

Presentation

SO FAR FROM GOD... RELIGION BETWEEN POWER AND DISSIDENCE

One notion generally believed to be characteristic of things religious is the supernatural, understood as all those orders of things that lie beyond the scope of our understanding; the supernatural world is one of mystery, of the unknowable, of the incomprehensible.

Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*¹

The supernatural aspect of the phenomenon of religion, which according to classical works of anthropology and sociology defines it as such, has been inseparable from the phenomenon of the political in diverse societies throughout history. The establishment of, and obedience to, moral norms dictated by religious doctrines, accompanied by ritual practice, have often been intertwined and combined with structures of domination and the exercise of power. But the acts of religiosity, its discourses and rituality transcend the sphere of the purely sacred where they are transformed into elements of the legitimization of power groups in society, of contentions among those groups, and even of the vindication of social sectors that dissent from hegemonic power. Examples from the annals of history are innumerable, reflecting a geometry with many variables and nuances that spans the extensive religious wars of 16th- and 17th-century Europe and phenomena

¹ Émile Durkheim, *Las formas elementales de la vida religiosa*, Mexico, Colofón [s.a.], 30.

associated with rebellions like those of the Virgin of Cancuc and the Tzeltal uprising of 1712.² There, religious discourse and its sacred character are so far removed from God that they end up as prisoners of such human passions as power or, in the best case scenario, elements vindicated through the actions of marginalized groups as they confront social injustices. The *Thematic Section* of this issue analyzes some points that may help broaden reflections on this topic.

In the Catholic religion, sprinkling Holy Water is a ritual practice performed to bless people, objects and spaces that during the *Ancién Régime* descended into the never wholly profane field of politics. The clearest instances transpired in the context of public ceremonies orchestrated by diverse corporations and authorities to consolidate the privileges of exercising jurisdiction and hierarchy over others. Under the Spanish Monarchy sprinkling Holy Water on the representatives of both ecclesiastical and secular authority became an important element of public ceremonial, as David Carbajal López demonstrates in his article. However, the increasing number of intermediate authorities introduced by late-19th-century reformism in New Spain generated changes in those rituals, some related to the broadening of the jurisdiction of Royal Patronage (*patronato regio*) where the issue of aspersion provoked controversies that in most cases remained unresolved. This phenomenon is of the utmost importance for it represented the naturalization of a sacred element in the sphere of the relations of institutional and personal power.

As we contemplate phenomena that reveal the slippage of the sacred into the profane space of societies—usually of the past, but also some current ones—questions emerge as to how, and why, collective consciences are formed that allow subjects to perceive this overlap between the supernatural and the everyday as somehow ‘natural’. Without doubt, the process through which individuals interiorize religious phenomena is a highly significant one that must be taken into account, and surely one fundamental factor in such processes of collective interiorization is the deployment of religious discourse and

² Juan Pedro Viqueira, *María de la Candelaria, india natural de Cancuc*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993.

religious imaginary in objects that are in plain view of the general public. From the hallowed objects used in liturgy to grand architectural works –not to mention paintings and sculpture– art is transformed into a vehicle for the diffusion, didactics and demonstration of the presence of the sacred in everyday life. In this regard, Javier Ayala Calderón takes the example of the gargoyles at the Augustinian Convent in Cuitzeo (Michoacán) to expound upon how elements of religious life gain expression in the iconographic display of architectural wholes. Are those gargoyles components of a discourse of spiritual perfecting that reflects and, simultaneously, recalls the finality of the monk's cloistered life? Do such architectural montages reflect the social and functional separation, in religious terms, between priest and faithful?

Whatever the mechanisms through which the interiorization of the religious phenomenon and its slippage towards earthly matters occurs in a society may be, the complexity of this reality finds a vigorous means of expression when it comes to defending identities, especially in relation to questions of a national nature. But the construction of identities –not only national but also other kinds– tends to go hand-in-hand with the construction of otherness, almost always negatively conceived. Jean Meyer takes the reader back to the case of Tsarist Russia in the times of Dostoyevsky, when the vicissitudes of international politics after a hundred years of monarchical crises triggered by the political modernity implanted by the French Revolution virulently reanimated the anti-Catholicism of the governors of *Rossiia-Matushka* (Mother Russia); an attitude that simultaneously reaffirmed the traditional, highly-orthodox character of empire. Russian anti-Catholicism, the horror provoked by the Roman religion –similar to the effect of the Poles, Russia's always 'uncomfortable' neighbors– translated into an *aggiornamento* of Russia's well-known, but by then jaded, "machinations of the Jesuits"; that is, the plotting of the Pope's black soldiers.

The *Thematic Section* closes with a text by Nadine Béliand that examines the Indian rebellions along what we might call the interior frontiers of New Spain –in this case, the Sierra Gorda and Sierra Norte in the state of Puebla– during the 5-year period from 1765-to-

1770. The author's comparison of these two regions is enriched by a meticulously-detailed analysis and the elaboration of a taxonomy of both the subjects in conflict (Indian and non-Indian) and the elements that participated in the construction of a popular religiosity that acquired the character of a rebellious, indigenous Christianity-Catholicism.

But the topic of religiosity transcends the limits of the *Thematic Section* to infiltrate other niches in this issue, as in the case of the document presented by Thomas Hillerkuss and Georgina Quiñones, a lengthy last will and testament from early 17th-century Mexico City. In addition to other interesting elements—such as the reconstruction of the testator's genealogy and his strategies of insertion and upwards social mobility as an official of the Mint (*Casa de Moneda*)—the text recalls the intimate relation between the everyday events of earthly existence and the salvation of the soul. Accompanying this contribution, the article by Rodolfo Aguirre, which opens the *General Section*, deals with a fundamental aspect of religious life in New Spain with its focus on the subsistence mechanisms of priests based on parochial income and the modalities of their regimen of sustenance during the first half of the 18th century.

Finally, in the spirit of carrying on one of *Relaciones'* original proposals, the *General Section* closes with two articles that present regional studies. The first, by Pedro Loeza *et al.*, analyzes the Chapala Wetlands in historical perspective placing emphasis on the interplay of transformations and permanence as constitutive elements of the region. In the second, Federico Reyes examines the problem of the sustainable rural development policies implemented on the Ignacio Allende *ejido*, located within the boundaries of the Natural Protected Area *Cañón del Usumacinta*. Above all, Reyes adopts the perspective of natural resources to discuss the negative impact of those policies on the local subsistence strategies developed by the region's inhabitants over several generations.

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