

2003 H. Paul Douglass Lecture:

“RELIGION” UNDER IMPERIAL DURESS: POSTCOLONIAL REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSALS*

OTTO MADURO
DREW UNIVERSITY

REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, 2004, VOLUME 45:3, PAGES XX-XX

Recent research on Hispanic Pentecostal congregations in Newark (NJ) brought to my attention how both realities and notions of “religion” are constructed under imperial duress (adopting and/or resisting racial, ethnic, class, gender, cultural, political, economic and religious biases deeply tied to imperial relations). In this essay, I try to stimulate reflection on how notions of “religion” in the U.S. are linked to U.S. imperial policies (including specific religious policies) developed over the last century toward, among others, our southern neighbors. Further, I suggest that those very imperial policies contribute to a deep disruption of life (religious and otherwise) in Latin America and the Caribbean. This dislocation is now impacting the U.S. with massive demographic, political and economic changes, as well as with major transformations in the ways in which religion is reconstructed, lived out, and understood by recent immigrants, as it happens in Latina/o Pentecostal congregations. After underscoring new forms of religious resistance to empire in these congregations, I close by proposing some ways of seeing “religion” that both critically acknowledge and responsibly attempt to overcome the ways in which certain understandings of “religion” have hitherto expressed and reinforced imperial views, relations and policies toward the least among us.

* Address correspondence to Otto Maduro, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940. omaduro@drew.edu. An earlier version of the ideas in this essay was shared on 9/26/03 at the Third Drew Colloquium for Transdisciplinary Theological Studies, *An American Empire? Globalization, War, and Religion*. The current version was originally presented as the 2003 H. Paul Douglass Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the Religious Research Association in Norfolk, VA.

There is no border, no matter how many walls
and infrared goggles and moats and machine-gun turrets;
there is no border – only history, and history is movement
across the borders we imagine out of our fears.
(Rubén Ramírez, *National Catholic Reporter*, 11/4/94)

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you
CAN make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that's all.”
(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)

The Rio Bravo or Rio Grande, part of the current border between Mexico and the U.S., is a site of hopes, hatreds and horrors, both reenacted and routed round-the-clock. Death awaits in the guns of the Border Patrol, the *bajaderos* and the migrant-hunting vigilantes on the U.S. side of the border, but also in the river waters, the perils of the desert, and the heat of locked trucks. A recent study of the University of Houston puts at 2,300 the number of migrants dead in the past eight years while trying to cross the border (Jones 2003). For the survivors, the risks of prison and deportation are next. After 9/11, in Texas alone, nearly 1,000 people are detained every day for trying to cross the border into the United States (Cobb 2003). On any given day, thousands await a decision in jail: spouses and siblings sent to separate facilities, children torn away from parents, frequently for months in a row. Still, many more are those who succeed in their desire of returning to the land taken from their ancestors, just over a century ago, by the newborn American empire.

In a tiny, 18-person strong, storefront Pentecostal congregation I frequently visited in Newark (NJ) during my sabbatical, I met some of those successful border-crossers. Some, sadly, had lost relatives or friends in their attempt. One of many instances shattering my preconceptions concerning Latina/o Pentecostal churches came about precisely when I heard the *testimonio*, the witness, of a Mexican migrant narrating how the Holy Spirit answered his prayers while crossing the border, making him invisible to the U.S. immigration guards – the whole congregation broke out in a loud, emotional burst of reaffirming *Aleluyas!* and *Glorias!*, indeed thus affording him

the essential support to dare cut through other imperial boundaries: between shame and pride, despair and hope, solitude and solidarity, unemployment and a job, homelessness and a bedroom to call one's own.

More seasoned researchers of U.S. Hispanic Pentecostalism – Gastón Espinosa and Daniel Ramírez, above all – have made me aware of how increasingly pervasive is the practice of helping others cross, among Hispanic Pentecostal congregations and their members on both sides of the border: with prayer, praise, healing services, and laying of hands on both the departing as on the newly arrived, no less than through water containers in the desert, referrals, safe houses, bail payments, jail visits, legal assistance, job contacts, housing leads, or fund-raising for dignified burials (Espinosa 1999; Ramirez 1999).

Is this “religion”? Maybe not so for that more renowned Pentecostal, Attorney General John Ashcroft. But where is, then, the line separating “religion” from criminal aiding-and-abetting; from economic entrepreneurship; from juridical assistance, political activity, law enforcement, or “mere” social work? For whom are such borders visible, relevant or necessary? Who decides and enforces which and where are those boundaries? In whose interests? Under whose pressures? And what are the dissimilar consequences of drawing and imposing such bounds on a population fraught with profound inequalities and intense, constant crises?

In what follows, I will first attempt to remind the readership of the weighty impact of U.S. imperial policies in the dramatic disruption of life south of the border – religious and otherwise. Next, I will recount a few among countless peaceful, constructive ways in which people forced northward by the turmoil of life south of the Río Bravo are now creating, doing, living and transforming religion within and despite empire. Lastly, I will conclude by suggesting a few routes for rethinking “religion” in a postcolonial, counter-imperial manner – hoping to at least stir the sociological imagination of some among my more prolific colleagues.

THE AMERICAN EMPIRE: A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

The shaping of the meanings of the very term “religion” itself is inextricably intertwined with the history of imperial appropriations, reinterpretations, clashes and impositions, above all, of traditions connected with the Middle Eastern founding figures of Jesus and Mohammed (Asad 1993; Beyer 1994; McCutcheon 1997). Similarly, the dynamic realities that we tend to grasp and label as “religion” anywhere in today’s world have been deeply marked both by those imperial initiatives as well as by the creative resistance of those living under imperial duress.

In the specific case of the Americas, could we seriously study “religion” while bracketing out the shaping force of empires – Spaniard, British, Portuguese, Dutch, French, etc.– upon the religious dynamics of this hemisphere? Can we understand “religion” in the U.S. today without closely examining how the enslavement of Africans, no less than the decimation and subjugation of American Indians, shaped the identity of mainstream white Christianity? Or, beyond the U.S. but not quite, could we honestly face the contemporary study of religion in the Americas as if the U.S. were just one more amid the variegated nations in a postmodern, globalized world?

True, the U.S. was, at least until recently, the empire refusing to bear such name. After 9/11, however, a growing number of explicit partisans of current U.S. policies are not asking any longer *whether* the U.S. is an empire, but, rather, *how* should the U.S. be one – or, in some more timid quarters, *if* the U.S. should continue being one (Boot 2001; D’Souza 2002; Daalder & Lindsay 2003; Ignatieff 2003; Kaplan 2003; Morgan 2003; Prestowitz 2003).

Whatever the case, for many who have lived long and attentively enough south of the border, the question is a ludicrous one. Since at least 1831– but much more consistently from 1898 on – few years have passed without a U.S. military intervention in one or another sovereign nation of the Caribbean or Latin America: near a hundred such interventions in about two thirds of the countries of the Americas .¹

Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Panama, Paraguay, Colombia, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Bolivia, and Panama know the experience firsthand. Besides – and often more deadly so – these and other countries have undergone other forms of U.S. overt and covert intervention, including the encouragement, financing, recognition, and active economic and military support of most right-wing military coups and dictatorships terrorizing their own peoples in the twentieth century.

In point of fact, from the 1940s to the end of this past century, almost every first elected, democratic government in a Latin American or Caribbean nation was overthrown shortly after its inauguration by the militant, proactive conspiracy of what I call “the four usual suspects:” (i) the U.S. government in cahoots with U.S. corporations investing in the country at stake; (ii) the local large landowners; (iii) the local military and police; and, last but not least, but with significant dissidence through the 70s and 80s, (iv) the Christian churches.

Between U.S. interventions and U.S.-backed military dictatorships, nearly half of the countries south of the U.S. were subject at one period or another of the twentieth century to widespread torture, persecution, and massacres – of which the worst case is arguably that of Guatemala, with well over 150,000 unarmed civilians killed by U.S.-sponsored State terrorism since 1954 (Schlesinger & Kinzer 1999). In addition, hundreds of thousands more of unarmed civilians in El Salvador, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Haiti, Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil were also put to death at some point or another of their recent history either by U.S. forces, by U.S.-sponsored paramilitary groups, or by the U.S.-backed military and police forces of those countries (Chester 2001).

It is important, however, not to fall prey to the habit of disconnecting these dynamics of armed violence from the deleterious effects of the global economy as forced upon the entire

Third World, especially during the last three decades. The policies of the IMF, WB, and WTO – all of which count on the U.S. as their major decision-maker – have contributed to an unprecedented upsurge of billionaires and of profitable international investments.

Simultaneously, however, for the last quarter of a century, the same economic policies imposed by those bodies have plunged every nation south of the U.S. in a downward spiral of impoverishment, coupled with an increasing inability to meet the educational, nutritional, medical, and other basic needs of their population – a situation now reaching a point of breakdown in most Latin American and Caribbean nations.² Brazil and Chile seem to be, in these beginnings of the twenty-first century, the only Latin American countries explicitly undertaking a timid effort to halt and reverse the pauperization of the majority of their population, inevitably colliding with many of the prescriptions of the IMF/WB/WTO.

Official – and not-so-official – U.S. documents (such as the 1969 Rockefeller Report, the 1969 Rand Memorandum, the 1975 Banzer Plan, the 1976 Operation Condor, the 1979 Santa Fe Report, the 1984 CIA Nicaraguan manual, etc.) indicate that U.S. policies toward Latin America have had specifically *religious* dimensions, too, for over 30 years now.³ These U.S. policies have included funding, isolating, favoring, persecuting, and eliminating certain Latin American religious groups and leaders, depending on their potential for U.S. interests. The long list of nuns, priests, bishops, pastors, seminarians and catechists assassinated in Latin America during the last third of the 20th century by U.S.-backed governments is only the tip of the iceberg (Lernoux 1991; Ortiz 2002).

These violent disruptions during the last decades of life south of the Rio Grande have contributed to, if not outright stirred, significant political turmoil, social conflicts, demographic movements, religious changes and cultural innovations. Among these we should note, indeed, the birth and multiplication of liberation theologies and Basic Christian Communities, but also the

wider and larger growth and spread of Pentecostalism. These are just two of the many religious facets of a vast social and cultural change, deepening since the 70s south of the border – a change which comprises an increasing hopelessness pushing millions to try their luck in the place touted by the globalized media as the one and only offering some real chances of survival for at least a while: *el norte, el imperio, los Estados Unidos de América* (Dunn 1993; Domínguez 2002; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Nevins 2002).

NOTES FROM BORDER-CROSSING CONGREGATIONS

As it is now widely known, Hispanics officially reached in 2003 the status of the largest U.S. minority: nearly 40 million living in this country, or close to 1/6 of the population. Nearly 40% of the U.S. population growth of the last decade is due to Latinas/os, at least half of them new immigrants. This Hispanic growth, plus the concomitant demographic stagnation and aging of the Euro-American population, will make of Euro-Americans, in the next few decades, the largest minority in the nation (less than 50% of the U.S. total population) – but, long before that, they will become a minority in the labor force, and, even sooner, in the school-age population.⁴

In the religious landscape of the U.S., Latinas/os are a crucial phenomenon, too. More than two thirds of U.S. Hispanics still claim to be Roman Catholic; Hispanics represent the bulk of U.S. Roman Catholic increase in the last decades; are probably already over one third of U.S. Roman Catholics; and might turn into the majority of U.S. Catholics in a generation or so. At the same time, however, the most significant drain from U.S. Roman Catholicism are Latinas/os converting to other faiths (especially to Pentecostalism); the only significant source of growth of U.S. Protestantism nowadays are Hispanics (albeit, as for Roman Catholicism, the main drain among mainline Latina/o Protestants is toward Pentecostal churches); the fastest-expanding religious movement among Latinas/os (south of the Rio Grande as well) is Pentecostalism; and,

finally, the main source of growth of U.S. Pentecostal churches are Hispanic converts. Not a minor set of trends for religious research.⁵

This demographic shift of the U.S. population is even more pronounced in New Jersey, as in its largest city, Newark. At the state level, 1.1 million people (13.3%) of New Jersey's population, defined itself in the Census 2000 as Hispanic or Latina/o, while of the 275,000-odd inhabitants of Newark 80,000 (29.5%) did likewise. African-Americans are the majority of that city's population (53.5%, over 146,000) while non-Hispanic Anglos have dwindled to less than 39,000 (14.2%) of the city's total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

According to the 2000 census figures, then, New Jersey has a population of nearly 8.5 million – almost 700,000 more than in 1990 – and 51% of its increase in the decade 1990-2000 was Latina/o growth. Nowadays, the largest minority, not only in the country as a whole, but specifically in the state of New Jersey and in the city of Newark, is constituted by Hispanics – with percentages higher there than in the nation as a whole.

Latinas/os, then, are the fastest growing ethnic segment of the population of the U.S., of the state of New Jersey, and of the city of Newark. Hispanics happen to be, coincidentally, the fastest growing segment of Newark's Roman Catholic churches – and, paradoxically, as nationwide, they are also the main source of growth of Protestantism and of Pentecostalism in the city of Newark.

While partaking in the Newark Latina/o Pentecostal Congregations research project (carried on during my sabbatical in 2000-2001), my co-researchers and I were repeatedly startled by the unexpected, the diverse, the novel. A congregation whose billboard announced a woman pastor who was nowhere to be seen, while the man occasionally referred to as the pastor kept such a low profile (except for being the only one always in a suit and tie), that I only confirmed he *was* the pastor on the day when one of the constant leading voices in their prayer services, a

woman, was introduced as the *new* pastor. In another congregation, where homosexuality was explicitly condemned as an abomination, men repeatedly hugged each other, wept on each other's shoulders, danced and were slain in the Spirit, shared aloud their confusions and frailties, and took warm care of each other in ways that neither of us in the research team had yet witnessed in our mainstream churches. Or still another congregation, where a preacher derided this-worldly concerns – political or economic – and was followed by prayers indicting as sinful, among others, white supremacy, the power of the wealthy, the unfairness of the justice system, the official harassment of undocumented immigrants, and English-only policies and attitudes. And, in all of these congregations, we were surprised by the consistent mix of women, men, children and senior citizens; literate and illiterate, employed and unemployed; single and married parents; separated, divorced, and remarried persons; of twenty different countries and with all the human gamut of skin complexions; from well-to-do to near miserable; U.S. born, naturalized, residents, and undocumented; including drug addicts and alcoholics craving for acceptance, people fresh out of prison, alongside others who haven't been in any of these predicaments – all of them immigrants or children of immigrants, who, for their most part come to the Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church from a daily dose of humiliations, invisibility, *nobodiness*. In all these congregations, we noticed how, for most congregants, this was the *only* refuge inside the empire where they have thus far realized, experienced, *known*, their *somebodiness*: where they are warmly welcome, recognized and greeted by their names and in their language; inquired about their lives and loved ones, and, in a word, confirmed that their existence is real, makes sense, has a meaning, a worthwhile and sacred reality and purpose.

One of the facets of this Newark research experience which drove our team to rethink previous notions of “religion” emerged precisely in the contrast of, on the one hand, what we witnessed Latina/o Pentecostal congregants say and do in their prayers and in their relations with

each other, and, on the other hand, what appeared to be their norms and beliefs according to their denominational literature and/or to their verbal responses to questions posed by external interviewers. Take the case of the situation of many women in Pentecostal congregations. After sharing and discussing an enormous amount of services visited, oral histories recorded, conversations entertained, and interviews carried with congregants and pastors in dozens of Latina/o Pentecostal churches in Newark, all we could reach as a general observation was, one, the clear majority of women in these churches; two, the rich and wide variety of ways in which women *did* and experienced Pentecostalism; and three, the repeated instances in which our provisional generalizations were blown to pieces by specific cases. Let me point out the specific aspect of battered Pentecostal women. You can indeed find some churches where a battered wife is advised to bear her burden, especially if the husband is a frequent participant in the services – and in that Newark Latina/o Pentecostals are no different from white blue-collar Baptists, Black upper class Roman Catholics, Latina/o Methodists, or Korean-American middle-class Presbyterians. You can find other among these churches, though, where the congregation is quite supportive of some of the battered wives in their midst, especially when their husbands are not “good” members of the congregation – and that support might go as far as helping the woman move out of her home, get a new dwelling, bring charges against the husband, divorce him, and get a brand new spouse from her congregation. You can even find at least one of those churches where the pastor is herself a former battered wife who lives now without a husband. Again, a similar diversity might be found as to women’s leadership in the church, the education of women, or the right of women to have a fulfilling marital life.

There are probably very few other places in these U.S. of A. where a recently arrived, jobless, dark-skinned, Spanish-speaking, undocumented young woman without husband, parents, profession, or a high-school degree, can go and find an open and diverse community where she

feels acknowledged as an equal, treated with respect, invited to come back, sought after if she stops going, provided with a supportive and accessible network, trained as a leader, and given a chance to become a teacher, a preacher, a missionary or a pastor in just a few months – all of this for free, in her own mother tongue, and linked to the spiritual traditions of her own homeland, ancestors, and childhood. A place where empire does not have the last word, and where her life is sacred despite what authorities think or do. A place where she has a say as to which borders might be crossed for the sake of her survival, even against official claims to the contrary.

BEYOND IMPERIAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF “RELIGION”

In her 1993 Douglass lecture, Nancy Ammerman, the renowned sociologist of religion, reflected on the experiences leading her to realize “the extent to which” the still pervasive understanding of modern societies as undergoing a process of secularization is a story “which – like all such stories – belongs to those who have the power to speak it. It has been crafted to make sense of the lives of those whose lives ‘count’ in ways that other lives do not” (Ammerman 1994). The story of secularization is in many respects a story that doesn’t take into account the ways in which countless people – mostly those in the lower rungs of our societies – rely upon, and creatively reappropriate, the spiritual traditions of their ancestors, hosts or neighbors. But, as Nancy Ammerman asked us in the same lecture, “what would happen if we built our theories from the bottom up, if we started by listening to the experiences of those whose ideas never make it into libraries and whose practices simply get them through everyday life?” (Ammerman 1994). What would happen to our concept of “religion” if we strove to include in its expanse the voices of those whose fears, whose wardens, whose humiliating experiences, do not encourage them to speak their mind even to themselves?

Allow me to hint at the possibility that what “religion” often alludes to are precisely those societal sites and processes where it is decided whose lives are sacred, i.e., worthy of steady

protection, and whose lives are expendable, and can thus be profaned in several ways; but where it gets determined, too, who has the legitimate authority to partake in those decisions (as in the separation of church and state), and who, on the contrary, does not, and when, and how, and why.

Let me further share with you a suspicion that arose from Drew University's Newark Project (under the leadership of my colleague Karen McCarthy Brown); a suspicion pushing us to rethink "religion" beyond the interests and constraints of reputable religious institutions (interests and constraints all too often coinciding with those of empire). Throughout our research among many different groups in Newark we found ourselves increasingly wondering if focusing on established institutions, recognized traditions, prevailing creeds, official leaders, etc., though important indeed to understand our societies, would really allow us to grasp but a small segment of social dynamics – religious or otherwise – while veiling a copious range of processes of resistance, creativity, and subversion.

In a re-reading of Max Weber (enriched by Marx, Engels and Durkheim), Pierre Bourdieu had already proposed, over three decades ago, to view religion as another form of human productive labor. More specifically, as a form of symbolic labor: a human, collective effort of transformation of a cultural legacy in order to meet new, shared needs. For Bourdieu, it is in this *religious labor* that properly religious groups, interests, power dynamics and conflicts arise – and it is there that the fruits of religious labor (religious "goods") become both partially shaped by the forces and dynamics of the larger social context, but also relatively autonomous from, and occasionally offering resistance to, such forces and dynamics (Bourdieu 1987, 1991).

This emphasis on religion as action, as process, as production – rather than belief, belonging, or instituted institution – points toward increasing attention to how concrete groups and individuals *do* religion; to what they actually *do* as religion; to what they *do* of and for

themselves, for and to each other, with and through religion; including what they sometimes do despite and over against their own religion(s); as well as to what they do *to* religion itself and to its meanings in these processes. This seems to be at least a fertile complement, if not a counterweight, to studies too tangled in a view of “religions” as tangible, given, pre-existing, established institutions.

A similar change is under way in relation to persisting understandings of “religion” centered around written, systematized, intellectual codes of conduct and belief – which, as Dorothy Smith would underscore, are more often than not views both reflecting and reinforcing ruling relations in the community where such standpoints become normalized (Smith 1993). Postmodern and postcolonial thinkers insist on the importance of orality, mimicry, bricolage, and pastiche, among others, in the production of culture. The study of religion is one area where these perspectives are finding fertile ground.

Another renowned sociologist of religion, Meredith McGuire, has recently rejoined the postmodern, postcolonial questioning of fixed, clear boundaries supposedly allowing us to grasp and define “religion” as clearly distinct from “non-religious” phenomena. “Those boundaries,” she reminds us, “are social constructions. Thus, what we think of as ‘religious’ is not inherent in nature and certainly not an object that we can point to for easy empirical examination. Rather the definitional boundaries are a human product; they are also clearly ethnocentric. They use Western official religions as a baseline for comparison with other religious expressions, encountered as ‘Other’” (McGuire 2003a: 5). Elsewhere, McGuire goes further: “Such boundaries [...] are the *outcomes of contested meanings*, so their creation was inherently a political process” (McGuire 2003b: 4).

Allow me to bluntly suggest that when we think, talk and write about “religion,” what we all too often do is both to adopt and endorse what the elites of our own community understand

and accept (and at times practice) as *legitimate* “religion” – of course, we usually do this without realizing or deciding to do so, but, most likely, as R. D. Laing would put it, somehow choosing to ignore that that is what we are doing (Laing 1970). That which does not fit neatly into “religion” as we learned to picture it, we then often qualify it with adjectives, such as popular religion, black religion, women’s religion, folk religion – which, even when done out of a genuine identification with the subject of our study, reveals while hiding it that the power to define real “religion” lies not with those whose “religion” begs an adjective. Or else, we use labels that might unwittingly convey belittling overtones: religiosity, syncretism, superstition, magic, sorcery, witchcraft, sects, cults, fundamentalism, and the like.

There are ways, of course, of using some of these, and other, concepts and distinctions in a sound effort to get a better grasp of the lives and communities we care for. It is, however, crucial that we do it with an acute awareness that what is a normal, familiar world for some, is concurrently a hazardous, menacing world for many others: a world where concepts and distinctions that become normalized in various disciplines and institutions, often turn out to function as tools to secure relations of exploitation, exclusion, and elimination of the weakest among us. *Knowing* is never an aseptic, neutral, merely “objective” endeavor. Knowing constantly entails – whether we like it or not – ethical and political responsibilities that have to be reassessed over and over again. And knowing “religion” entails the peculiar challenge of dealing precisely with a dimension of social life in which – as in prisons and garrisons – silencing dissent and subduing diversity is a consistent feature of its history, even if no less so, however, than resisting oppression and creating alternatives beyond imperial confines.

Here I would like to bid welcome to the ongoing move away from seeing religion mainly, or solely, in terms both of *membership* in (or affiliation or belonging to) pre-existing institutions, and of *degrees of conformity* to the top-down codes and customs of such institutions – that is, as

if kathenotheism, henotheism, polytheism, pantheism, panentheism, deism, or monolatrism were mere theoretical fictions. In this direction, I have proposed elsewhere to consider multiple, coetaneous religious allegiances, as an older, broader and more intriguing phenomenon than, for instance, exclusive or successive religious affiliations: I mean simultaneous affiliations, as in a Lutheran pastor who attends Catholic masses more than once annually, participates in *Santería* rites several times a year, and keeps with her children and spouse the Jewish Sabbath at home (Maduro 2002). And let me warn about reducing such phenomena exclusively to an urban, free-market, postmodern trend. What might be more recent and urban is, yes, the growing tolerance and decriminalization of multiple religious allegiances, which of course allows for both an increased saliency and diffusion of the phenomenon (Warner 1993). But a growing number of historical studies (Pagels 1979; Brown 1989; Boyarin 2004) suggest that the phenomenon of people positively and simultaneously connecting with several distinct religious traditions is a millenarian phenomenon, probably older and more widespread than religious intolerance, and presumably at the root of most syncretizations – a phenomenon often entailing counter-imperial religious resistance, especially there where imperial religion(s) officially require exclusive allegiance from the citizenry.

In this sense, I am particularly interested in the ways in which *syncretism* and *hybridity* are being recast in the study of religious resistance to empire. McGuire, among others, has suggested that “ALL cultures are syncretic and the existence of any truly pure tradition – whether linguistic, ethnic, national or religious – is highly improbable” (McGuire 2000: 104). Let me add the hypothesis that “the existence of any truly pure tradition” is more often than not a socially constructed fiction, part and parcel of social strategies of self-legitimation and other-defamation; strategies whose history and dynamics we might want to examine more closely and which are deeply germane to imperial strategies of domination. I would thus submit that the

degree of visibility (or invisibility) of a so-called “syncretism” is usually more a function of power relations and struggles in the social context where the labeling takes place, and of the social location of the observer – thus, more a function of interests in, and means for, erasing the hybrid origins of mainstream institutions, while underscoring the “impurity” of the unruly subaltern – than the effect of any real traits inherent in the object of study itself. Or more bluntly stated: it will always be easier for the “religion” of an emperor– regardless of how naked he might be – to successfully present itself as orthodox and uncontaminated, than for the “religions” of those manually laboring in his domains to avoid being derided as “syncretic,” “magic,” or “superstitious.” As Pierre Bourdieu indicated long ago in relation to the distinction of “magic” and “religion,” what disciplinary concepts and taxonomies often unconsciously perform under the guise of objectively classifying diverse types of facts, is a surreptitious “scientific” legitimation of pre-existing cultural valuations and power hierarchies, thus both mirroring and reifying the asymmetric power relations among groups striving to legitimize what they do (Bourdieu 1991).

Let us take for instance Caribbean religious hybridizations and their visibility for anthropologists or sociologists of religion (i.e., in *santería*, *vodou*, or *palo monte*) – as opposed, for instance, to the invisibility of North American religious syncretizations in mainstream white middle class Protestant churches. My contention would be that these differences in visibility of the religious amalgamations at stake have very little to do with the objective traits of either tradition, and a lot to do with the latter set of religions (and their observers) being located closer to centers of national and global power, sharing in strategies and means for reproducing that location as well as for marginalizing subaltern religions such as the former. As have some among my former and current doctoral students, I would like to see more studies, for instance, of the syncretizations at work in Methodist history between the Wesleyan tradition, on the one hand,

and, on the other, U.S. white supremacy, middle class ethos, and Manifest Destiny. Similarly, I would encourage researchers on Pentecostalism to zero in the ongoing hybridizations in the Assemblies of God between its Holiness heritage and the extraneous trends of dispensationalism, Armageddon theology, and the gospel of prosperity – alongside with the abandonment of an earlier openness toward women leaders and pacifism. I would suggest to those researching the history of missions to study the processes of integration of (and resistance to) capitalism, militarism and U.S. hegemony into the evangelizing practices, among others, of both U.S. Protestant and Catholic missionaries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. To those interested in the sociology of Puerto Rican Christian churches I would propose to reconstruct the dynamics leading to the pervasive recasting of Puerto Rican nationalism as a *religious* heresy. Obviously, all these areas of research address the current interface of religion and the American empire.

Sanjay Joshi, in an interesting collection of essays called *The Invention of Religion*, suggests that “modernity restricted the meaning of religion to matters of private belief, its domain to the otherworldly and the esoteric, and its legitimate place to the world of rituals rather than the public and the political realm” (Joshi 2002: 79). I do not want so much to rejoin the discussion about the origins of our current usage of the term, as to link it to an ongoing conversation in our midst regarding the social forces that contribute to shape – in our past or in our present – the ways in which certain meanings of “religion” are subtly enforced while others are obliterated.

Three examples might serve better to illustrate my concerns than a barrage of abstract generalizations.

A first one from firsthand experience. In 1981, in Manaus (Brazil), the annual meeting of CEHILA (the Ecumenical Commission for the History of the Church in Latin America) had as keynote speaker a Brazilian Indian leader, invited to make a presentation about his own

community's religious history. The lecturer opened with a brief disclaimer that he was not taking any questions, in reciprocity for the as yet unanswered queries his community had posed to missionaries for over the last four centuries. This warning was followed by a presentation where he draw his community's living territories in a blackboard, while simultaneously describing what for western-trained ears would be the geography, history, religion, ethics, polity, and economy of his people. The anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of the church that bade him farewell on his way out were left speechless for a long while. In the following days, a crucial, uncomfortable hunch began to take verbal form among us: there probably was no way of detecting a "religion" in many non-western cultures, except by forcing certain concepts onto them while simultaneously including therein a wide array of dimensions we have learned to bracket out of, and pose in contradistinction to, our own understanding of "religion."

Another illustration. As many of you might know, *Santería* priests – as *babalawos* are often designated in a problematic analogy with mainstream Christian clergy – frequently require for rites of protection and thanksgiving the sacrifice of doves and chicken (sort of like a Sunday cookout in any of our churches; except with many less chicken sacrificed or dumped in the garbage, and not cooking or eating any of them). In the U.S., however (unlike Christian church barbecues), these rites continue to be subject to police and judicial harassment – often after denunciations by local chapters of the Humane Society – and protestations of religious freedom seldom serve to shield them from such actions. Food for thought, I'd say.

Yet one more case for reflection. In an article in the Spring 2001 in *Religion in the News*, Dennis R. Hoover analyzed the U.S. fate of what David Beckman – president of Bread for the World – had called "the biggest religious news story of the year," the worldwide inter-religious campaign toward debt relief for the Third World, launched in the 90s and reaching its climax in 2000. "While the European press gave significant coverage to the Jubilee movement, for the

most part the U.S. news media passed on the story. In so doing journalists slighted a major global story that revealed a lot about the power of organized religious groups to influence political and economic policies.” And this despite the fact that “the campaign achieved considerable legislative success in the Republican-controlled U.S. Congress” (Hoover 2001:15).

In the real world of human social interaction – marked by imbalances of power and shifting solidarities as well as by competition, greed, fears, conflicts, and wars – whatever “religion” ends up predominantly meaning in a certain juncture, region or period, is probably more a fruit of relations of force, clashing interests, deep-seated prejudices, unconscious power strategies, and dissimilar capacities for resource mobilization than of any “rational,” “measured” or “democratic” processes. As Humpty Dumpty tells Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, the question is not so much “whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.” “The question is, [sadly, I’d say] which is to be master – that’s all.” Or, from a less cynical and pessimistic perspective, but a more demanding one, the question would be – as researchers, theorists, teachers, advisors, writers, or consultants on religious matters living under imperial duress – how to resist the master narratives of “religion” in the daily exercise of our trade. And further: how can the exercise of our disciplines come to grips with the deep ethical, epistemologico-political, responsibility of not trampling further the lives of those whose labor renders possible a decent living for the few, while the many hardly get enough to entertain other than fragile certainties and tenuous hopes for their morrow.

CONCLUSION: COMPLICATING “RELIGION”

Let me suggest that we seriously consider the possibility that our current understandings of “religion” have long been (and continue to be) scarred by their location under imperial duress. That, under an appearance of objectivity, neutrality and detachment, our understandings of “religion” are ensnared in dynamics of exclusion of the subaltern and sacralization of the mighty,

and filled with misrecognized value judgments. That maybe only by taking seriously such possibility could we get a bit closer to the life-nurturing facet of that elusive, ambiguous ideal of a neutral, value-free, scientific study of religion (or, at least, move further away from being unwitting accomplices and beneficiaries of politics of exclusion, marginalization and subjugation of the most vulnerable among and around us). Until then, it might be more salutary for our disciplines to hold in suspicion any easy claims of neutrality and value-freedom in the understanding and study of “religion,” while asking ourselves who benefits, and who doesn’t, from understanding “religion” in thus and such ways and not in others.

At any rate, let me close by proposing that we complicate further the study of religion, by multiplying the dimensions, questions, subject, and dynamics included in it. And that we do it in a similar spirit of epistemological humility as the one which western physics began to develop in 1927, when Werner Heisenberg formulated the uncertainty principle, or principle of indeterminacy (“The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa”); a principle that we might reformulate today for our own subject by way of saying, for instance, that the more precisely we attempt to define what “religion” is, the less capable we will be to grasp its momentum in this instant, and vice versa.

May our research and reflections on “religion” contribute to, rather than hinder, the counter-imperial struggles of people everywhere to have their lives, and those of their children, neighbors, friends, and other loved ones recognized as sacred, worthy of tender care and respect, rather than consistently threatened, busted, bombed, or trampled by this-worldly powers and principalities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to warmly thank Karen McCarthy Brown, Samuel Cruz, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Catherine Keller, Traci West, Carlos Sintado, Arthur Pressley, and especially Mayra Rivera and Laurel Kearns, for their support and advice in my struggle to get these ideas in an acceptable shape. And my son, Mateo, for thoughtfully offering that I take a break from reading him bedtime stories so that I had more time to finish this piece.

NOTES

1. The literature on the topic is not just enormous, but it is multiplying incessantly after the U.S. 9/11 (unfortunately, there was an earlier, Latin American, 9/11, in 1973 in Chile, with the U.S. on the perpetrating side of terror).
2. Among the most reputable analysts critiquing the narrow neo-liberal capitalist globalization forced from above on Third World nations are the 2001 Nobel Prize and former World Bank Vice President and Chief Economist Joseph E. Stiglitz (2002) and the billionaire businessman and philanthropist George Soros (2002).
3. Rockefeller 1969; Einaudi, Mauli, Stepan, and Fleet 1969; The Committee of Santa Fe 1980; Marchetti and Marks 1974; Anderson and Anderson 1986; Omang and Neier 1985.
4. U.S. population growth was already in 2002 at its lowest point since the 1930s. "[T]he rate of population growth is projected to decrease during the next five decades by about one third. After 2025, the United States would grow more slowly than ever before" (Bureau of the Census 1996:1). Major demographic shifts, however, are setting this slowdown apart. Between 1990 and 2000, U.S. Hispanics grew nearly 58%: from 22 million (9% of the total) to over 35 million – 12.5% of the current U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Of the nearly 33 million people added to the national population in that decade, about 37% (some 13 million) were Hispanics. Thus, Latinas/os numbered in 2000 one in eight persons living in the U.S. – slightly more than the non-Hispanic black population. "Every year from now to 2050, the race/ethnic group adding the largest number of people to the population would be the Hispanic-origin population. In fact, after 2020 the Hispanic population is projected to add more people to the United States every year than would all other race/ethnic groups combined" (Bureau of the Census 2001:1). Census estimates put U.S. Latinas/os near 100,000,000 in 2050 (25.6% of the U.S. population), when non-Hispanic whites will have decreased to less than half of the U.S. population (Bureau of the Census 2001:12).
5. "[H]igh birthrates and immigration have made Hispanics responsible for 71 percent of the Catholic Church's growth in the past 40 years. Estimates put Hispanics at anywhere from 17 percent to 35 percent of the nation's Catholic population." (Wakin 2002). Andrew Greeley, based on data from the research center he directs, claimed in 1988 that nearly 60,000 Latinas/os were then annually leaving the U.S. Roman Catholic church for Evangelical/Pentecostal churches, and that in the 15 years between 1973 and 1988 already a million (or 8%) Hispanic Catholics had done so (Greeley 1988). The understudied phenomenon of Hispanic conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism and Pentecostalism is referred to by Kenneth Davis, Allan Deck, and others as the "Hispanic Shift." Edwin I. Hernandez states that "[t]his may be the most significant shift in religious affiliation since the Reformation, and represents a 20 percent loss of Catholic Hispanic membership in as many years" (1999), while Manuel Vásquez notes that, "[a]lthough reliable numbers are difficult to obtain, some estimates place the number of Latino Protestants at 6.2 million - more than 25% of the total Latino population in the U.S. Among Latino Protestants 36% consider themselves Pentecostal, by far the largest denominational proportion – the second being Baptist with 23%" (1999).

REFERENCES

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 1994. "Telling Congregational Stories." *Review of Religious Research* 35(4):289-301.
- Anderson, Scott and John Lee Anderson. 1986. *Inside the League*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Beyer, Peter. 1994. *Religion and Globalization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boot, Max. 2001. "The Case for American Empire." *Weekly Standard* Oct 15:7, 5.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. "Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion." In Sam Whimster and Scott Lash (eds.), *Max Weber Rationality and Modernity*, pp.119-136. London: Allen & Unwin.
1991. "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field." In Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Comparative Social Research: Religious Institutions*, pp.1-44. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 2004. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. 2002. "You Better Believe Federal Faith-Based Funding Is a Bad Idea." *Los Angeles Times* December 24:B13.
- Brown, Peter. 1989. *The World of Late Antiquity A.D. 150-750*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Bureau of the Census. 1996. "Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050." (<http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t1/tab04.txt>). Retrieved 12/13/03.
- Chester, Eric Thomas. 2001. *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff, and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965-1966*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Cobb, Kim. 2003. "For Migrants, Jobs Come With a Price." *Houston Chronicle*. June 7. (<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/special/deadlycrossing/1941862>). Retrieved 10/6/03.
- Committee of Santa Fe, The. 1980. *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*. Washington, DC: Council for Inter-American Security.
- Daalder, Ivo H. and James M. Lindsay. 2003. "American Empire, Not 'If' But 'What Kind'." *New York Times*. May 10 B:9,11.
- DePalma, Anthony. 2002. "Hispanics Still Backing Catholic Leaders, For Now." *New York Times*. May 1:A-22.
- D'Souza, Dinesh. 2002. "In Praise of American Empire." *Christian Science Monitor*. April 26:11.

- Domínguez, Jorge I., ed. 2002. *The Future of Inter-American Affairs: An Inter-American Dialogue Book*. New York: Routledge.
- Dunn, Timothy J. 1993. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Einaudi, Luigi, Richard Maullin, Alfred Stepan and M. Fleet. 1969. *Latin American Institutional Development: The Changing Catholic Church*. Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation.
- Espinosa, Gaston. 1999. "El Azteca: Francisco Olazábal and Latino Pentecostal Charisma, Power, and Faith Healing in the Borderlands." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67(3):597-616.
- Greeley, Andrew. 1988. "Defection among Hispanics." *America*. 30:61-62.
- Hernández, Edwin. 1999. "Moving from the Cathedral to Storefront Churches: Understanding Religious Growth and Decline Among Latino Protestants." In David Maldonado (ed.), *Protestants/Protestantes*, pp.216-235. Nashville, TN: Abingdon
- Hoover, Dennis R. 2001. "What Would Moses Do? Debt Relief in the Jubilee Year." *Religion in the News* 4(1):15-17.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 2003. "The American Empire: The Burden." *The New York Times Magazine* January 5:23ff.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. 2003. *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology (10th Anniversary Edition)*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Jones, Arthur. 2003. "Pilgrimage: 'Stop These Deaths'." *National Catholic Reporter* Sept.19:13.
- Joseph, Gilbert M., Catherine C. Legrand and Ricardo Salvatore, eds. 1998. *Close Encounters of Empire. Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Joshi, Sanjay. 2002. "Republicizing Religiosity: Modernity, Religion, and the Middle Class." In Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof (eds.), *The Invention of Religion*, pp.79-99. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Kaplan, Robert D. 2003. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Requires a Pagan Ethos*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Laing, R. D. 1970. *Knots*. New York: Random House.
- Lernoux, Penny. 1991. *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America—The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy*. New York: Penguin.
- Maduro, Otto. 2002. "On the Theoretical Politics of Defining 'Religion.'" *Social Compass* 49(4):601-605.
- Maldonado, David, ed. 1999. *Protestants/Protestantes: Hispanic Christianity within Mainline Traditions*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.

- Marchetti, Victor and John D. Marks. 1974. *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*. New York: Dell Publishing Co.
- Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand and Norman J. Malone, eds. 2002. *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Free Trade*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- McCutcheon, Russell. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2000. "Toward a Sociology of Spirituality." *Tidsskrift for kirke, religion og samfunn* 13(2):99-111.
- 2003a. "Why Bodies Matter: A Sociological Reflection on Spirituality and Materiality." *Spiritus* 3:1-18.
- 2003b. "Lived Religion: Spirituality and Materiality in Individuals' Religious Lives." Book project presented to Rutgers University Press.
- Meldon, Jerry. 1997. "Return of Bolivia's Drug-Stained Dictator." Retrieved 12/13/03 (<http://www.consortiumnews.com/archive/story40.html>).
- Morgan, Dan. 2003. "A Debate Over U.S. 'Empire' Builds in Unexpected Circles." *The Washington Post*. August 10. (http://www.truthout.org/docs_03/081203G.shtml). Retrieved 10/8/03.
- National Security Archive, The. 2001. "Operation Condor: Cable Suggests U.S. Role." (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20010306>). Retrieved on 12/13/03.
- Nevins, Joseph. 2002. *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge.
- Omang, Joanne and Aryeh Neier. 1985. *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare: The CIA's Nicaragua Manual*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ortiz, Sr. Dianna (with Patricia Davis). 2002. *The Blindfold's Eyes. My Journey from Torture to Truth*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Pagels, Elaine. 1979. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House.
- Prestowitz, Clyde. 2003. *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions*. Lowell: Basic Books.
- Ramírez, Daniel. 1999. "Borderland Praxis: The Immigrant Experience in Latino Pentecostal Churches." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67(3):573-596.
- Rockefeller, Nelson. 1969. *The Rockefeller Report on the Americas. With an Introduction by Tad Szulc*. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books.

- Schlesinger, Stephen and Stephen Kinzer. 1999. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, (expanded edition). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University/David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies.
- Schoultz, Lars. 1998. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1993. *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. New York: Routledge.
- Soros, George. 2002. *George Soros on Globalization*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2002. *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: Norton.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2000. "Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1, PL2, PL3, and PL4."
(http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsTable?_lang=en&_vt_name=DEC_2000_PL_U_QTPL&_geo_id=16000US3451000).
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2001. "Table 4. Difference in Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, for the United States: 1990 to 2000." <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t1/tab04.txt>
- Vásquez, Manuel. 1999. "Pentecostalism, Collective Identity, and Transnationalism Among Salvadoreans and Peruvians in the U.S." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67(3):618.
- Wakin, Daniel. 2002. "Ammunition in a Battle for Souls." *New York Times* May 22:B-4.
- Warner, R. Stephen. 1993. "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 98:1044-1093.