chapter are based on personal observations and conversations with Mexican American and Latino scholars and graduate students. The names of the persons have been withheld to protect their anonymity.

8. One of the first academically trained Mexican American historians to discuss Mexican American Catholicism was Carlos Castañeda, who wrote a monumental multivolume history of the Mexican American Catholic Church in Texas in the 1930s. That same decade, the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio published a monograph on Mexican immigration to the United States and a book of documents, both of which include attention to religion. Moises Sandoval edited the first comprehensive history (largely liberationist in approach) of U.S. Latino Christianity in the United States in 1983, entitled *Fronteras: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA since 1513* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1983), and a shorter version of the book, *On the Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991). Since then, Jay P. Dolan edited a three-volume series on Hispanic Catholicism in the United States in the 1990s: Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, eds., *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S.: Issues and Concerns* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900–1965* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Jay P. Dolan and Jaime R. Vidal, eds., *Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics in the U.S., 1900–1965* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). All of these volumes focus exclusively on Hispanic Christianity in the United States. The vast majority of the attention is focused on Catholicism, with just a chapter or in most cases a few paragraphs to Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Christianity. No attention is given to Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-Day Adventists, metaphysical and occult traditions, Native American traditions, or world religions.



9. When comparing Latinos to African Americans, they write in 1993, “There is no tradition of a separatist or autonomous Hispanic church” in the United States. Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman, *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993), 138.

10. For a discussion of material Christianity, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995). Also see David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).



# I

History and  
Interpretations of  
Mexican American Religions





## I

# History and Theory in the Study of Mexican American Religions

The contemporary academic study of Mexican American religions traces its origins to 1968, although important historical, sociological, and anthropological writing on the topic stretches back throughout the twentieth century. That year the writings and intellectual foment stimulated by César Chávez, Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Enrique Dussel, and others served as major catalysts in the future methodological and theoretical development of the field.<sup>1</sup> Between 1970 and 1975, some of the first major academic books, articles, and centers were written, created, and organized by scholars such as Elizondo, Dussel, Moises Sandoval, Juan Romero, Juan Hurtado, Patrick McNamara, Joan Moore, and others.<sup>2</sup> The Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC), which was cofounded and directed by Elizondo in San Antonio, Texas, in 1972, played a decisive role by publishing many of the first academically oriented biographies, histories, and studies in the emerging field. The field of Mexican American religions received a boost in 1987–88 with the publication of the work of feminist-informed Chicana/o literature and theologies by Gloria Anzaldúa, Andrés Guerrero, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango.<sup>3</sup> The next major turning points came in 1994–96, when Jay P. Dolan and the University of Notre Dame Press published the three-volume series on Latino Catholicism (1994), Anthony Stevens-Arroyo and the Program for the Analysis of Religion Among Latinos (PARAL) published the four-volume series on U.S. Latino religions (1994–95). In 1997, Rudy V. Busto and Daniel Ramirez organized a conference at Stanford on U.S. Latino evangelism, and in 1996 Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García attempted to help define the field at their “New Directions in Chicano Religions”

conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara (1996).<sup>4</sup> This book is part of the fruit of that conference.

Over the past thirty-five years, scholars have often taken one of five approaches to the study of Mexican American religions: (1) traditional church history (e.g., Brackenridge and García-Treto, Dolan, and Hinojosa), (2) interdisciplinary liberation theology church history (e.g., Sandoval, Romero), (3) interdisciplinary popular theology and religion (e.g., Elizondo, Guerrero, Rodríguez, Tarango), (4) anthropology, psychology, and sociology (e.g., Madsen, Kiev, McNamara, Moore), and (5) interdisciplinary phenomenological religious studies (e.g., Carrasco, León, Espinosa).<sup>5</sup> Still other scholars have blended approaches or taken a Chicano studies/ethnic studies approach (e.g., Busto, Aquino).<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have drawn on Chicano literature and poetry (Carlos Castañeda, Luis Valdez, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles, Rudolfo Anaya, and Gloria Anzaldúa), the writings of Reies López Tijerina, the Chicano Student Movement, Chicana feminism, Black studies, secular religious studies, and the emerging scholarship on postcolonialism, transnational studies, critical theory, ethnic studies, and race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

After sketching the historical development of the field of Mexican American religions, I will propose that a *nepantla*-informed, ethno-phenomenological method is one of many possible alternatives for studying and interpreting Mexican American religions at secular colleges and universities, which are required by the state or college mission statement not to promote or endorse a normative theological worldview.<sup>8</sup> This approach blends race, class, gender, and phenomenological analyses grounded in their historical, social, theological, and political contexts. It identifies, recognizes, and interrogates religious leaders and structures, traditions, movements, and experiences on their own plane of reference. Such an approach is taken in order to understand how such leaders and structures provide hope and meaning to practitioners and contribute to their larger culture. It also seeks to bridge the growing chasm that separates secular religious studies from theology as described in Donald Wiebe’s book *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (1999). It does so by listening to, dialoging with, and drawing upon the important insights from theology and the above-noted influences. While Mexican American and U.S. Latino religions are organically connected, due to time, space, and regional limitations I will focus on the historical development of Mexican American religions in the Southwest. The best place to review the literature on Mexican American religious historiography are the bibliographies and essays edited or written by

Anthony M. Stevens Arroyo and Segundo Pantoja, Paul Barton and David Maldonado, Justo L. González, and Daisy Machado.<sup>9</sup> Although beyond the scope of this study, there are also a number of overviews on U.S. Latino theology and history by Alex Saragoza, María Pilar Aquino, Lara Medina, Eduardo Fernández, Orlando Espín, Miguel de la Torre and Edwin Aponte, and Miguel H. Díaz.<sup>10</sup>

### Why Mexican American Religious Studies?

Despite the growing scholarship on Mexican American religions, no one has attempted to systematically map out its historical development over the last 100 years. This is largely because it has been subsumed under the rubric of U.S. Latino religions. However, there are a number of reasons why it should itself be an academic field of intellectual inquiry. People of Mexican ancestry have lived in the Southwest for over 400 years—since 1598. Their history in the American Southwest predates that of the Pilgrims and Puritans at Jamestown in 1607 and Plymouth Rock in 1620. People of Spanish and Mexican ancestry have a number of rich and unique religious traditions (e.g., New Mexican popular Catholicism, the *santero* tradition, the Chimayó Pilgrimage site, Día de los Muertos), saints and spiritual healers (e.g., Our Lady of Guadalupe, El Niño Fidencio, María Teresa Urrea, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Juan Soldado, Francisco Olazábal), brotherhoods and social-spiritual movements (e.g., the Penitente Brotherhood, the Cursillo, PADRES, Las Hermanas, La Raza Churchmen), political leaders (e.g., Padre Antonio José Martínez, César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Dolores Huerta), and religious leaders (e.g., Junipero Serra, Eusebio Kino, Francisco Olazábal, Archbishop Patricio Flores), all of which have influenced U.S. Latino and American religious history.<sup>11</sup> People of Mexican ancestry have shaped the history, architecture, politics, culture, and cuisine of the Southwest for over 400 years.

The 2006 U.S. Census Bureau noted that people of Mexican ancestry made up 64 percent (28 million) of the nation's 44.3 million Latinos. They are now more numerous than all Asian Americans (14.9 million), Jewish Americans (6 million), and Native Americans (4.5 million) combined, all of which have their own discrete intellectual fields of study. They are also the fastest growing Latino subgroup in the United States and account for 52 percent (8.2 million) of all Latin American immigrants to the United States (16 million).

The Mexican American community is also becoming more religiously diverse. The Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL) National

Survey, which surveyed more than 2,060 Latinos across the country (1,103 of whom were of Mexican ancestry), found that 79 percent of all Latinos of Mexican ancestry were Roman Catholic and 21 percent were Protestant and other Christian. Of this population, 27 percent self-identified as Catholic Charismatic. When the figures are broken down by five religious family groupings, 79 percent of people of Mexican ancestry self-reported Roman Catholic affiliation, 7.2 percent Pentecostal, 6.9 percent Evangelical non-Pentecostal, 4 percent Mainline Protestant, and 3 percent Alternative Christian, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon, and other. All combined, 14 percent (almost 1 in 6) of all Mexican Americans self-identify as Pentecostal/Evangelical. Furthermore, over 30 percent of those who self-identified as Mainline Protestant also self-identified as a Born-Again Christian, thus indicating that the actual percentage of Mexican-ancestry Evangelical Protestants is larger than the figures above indicate. An analysis across all denominations and religious traditions shows that 35 percent of all people of Mexican ancestry self-reported being a Born-Again Christian, slightly less than the overall U.S. Latino population at 37 percent. This number is shaped by the influence of the trans-denominational Pentecostal/Charismatic movement as 36 percent of all those of Mexican ancestry also reported being both Born-Again Christian and Pentecostal/Charismatic/Spirit-Filled. Other spirit-led metaphysical religious traditions are also active. The HCAPL survey found that 18.3 percent of all people of Mexican ancestry said they "believe in the practice of" *espiritismo*, *curanderismo*, *brujería*, or all of the above. All of these figures point to a very vibrant and diverse religious community.<sup>12</sup>

### Genealogy of Mexican American Religious Studies

The exact origin of the academic study of Mexican American religions is difficult to determine. The most important systematic records of Mexican American religious experiences in the Southwest were written from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries by Catholic Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries, diocesan priests, lay leaders, and American and European clergy, missionaries, and traders such as Father Alonso de Benavides, Father Eusebio Kino, Father Junipero Serra, Richard Henry Dana, and others.<sup>13</sup> In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, we see the rise of slightly more formal institutional church histories, such as Jean-Baptiste Salpointe's *Soldiers of the Cross: Notes on the Ecclesiastical History of New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado* (1898) and Thomas Harwood's *History of Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1850*

to 1910, 2 vols. (1908, 1910). However, these were written almost exclusively by clergy about their own institutional churches and for a Christian audience.

In the wake of the first massive wave of Mexican immigration to the United States from 1880 to 1920, we begin to witness in the 1920s and 1930s a number of church-sponsored or affiliated Catholic and Protestant books, reports, and articles on Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The most important books include Jay S. Stowell's *A Study of Mexicans and Spanish Americans in the United States* (1920), Vernon M. McCombs's, *From Over the Border: A Study of the Mexican in the United States* (1925), Linna Bresette's, *Mexicans in the United States: A Report of a Brief Survey* (1929), Robert N. McLean's, *The Northern Mexican* (1930), Robert C. Jones's and Louis R. Wilson's, *The Mexican in Chicago* (1931), and Theodore Abel's, *Protestant Home Missions to Catholic Immigrants* (1933). Many other articles, reports, and books were also published.

In the early twentieth century we also note a growing number of university-affiliated humanistic and social-science theses, books, reports, articles, and studies on Mexican Americans that include attention to religion.<sup>14</sup> One of the first major social-science studies on Mexican American religions was the Methodist bishop G. Bromley Oxnam's article "The Mexican in Los Angeles from the Standpoint of Religious Forces of the City" (1921).<sup>15</sup> This research was more social-science oriented than the previous church-sponsored literature. It was soon augmented by a number articles, folklore and museum studies, and histories on religion and culture in New Mexico and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first set of significant humanistic interpretations of Mexican American religiosity were Manuel Gamio's classic anthropological studies *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (1930) and *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life-Story* (1931). Gamio, who was a highly respected anthropologist from Mexico, conducted his field research in the United States over a two-year period from 1926 to 1927. His books were among the first to examine the role that religious beliefs played in helping Mexican immigrants transition into American society. Unlike the approach of previous church-sponsored work, the methodological orientation of his work is almost entirely secular, humanistic, and anthropological. His work touches on anti-clericalism, church attendance, popular-Catholic practices, and why many Catholics were switching over to Protestantism. Perhaps more important for the future methodological development of Mexican American religions, his pluralistic and nonsectarian work notes the importance of Evangelical



Protestantism and other religious traditions such as Spiritualism, Spiritism, and brujería.<sup>17</sup>

Oxnam's and Gamio's work influenced Robert C. Jones' report on "The Religious Life of the Mexican in Chicago" (1929) and his subsequent book *The Mexican in Chicago* (1931).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, American Baptist Samuel M. Ortégón drew upon Oxnam's and Gamio's work for his MA thesis at USC entitled "Mexican Religious Population of Los Angeles" (1932).<sup>19</sup> Like Gamio and Jones, Ortégón's work was pluralistic in scope and included brief mention of Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, Spiritualists, Theosophists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Roman Catholics. His study was perhaps the first significant qualitative and quantitative ethnographic study of Mexican American religions in Los Angeles. Gamio's work was later picked up with vigor by Chicano Movement scholars hungry for Mexican authors and cultural interpreters.<sup>20</sup>

The flurry of scholarship on Mexican American religions in the late 1920s and early 1930s continued in a steady stream throughout the 1940s,<sup>21</sup> and especially the 1950s in the wake of the bracero guest-worker program agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments.<sup>22</sup> The two most notable book-length manuscripts were Samuel M. Ortégón's massive USC PhD dissertation, "Religious Thought and Practice among Mexican Baptists of the United States, 1900–1947" (1950), and Carlos Eduardo Castañeda's (1896–1958) seven-volume history, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519–1950* (completed in 1958).<sup>23</sup> Although both works were clearly rooted in their respective theological and ecclesiastical traditions, they mark a major leap forward in the academic study of Mexican American religions because they also included social-science interpretations and explanations that were not strictly shaped by a theological method. Perhaps more important, they represent two of the first major histories of Mexican American Protestantism and Catholicism written by, about, and for the Mexican American and Anglo-American communities. A number of scholars cited their work in the wake of the Chicano Movement.<sup>24</sup>

Ortégón and Castañeda were part of what Mario T. García has called the Mexican American GI Generation (1930s–50s), which sought to uncover and reclaim a Mexican American historical consciousness and fight for civil rights by working within the existing political and social system.<sup>25</sup> Although they were professionally trained intellectuals and church historians living in the American Southwest that were engaged in a process of historical retrieval, their work does not mark the birth of the field, because they (like Gamio before them) did not see themselves as scholars

of Mexican American religions per se and because they did not seek to self-consciously define or construct a field as such.

### César Chávez and Birth of the Study of Mexican American Religions

The key turning point in the development of Mexican American religious studies took place in 1968. That year the writings and intellectual foment stimulated by César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Enrique Dussel, Carlos Castañeda (1925–98), and others served as major catalysts in the future methodological and theoretical development of the field. The spark that helped ignite the field came from an unlikely source—a former community service organizer (CSO) named César Chávez.<sup>26</sup> Inspired by Father Donald McDonnell to fight for social justice and to unionize Mexican American migrant farmworkers, in 1965 Chávez and Delores Huerta organized the United Farm Workers organization in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Delano, California, to fight for better wages, housing, and civil rights. In March 1968, during his first major fast for social justice, Chávez penned one of the first significant historical, social, political, and theological critiques of the Catholic Church by a Mexican American titled “Mexican Americans and the Church.”<sup>27</sup> Echoing other Latinos throughout the Americas struggling for justice, he criticized the institutional Catholic Church’s lack of support for the Mexican American people and called on it to sacrifice with the people for social change and political and economic justice. His critique differed from Gamio’s and Castañeda’s (d. 1958) because it asked the Catholic Church to take sides, affirmed indigenous popular Catholicism, and blended faith, writing, and activism. Chávez and Chicano Movement activists differed from the Mexican American GI Generation activists because he was willing to work outside of the system and because he drew on his faith in his activism.

Chávez’s critique and faith-based activism had a profound influence on the future development of Mexican American religious studies. His essay and activism were widely cited and followed in Chicano periodicals such as *El Grito del Sol* (1968) and by a number of Chicano and Latino scholars such as Rodolfo Acuña, Octavio I. Romano, Francisco García-Treto, Virgilio Elizondo, Juan Hurtado, Antonio Soto, Moises Sandoval, Anthony M. Steven-Arroyo, and later by Andrés Guerrero, Gilberto Hinojosa, and others.<sup>28</sup> Chávez’s critique and faith-based activism along with that of the African American, Chicano, American Indian, feminist,

and liberation theology movements inspired an emerging generation of Mexican Americans and U.S. Latino scholars to use their scholarship to fight for social, political, and economic justice on behalf of their communities. It also inspired many religious clergy and laity to participate in the Chicano cultural renaissance, which sought to celebrate their Mexican and indigenous cultural and religious identity.<sup>29</sup>

The struggle in California experienced by Chávez's United Farm Workers organization was important because it also helped spotlight the struggle of other Mexican American activists, such as former Assemblies of God Pentecostal evangelist-turned-activist Reies López Tijerina. His *aliancista* land grant struggle in New Mexico along with his Poor People's March in 1968 inspired many Mexican Americans to fight for civil rights and social justice. However, his activism and writings were largely overlooked by scholars writing on Mexican American religions because most of them had Catholic backgrounds and they tended to find more resonance with Chávez's openly ecumenical Catholic pacifism than with Tijerina's magical-literalist militant activism.<sup>30</sup>

The critical role that popular Catholicism and indigenous religious symbols played in the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement was influenced by Chávez's fasts, pilgrimages, and decision to march behind the colorful banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. They were also influenced by Reies López Tijerina's land grant struggle; by the religious themes in Luis Valdez's *Plan of Delano* and *La Pastorela* play; by Rodolfo "Corky" González's epic poem, *I am Joaquín*, and his call for a national Chicano homeland (Aztlán); and by hundreds of barrio wall murals, poems, songs, theater troops, and student movements sprouting up across the Southwest and nation in the early 1970s.<sup>31</sup> This first generation of Mexican American activists provided *el movimiento* with a spiritual impulse and a sacred set of symbols (Our Lady of Guadalupe, Aztec Eagle), a sacred genealogy (*la raza cósmica*—a cosmic racial heritage going back to the "brilliant" civilizations of the Aztecs and Mayas), a set of sacred traditions (pilgrimages, fasts, and penance, ecclesiastical history), and a sacred homeland (Aztlán—the American Southwest) that gave ordinary Mexican Americans a "Chicano" identity and a sense of collective mission that they could understand, appreciate, and rally behind.

Their grassroots activism contributed to the birth of a Mexican American/Chicano cultural renaissance that promoted cultural nationalism and a sense of ethnic pride that manifested itself in art, music, poetry, theater, politics, and historical recovery. Chicano cultural nationalists argued for an oppositional "us versus them" attitude toward Anglo-American

society. “Corky” González called for the creation of a national Chicano homeland in the Southwest, which he named Aztlán after the mythical homeland of the Aztecs and Mexican people. Drawing upon the work of Paulo Freire, Acuña argued that Chicanos were an internal colony suffering oppression like other “Third World peoples.”<sup>32</sup> This led many Chicano scholars, such as Juan Gómez-Quinones, to argue that in their struggle for liberation there could be no neutrality because “to acculturate is not merely to exercise a cultural preference but to go to the other side.”<sup>33</sup> Acuña’s vision of internal colonialism was further refined in Mario Barrera’s essay “Barrio as an Internal Colony” and in his 1979 landmark study on internal colonialism, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality*, which were later picked up by U.S. Latino scholars of religion.<sup>34</sup>

Despite their important contributions, the Chicano historian Alex M. Saragoza argues that the work of Acuña and others led to a kind of nationalist romanticization and mythologization of Mexican American history that painted an us-versus-them struggle. This approach minimized internal conflict and dissension, focused on local community studies rather than comparative analyses, and exaggerated the continuities and downplayed discontinuities in Chicano and *mexicano* cultures. Seeking to create a collective history and identity, Saragoza argues that authors such as Acuña tended to project normative value judgments in a world where there were good people (largely Mexican American, Latina/o, ethnic minority, poor, women, etc.) and bad people (largely white males or ethnic minorities that sought to accommodate and/or transform society within the existing social and political system). Furthermore, there was a certain moral urgency and rightness to their scholarship; they assumed that because they were either describing or promoting tolerance, pluralism, diversity, or social justice, they were justified in offering an otherwise explicitly and unapologetically negative ideological interpretation of their opponents all the while purporting to be engaging in critical, fair-minded academic scholarship.<sup>35</sup>

### Latin American Influences on Mexican American Religious Studies

At the same time Chávez, Huerta, Tijerina, and others were fighting for social justice, civil rights, land rights, and human liberation, Catholics and Protestants in Latin America were engaged in a similar struggle. The same year that Chávez penned “The Mexican American and the Church,” hundreds of Catholics met at the Second General Conference of Latin

American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, where they began to articulate a theology of liberation.<sup>36</sup> The critical development of liberation theology took place when the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez asked his colleagues if their theology of socioeconomic empowerment would “be a theology of development [i.e., capitalism] or a theology of liberation?”<sup>37</sup> Blending conviction with academic precision, Gutiérrez penned Latin America’s most important contribution to the global Christian theology, *Teología de la liberación* (1971), which was subsequently translated into English as *A Theology of Liberation* (1973). In this book he argues that Jesus was a scorned suffering servant and revolutionary who preached a Gospel of liberation to the poor and oppressed, who fought for spiritual, political, social, and economic justice against the religious and political establishments, and was as a result martyred on behalf of his people in order to help usher in the kingdom of God.<sup>38</sup>

Liberation theologians such as Ruben Alves, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assmann, Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, Juan Luis Segundo, José Miguel Bonino, Enrique Dussel, and many others in Latin America argue that their movement is a theological and practical movement that emphasizes present deliverance of the oppressed from their sinful oppressors. The authentic starting point for any Christian theology is commitment to the poor, the “nonperson.”<sup>39</sup> The Christian message, they suggest, has to be interpreted out of the context of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor. Drawing on the story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, they preach a revolutionary and prophetic praxis-based message that maps the trajectory of human history from “captivity” to “exile” to divine hope and human liberation. “Conscientization” (consciousness-raising), contextualization, and praxis are the keys to realizing this liberation, they teach. They believe God is on their side—and the side of the poor against the symbolic pharaohs of this life. They tend to focus on the importance of economic factors in oppression, pay close attention to class struggle, argue for the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones, emphasize the role that society plays in oppression of individuals and communities, and argue that suffering is also the result of unjust social and political structures. Liberation theologians have been unfairly criticized as being Marxists. However, they tend to use Marxism in a purely instrumental way.<sup>40</sup> Today most have distanced themselves from any Marxist influence.

Latin American liberation scholars such as Enrique Dussel also influenced the rise and methodology of Mexican American religious history. He formulated a praxis-based historical methodology that reframed history

as a struggle for liberation from neocolonial dependency on Anglo-Saxon English and American industrial capitalism. Echoing Marxist, leftist, and social historians, Dussel argued that no description of a historical fact is obvious or neutral. Every historical account presupposes an “interpretation” based on one’s ideological and theological worldview that either upholds the capitalist structure of society, or promotes a revolutionary movement toward human liberation and freedom. For this reason, he argued that scholars must create a Christian faith-based interpretation of history and society that blends the rigors of a critical scientific methodology with an equally rigorous contextual and praxis-oriented commitment to the suffering, aspirations, and perspectives of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>41</sup>

Dussel’s methodological influence is clearly evident in Moises Sandoval’s groundbreaking history, *Fronteras: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA since 1513* (1983). In the preface, Bishop Ricardo Ramírez states that the idea for Sandoval’s book came from Dussel, who was then president of the Commission for the Study of the History of the Church in America (CEHILA).<sup>42</sup> This influence is also noticeable in Virgilio Elizondo’s introduction to the book, where, echoing the language of Paulo Freire’s conscientization, he states that one of the reasons so many Latinos were confused and divided over their ethnic identity was because they have been deprived of a “real consciousness of . . . [their] historical becoming.” The best way to address this problem was to follow the examples of Dussel and especially of Acuña, whose work “beautifully brings out the Chicano struggle for liberation.” Far from being a dead and fossilized past, Mexican American history and religion were very much alive in the dynamic and creative imagination of *corridos*, *leyendas*, *cuentos*, *murales*, *pinturas* (songs, legends, stories, murals, paintings) and religious celebrations of the saints and cultural heroes such as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Elizondo writes. After thanking Enrique Dussel and CEHILA for inviting them to write the book, he ends his introduction by stating that it filled him with great joy that MACC was able to publish this first general history of Latino Christianity in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

### Virgilio Elizondo and the Birth of Mexican American Religious Studies

Virgilio Elizondo (figure 1) played a pivotal role in the birth of Mexican American theology and religious studies. A native of San Antonio, Elizondo stated to me that his praxis-oriented scholarship wove together a Mexican American/Chicano theology that reflected the influences of his



1. Virgilio Elizondo, 2000. Courtesy: Virgilio Elizondo.

seminary training's emphasis on social justice; Archbishop Robert Lucy's grassroots work on the war on poverty and farmworkers' movement; and Vatican II's insistence on incarnational theology, the need for "inculturation," and the dynamic notion of divine revelation. He further noted that he was influenced by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, "Dei Verbum"; the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, "Ad Gentes"; and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, "Gaudium et Spes." In addition, his thought and method were directly shaped by Chávez, Gutiérrez, Dussel, Acuña, and others in the Chicano cultural renaissance. Perhaps his most important influences were Johannes Hoffinger and Alfonso Nebreda of the East Asian Pastoral Institute because they argued that he needed to draw on cultural anthropology for any kind of Christian theological reflection. These influences were clarified and deepened by Jacques Audinet of the Institut Catholique de



Paris's insistence on using the social sciences in the task of creating local theologies. Elizondo not only knew Chávez firsthand and learned about the promulgations of Vatican II from Archbishop Robert Lucy who had attended the event, but he also accompanied Lucy to the preparatory meetings of the now historic CELAM conference in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, where he met and conversed with Gustavo Gutiérrez, Enrique Dussel, and many other Latin American liberation theologians. These influences are evident in his groundbreaking 1968 essay, "Educación religiosa para el México-norteamericano," published in the Mexican journal, *Catequesis Latinoamericana* and other articles from this period.<sup>44</sup> He was also later influenced by the Chicano historian Jesús Chavarría at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who said that "As long as you do not write your own story and elaborate your own knowledge, you will always be a slave to another's thoughts."<sup>45</sup> These influences were later refined in his *Anthropological and Psychological Characteristics of the Mexican American* (1974) and in his classic study *Christianity and Culture* (1975). They came to their intellectual maturity in his germinal works *Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Birth and Gospel* (1978), *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas* (1980), and especially *Galilean Journey* (1983) and *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (1988).

Elizondo's writings signal the academic birth of Mexican American theology and history.<sup>46</sup> Drawing upon the methodology of Gutiérrez, Dussel, Acuña, and others, he argued that Mexican American scholars should create and publish collective revisionist scholarship on Mexican American theology and religious history from the perspective of the poor and marginalized that is also "objective" and academically rigorous.<sup>47</sup> He brought this vision to fruition by publishing not only theological works but also some of the foundational historical, biographical and sociological books on Mexican American religions through MACC. In addition to three of his own books, under his influence MACC also published Juan Romero and Moises Sandoval, *Reluctant Dawn: Historia del Padre A. J. Martínez, Cura de Taos* (1976), Juan Hurtado, *An Attitudinal Study of Social Distance between the Mexican American and the Church* (1975), Sandoval, *Fronteras*, and many other books, reports, and articles.

Although Elizondo was proactive in publishing the work of other scholars and writers, it was his own aforementioned books that challenged and revised the theological agenda of the day. His mestizo paradigm contended that Mexican Americans are like Jesus because they are religious outsiders who are rejected by the racial and religious establishment for being from a racially and theological impure (meaning mixed blood—a



popular Jewish counter-tradition taught that Jesus's father was a Roman soldier) bloodline from the scorned region of Galilee. For this reason, Elizondo called on all Mexican Americans to be proud of their mixed racial and hitherto-scorned Mexican popular-Catholic heritage. The work of Elizondo and other U.S. Latinos contributed what Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo have called a resurgence in the study of U.S. Latino religions (1988).

The work of Elizondo, Chávez, Gutiérrez, Tijerina, and others in the 1960s and 1970s influenced, to varying degrees, the work of later Mexican American and U.S. Latino/a scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, including Andrés G. Guerrero, *A Chicano Theology* (1987), Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (1988), and Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (1994). Whereas in the United States, Elizondo and Isasi-Díaz and Tarango's work exerted tremendous influence in the study of Mexican American and U.S. Latino religions, Guerrero's book was, by comparison, largely overlooked despite the fact that he cites Chávez, Tijerina, Gutiérrez, and Elizondo.<sup>48</sup> Guerrero's theology (based on a set of nine interviews with Chicano Catholic and Protestant leaders) stated that the Christian Church was the last hope of Chicanos. However, he also accused it of working against Chicano liberation, practicing sexism, preaching the inferiority of women, and using Our Lady of Guadalupe to both liberate and oppress Chicanos. Some interviewees promoted fighting for communal lands taken by Anglos in the wake of the 1848 war between the United States and Mexico and to use whatever means was necessary (including violence) to achieve liberation—a position that the pacifist Guerrero did not support. Despite his rejection of violence in the struggle for liberation, his book has been largely overlooked by scholars because it is seen as romanticizing the Chicano struggle, being too academic and too militant, falling into a simplistic us-versus-them binary, and perhaps because it was too quick to condemn the institutional Church, which, love it or leave it, was, and still remains, the religious home of most Mexican Americans.<sup>49</sup>

Mexican American and U.S. Latino scholars have promoted a largely liberationist methodological outlook and praxis-based orientation through a number of pan-Latino interdisciplinary associations, organizations, and journals such as the Association of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS—1988), the Program for the Analysis of Religion Among Latinos (PARAL—1988), La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Religion (1989), the Hispanic Fund for Theological Education, the His-

panic Theological Initiative (HTI—1995), and interdenominational journals such as the United Methodist-affiliated *Apuntes: Reflexiones teológicas desde el margen hispano* (1981), and the Roman Catholic-affiliated *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* (1994). These organizations and forums have trained and funded many Mexican American and U.S. Latino/a scholars of religion. In 1992, Rudy V. Busto and Daniel Ramírez secured grant money to hold a conference entitled “Nuevas Fronteras/Reconsidering Borders: U.S. Latino Evangelicalism,” at Stanford University. Through these endeavors, Mexican American and U.S. Latino/a theologians and scholars have been able to keep alive, institutionalize, and mainstream their largely Christian, liberationist-theological, praxis-based methodology. For these reasons and others, Mexican American theology and, to a lesser degree, religious studies and Chicana feminist theology, has largely been a footnote to liberation theology—in one manifestation or another.

### Chicana Feminism and Women in Religion

Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgilio Elizondo directly influenced (along with other Chicana/Latina women) the rise of Chicana feminism and later *mujerista* theology through the Chicana Yolanda Tarango and Cuban-born Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s pioneering work, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (1988). Their Latina, feminist liberation theology was based on a series of interviews with Hispanic women. It also drew upon the insights and writings of Rosemary Radford Reuther, Margaret Farley, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Elizabeth Hunt, Clifford Geertz, Antonio Gramsci, Paul Tillich, José Míguez Bonino, Paulo Freire, and others. They sought to create a Hispanic cultural, feminist, and liberation theology that captured the sentiment and struggles of ordinary women. They saw themselves first and foremost as activists struggling for justice and peace and saw no conflict in combining theology and activism. They sought to “militantly” fight against both Anglo-American and Latino multilayered sexism, patriarchy, classism, and economic oppression. Some of their work, especially as articulated by Isasi-Díaz, was methodologically important because it (a) provided a sharp critique of Latino sexism, classism, elitism, and patriarchy, (b) called on Latino men to share leadership and the theological enterprise with women, (c) called for more inclusive theologies, and (d) gave voice to Latina women and sought to shift the focus away from “orthodoxy” (right belief) to “orthopraxis” (right practice).<sup>50</sup>

Despite the pivotal role that Tarango’s and Isasi-Díaz’s book played in the development of a Latina, feminist liberation theology, María Pilar

Aquino has warned scholars to be careful not to assume that their work represents all Chicana and U.S. Latina feminist theologians. In fact, Chicana and Latina feminism is much broader, pluralistic, and effusive than the work of Isasi-Díaz and Tarango, Gutiérrez, and Elizondo, despite their important influences, Aquino argues. Furthermore, Aquino suggests that Isasi-Díaz's *mujerista* theological perspective is in fact a creative fiction because "there are no *mujerista* sociopolitical and ecclesial subjects in the United States or Latin America." The problem with Isasi-Díaz's work, Aquino continues, is that she created a theology that "glorifies difference" and produces "'discursive . . . locations . . . and false oppositions' that weaken the political force of feminism." For these reasons and others, she suggests that Chicana/Latina "theology must be clearly characterized by a *non-mujerista* orientation."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, she calls on Chicana and U.S. Latina feminist theologians to draw on the work of Chicana feminist writers and thinkers such as Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Vicki Ruiz, Chela Sandoval, Dena González, Olga Villa-Parra, Alma García, and Cynthia Orozco, and on other feminist voices.<sup>52</sup>

Pilar Aquino equally distances Chicana feminist scholarship on religion from Loida Martel Otero's important 1994 work on Latina *evangélicas* because of her subject's perceived lack of commitment to social transformation.<sup>53</sup> Espinosa's work on Latina Pentecostal women in ministry, along with that of Elizabeth Ríos and Arlene Sánchez-Walsh, argues that there is in fact a long tradition of Latina Pentecostal women engaging in social action ministry.<sup>54</sup> Mexican American Pentecostal women have been engaging in social ministry since 1906, and most have historically voted for Democratic Party candidates, despite their very conservative position on abortion and same-sex marriage—which they reject as unbiblical. In fact, 69 percent of Latino Pentecostals voted for Bill Clinton in the 1996 presidential election and in 2000, 67 percent of Latino Protestants voted for Al Gore.<sup>55</sup> However, although Latina Pentecostal women are morally conservative, women such as Aimee García Cortese engaged in a kind of feminist discourse and protest (although she was uncomfortable with the word *feminist*) as early as the late 1950s in their struggles against sexism within the Latino Assemblies of God.<sup>56</sup> Despite this fact, Cortese and others rejected feminism because of its association with a "pro-abortion" position and "the gay movement."<sup>57</sup>

Chicana feminist interpretations of religion are critical to understanding and interpreting the Mexican American religious experience. Every effort should be made to support feminist scholarship and scholars. Building on their work, there is also a great need to uncover, discover, and

analyze the stories of millions of other nonfeminist women from new and hybrid theoretical and methodological interpretive frameworks. They can include new and hitherto-overlooked voices of women from diverse religious traditions, such as Catholic Charismatics, Mainline Protestants, non-Pentecostal Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Spiritualist/Spiritists, adherents of *brujería*, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, agnostics, Native Americans, practitioners of mixed religion, New Agers, and others. This pluralistic framework is important in light of the growing religious diversity within the Mexican American and U.S. Latino communities.<sup>58</sup>

As the research above indicates, there is also a great need for research on non-Christian and hybrid Mexican American and U.S. Latino religions and spiritualities. The religious boundaries are as porous as the country's border.<sup>59</sup>

### Secular Interpretations of Mexican American Religions

Like the work of Gamio, Jones, and Ortigón forty years earlier, Anglo-American scholars such as Patrick McNamara and Joan Moore also published important sociological and historical essays on Mexican American religions in Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzman, *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (1970), which included brief attention to Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Mormons. Their essays sketched the role that churches played in assimilation, socialization of values, and furthering social change, which together contributed to socioeconomic advancement and social justice. McNamara argued that "folk" Catholicism combined "normal" Catholic practices with "pagan (Indian) rites."<sup>60</sup> Unlike the "ideologically-tinged ethnic spokespersons and activists who as insiders had their own agendas," he claimed, his survey research findings could "influence the objectivity of outsiders."<sup>61</sup> He further states that his essay provided data for a new generation of Chicano scholars such as Acuña, who were "bent upon rewriting the history of the Southwest in a conflict/internal colonialism framework."<sup>62</sup> Although his study was cited by Mexican American scholars for hard facts, it does not mark the birth of the field, because McNamara stated that his sociological focus was *not* on Mexican American religiosity and because he did not attempt to define or construct a field as such.<sup>63</sup> However, McNamara's and Moore's research is methodologically important because of its social-science approach and because it clearly built on the previous writings of Jean-Baptiste Salpointe,

McCombs, Abel, Ortegón, Castañeda, Delbert Lee Gibson, Soto, Chávez, and others.

In addition to the rise of secularly oriented social-science research, we also see humanistic anthropological research on Mexican American religions. From the 1930s through the 1960s, we saw the rise of secular anthropological, historical, psychological, and folklore research and literature both on Mexican American Christian healing traditions, such as Pentecostalism and Catholic *curanderismo*, and on metaphysical traditions, such as Spiritualism, Spiritism, and *brujería*.<sup>64</sup> This literature has continued to grow from the 1970s through the present thanks to the work of Juan Castañón García, June Macklin, Marc Simmons, Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira, Beatrice A. Roeder, David Carrasco, Luis León, Gastón Espinosa, Lara Medina, Inés Hernández-Avila, and many others.<sup>65</sup> Little, by contrast, was written on Latino Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and world religions, with the exception of brief references by Ortegón, Moore, and Espinosa.<sup>66</sup>

During this period from 1965 through the publication of *Fronteras* in 1983, we also see the rise in number of histories, biographies, and other works about Mexican American and U.S. Latino Mainline, Evangelical, and Pentecostal Protestants.<sup>67</sup> They were not explicitly liberationist in orientation.<sup>68</sup> This church-based scholarship was supplemented by a number of books by Chicano historians such as Ramón Gutiérrez, Mario T. García, Vicki Ruiz, George Sánchez, and others. They provided alternative theoretical and methodological frameworks for interpreting Mexican American history and religions that clearly went beyond the purview of traditional church history and liberation theology.

The work of these Chicano historians is important because they moved away from the static us-versus-them oppositional approach of the 1970s and instead argued for more complicated, contradictory, and nuanced histories of the Mexican American experience.<sup>69</sup> Mario T. García, for example, wrote that the "Mexican border culture [was] neither completely Mexican nor American, but one revealing contrasting attractions and pressures between cultures."<sup>70</sup> Sánchez similarly wrote that "any notion that individuals have occupied one undifferentiated cultural position — such as 'Mexican,' 'American,' or 'Chicano' — has been abandoned in favor of the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions."<sup>71</sup> Their work has in turn shaped an emerging generation of Mexican American religious studies historians and scholars such as Rudy Busto, Gastón Espinosa, Luis León, Arlene Sánchez-Walsh, Alberto Pulido, Lara Medina, Roberto Lint Sagarena, Paul Barton, Laura Pérez, Daniel Ramírez, and others.

## Chicano Literature, History, and Mexican American Religious Studies

The field of Mexican American religions has not only been shaped by the faith-based activism of Chávez and Tijerina, the Chicano Movement, liberation theology, denominationally sponsored church histories and theologies, and social scientific and humanistic scholarship, but also by Chicano literature. Although writing outside of the academy, literary works—Carlos Castañeda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)—have also contributed to the interdisciplinary and canon-busting movement away from institutional theology. They focus on noninstitutional forms of religiosity and theology and treat the U.S.–Mexico borderlands as a hybrid shamanic space that challenges traditional Catholic and Protestant hegemony, traditions, and way of life.<sup>72</sup>

Castañeda's anthropological foray into the world of Don Juan, a *diablero*, or satanic sorcerer from northern Mexico then living in Los Angeles, explores shamanistic cognition and ways of knowledge and power that challenge modern Western categories, medicine, religion, and epistemology. Like Castañeda's emphasis on Mexican American healing traditions, Anaya's novel analyzes the influence of Native American indigenous history, spirituality, and mythology on the magical-realist outlook on life and the world in popular Catholicism. It does so through the life and work of a *curandera*, or folk healer, named Ultima. She teaches her coming-of-age grandson and apprentice, Antonio, that life cannot be reduced to a simple binary of good versus evil. Knowledge, like the world, is fragmented and yet one can find liberation and hope through moving beyond one's individual identity.<sup>73</sup> This magical-realist outlook has been shaped by a number of other writers and has influenced the writing of Mexican American scholars such as Rudy Busto.<sup>74</sup>

Castañeda's and Anaya's work inspired and influenced Gloria Anzaldúa's new mestiza paradigm, which calls for the celebration of a shamanic state of consciousness that challenges traditional Western conceptualizations of religion, gender, sexuality, and identity. Her work explores in prose and poetry the ambivalence of Chicanos/as in Anglo culture, women in Latino culture, and lesbians in the straight world. She criticizes anyone who oppresses people considered culturally or sexually different. Although her work has been overlooked by some Mexican American scholars of religion who have strong ties to the institutional church or who were trained