

The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Study of Socio-Religious Identity

by *Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel*

The Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the most iconic Christian symbols in the world. She is, however, more often misunderstood or misinterpreted and portrayed (especially by North American evangelicals) as a syncretistic, idolatrous image. In Latin America, she is often elevated to the status of the divine. She is recognized as the patron saint of the Americas, and has been alternately nicknamed “Queen of Mexico,” “Empress of the Americas,” and “Patroness of the Americas.” Her basilica is the second-most visited Catholic site in the world after the Vatican. It seems that the fate of many important women in history (more so than men) is to be mythologized, the historical person being overtaken by the myth—examples include Joan of Arc, Pocahontas, Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth I, Sacagawea, Betsy Ross, Helen Keller, Anne Frank, and especially Mary the mother of Jesus. Why might this be? For whatever reason, these women become more useful as cultural symbols and rallying points than as real people whose historical role is accurately understood.

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It has been far too easy for North American evangelical Christians to dismiss the Virgin of Guadalupe as syncretistic without exploring fully her dynamic role in the religious life of Latin America. Even Latin American Protestants preemptively claim her role, her story, and her apparitions as heresy without considering the vital insights they might gain from their own religious history. We’re tempted to share these reactions, especially when the Virgin is often regarded more highly than Jesus across much of Latin America. People pray to her first before they pray to God, asking her for healing and protection. Yet, by dismissing the Virgin entirely, we believe we miss crucial lessons in the connectivity of pagan religion, the Christian faith, and the cultural orientation of an indigenous people.

History of the Virgin of Guadalupe

The Virgin of Guadalupe originated from the province of Cáceres in the Extremadura region of Spain, and is one of several black Madonnas in that country. Her official name is Our Lady of Guadalupe and her statue is housed

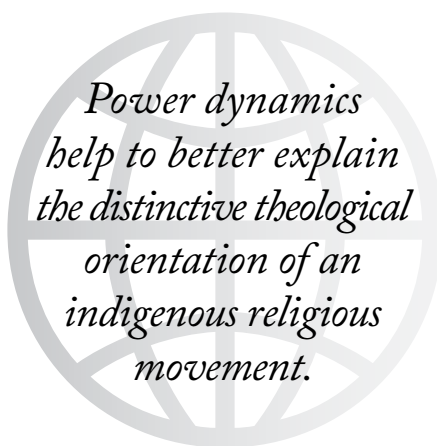
in the basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe. She was the most important Madonna during the medieval period of the Kingdom of Castile. When the idea of the “Brown Virgin” came to the Americas (as she became popularly known after indigenization), one of the most significant religious developments occurred that would change the face of Latin American religion. The two earliest accounts of this story were published by Miguel Sánchez in 1648 in Spanish, and in 1649 in Nahuatl. The latter and more authoritative account was written by Luis Lasso de la Vega.¹

On December 9, 1531, an Aztec named Cuauhtlatoatzin (Christianized name Juan Diego) happened to be walking through Tepeyac on his way to church in Tlatelolco when he suddenly heard a sweet voice summoning him. On the hilltop he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary in Aztec dress who spoke to him in his indigenous language, asking that a church be built in her honor on that very spot. He proceeded to relay this request to the first Bishop of Mexico City, Juan de Zumárraga, who promptly dismissed him. Juan Diego returned to the Virgin, reporting his lack of success and lack of credibility. She requested that he return to see the Bishop, which he did. The second visit made a little more headway when the Bishop asked for a sign as proof.

On Diego’s third visit to the Virgin, she provided that very proof. Juan Diego’s uncle, Juan Bernardino, was ill at the time. The Virgin said to Diego: “Know, rest very much assured, my youngest child, let nothing whatever frighten you or worry you. Do not be concerned. Do not fear the illness or any illness or affliction. Am I, your mother, not here?” Not only did she heal his uncle at that very moment, but on top of the hill in mid-winter she provided a miracle of flowers. He gathered the flowers into his indigenous cloak (known as a *tilma*) and carried the flowers to Bishop Zumárraga. When he opened his poncho, a painted image of the Virgin was emblazoned on

his cloak in their stead. The Bishop got the sign he wanted and commissioned a shrine at Tepayac to house the cloak. Though the origins of this story and even the very historical existence of Juan Diego are in doubt, this cult of the Virgin caught fire in the hearts and imaginations of Mexicans everywhere.²

The building that housed the cloak was completed in 1709 by Pedro de Arrieta. Eventually this old basilica began sinking into its foundations, Mexico City having been built on the bed of a drained lake (Lake Texcoco, on the site of the former Aztec capital city Tenochtitlán). For this reason, and to accommodate the overwhelming number of pilgrims, architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was commissioned to design a new basilica, which was built between 1974



and 1976, right next to the former location. The cloak of the Virgin was framed and placed in this new basilica with a moving walkway underneath to keep the visitors from crowding the image. The Virgin commands such awe and respect that many pilgrims approach the basilica on their knees when they get within several hundred yards, or even a few miles, of the building. Visitors are especially frequent on the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is December 12.

Latin Americans vs. North Americans

To properly understand this phenomenon of the Virgin of Guadalupe it is important to appreciate how Latin

Americans are different from North Americans in their understanding of the three categories of race, class, and gender, and how these relate to their religious faith. These are frequently seen as the three lenses of liberation theology: black, Latin American, and feminist, respectively. But these three categories are also recounted in the Pauline epistles: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28). The Apostle Paul also addresses this threefold dynamic in Ephesians 3:6, 5:22, and 6:5, as well as in Colossians 3:11, 19, and 22.³ These categories, what we interpret as power dynamics, help to better explain the distinctive theological orientation of an indigenous religious movement that emerged around the Virgin of Guadalupe.

For North Americans, theology has more often been understood as acultural, apolitical, asexual, and non-racial. In other words, it is often the case that the well-intentioned dominant majority is not aware of the lenses through which they view the world. They see themselves and the worldview that underlies their theology as normative. A minority, on the other hand, may be more aware of those lenses in comparison to a powerful majority. However, though Latinos may be a minority in North America, it ought not to be forgotten that the whole of Latin America has a much larger population than the United States, and as such, they may also be quite unaware of how their own lenses on theology are affected by race, class, and gender.

The reality is that these three power dynamics are historically and culturally different in North America. In the North the racial mixing of blood is a relatively new phenomenon, while in Latin America it has been present from the very beginning of European contact with the Americas. This also has a profound effect on political perspectives: European descendants in

North America classify themselves as the conquerors, whereas Latin Americans, because of their mixed heritage, identify with both the conquerors and conquered. There is a tension in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, between these two identities, which might be seen as a cultural *mestizaje* (a racial and/or socio-cultural mixture). Finally, though Latin America is a patriarchal society (even more so than North America), it is ironically the women who form the backbone of society and thus are more stable, foundational, and important.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is perhaps the most significant way that these three inextricably linked perspectives find their expression in Latin American Catholicism. In some ways, she *had* to be female, indigenous or mixed race, and identified with the oppressed or common people. It must be remembered that she had significance in New Spain back when it was not yet Mexico—when there was still a distinction between conqueror and conquered—as well as to modern-day Latin America. From the very beginning, when the Virgin was identified with the Aztec goddess Tonantzin (Tepeyac was the hill which was associated with her), the adaptability of her religious role became apparent. This adaptability—which not only bridges geographies and ethnicities; but also time and situation—is what makes the Virgin so remarkable. The following sections will explore her religious dexterity through the categories of race, gender, and class, as well as through the more typical category of religion. Each is not so much a clear-cut category, but more a perspective or a lens, since each overlaps in and through the Virgin's role in Latin American religious expression.

Indigenous: The Virgin and Race

It is not insignificant that Juan Diego was racially an Aztec, and that the Virgin appeared to him with indigenous clothing, speech,

Embracing the Brown Virgin was a conscious act of putting down roots in the New World. —Gregory Rodriguez

and skin coloring. Latin America is a very racially mixed continent: the offspring of Spaniards and Indians were called *mestizos*; of Spaniards and Africans were *mulattos*; and of Indians and blacks, *zambos*.⁴ Some have been further delineated the racial categories as follows:

Spaniard + *mestizo* = *castizo*

Spaniard + *mulatto* = *morisco*

Spaniard + *morisco* = *albino*

Spaniard + *albino* = *torna atrás*

Indian + *torna atrás* = *lobo*

Indian + *lobo* = *zambaigo*

Indian + *zambaigo* = *cambujo*

cambujo + *mulatto* = *albarazado*

albarazado + *mulatto* = *barcino*

barcino + *mulatto* = *coyote*

Indian + *coyote* = *chamiso*

chamiso + *mestizo* = *coyote mestizo*

coyote mestizo + *mulatto* = *ahí te estás*⁵

Regardless of the ways that these designations are parsed, the fact remains that multiple racial permutations constitute part of the fabric of this continent. One of the most significant examples of this phenomenon is that the Mexican Independence of 1810 was started by *criollos* (people of Spanish descent born in the New World), not by people of indigenous background. Similar to North Americans during the Revolution against the British, *criollos* in the Americas began to identify more with their birthplace than their ancestral homeland. They were Mexicans, not Spaniards. And “for *criollos*, embracing the Brown Virgin was a conscious act of putting down roots in the New World.”⁶

As Octavio Paz observes, first and foremost “se trata de una Virgen india”⁷ [it's about an Indian Virgin]. Though

today the Virgin of Guadalupe is easily recognizable by her brown skin and Mexican or Indian features, how did she become this way? Certainly she was not presented this way to the Indians. Whether the Spanish Virgin was originally brought to the Americas as a white (European) Virgin, or as the “black virgin”⁸ of Byzantine origin from Extremadura in Spain,⁹ it is clear that the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was transformed in the New World. Gregory Rodriguez also puzzles,

The Indians appropriated her image and through a process that is shrouded by myth and legend, the Mexican Guadalupe became brown-skinned.¹⁰

However this came to be, there continues to be a racial distinction in Latin America between Christ and the Virgin: the former is white, the latter is brown. This may seem a small point, but it is a powerful one. It highlights the feeling that Christ is imported, but the Virgin is one of the people. She is “mother” and could not have been so if she did not look like the people.

The Virgin of Guadalupe served a symbiotic function prompted by necessity: people believed in her and she gave them what they needed. The fact that nearly every Latin American country has its own version of the Virgin shows that the conquered people all desired an image with whom they could identify. In Cuba, she became known as the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre; in Bolivia she is Our Lady of Copacabana; in Brazil she is Our Lady Aparecida; in Nicaragua she is Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of El Viejo;¹¹ and in Venezuela she is the Virgin of Coromoto. She transcends not only nations but also ethnicities. She is viewed paradoxically as both a Christian symbol that

legitimizes the European right to invade and evangelize the New World as well as a racial affirmation of the identity and worth of the indigenous Christian community.¹² This is not unlike black slaves in the American South who appropriated the religion of their oppressors in order to find worth, dignity, and hope; and even when the oppression subsided, their faith remained as an affirmation of their indigenous identity. However, in Latin America, the Virgin had a more profound unifying effect, where Latin America came to be seen as a single entity despite different races and even languages (notably Spanish vs. Portuguese). The Virgin as patron saint, first of Mexico and then of all Latin America, transcended difference and contributed vitally to this unity.¹³

Female: The Virgin and Gender

When attempting to comprehend the significance of the Virgin of Guadalupe for the Mexican populace, we must reflect on the country's origins and the first contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples. Unlike the British who established themselves as *settlers* in the Thirteen Colonies and brought their families, the Spanish conquistadores came to the New World as *conquerors* without their women, so they needed to take the indigenous women for their own. This was further exacerbated by an indigenous culture where women were given away as gifts and sacrifices, especially when the Spaniards were regarded as gods. These factors begin to explain the drastically different evolution of societies in North America and Latin America.

Plainly stated, Mexicans are the children of the violated woman. When understood in this manner, the fervor with which the Virgin of Guadalupe is venerated does not come as much of a surprise. As philosopher Carlos Fuentes explains regarding the Mexican national identity, through the Virgin of Guadalupe,

De un golpe maestro, las autoridades españolas transformaron al pueblo

indígena de hijos de la mujer violada en hijos de la purísima Virgen. De Babilonia a Belén, en un relámpago de genio político.¹⁴

[In a master stroke, the Spanish authorities transformed the indigenous population from being children of the raped woman to children of the pure Virgin—from Babylon to Bethlehem in one flash of political genius].

This created the foundation for the ferocious loyalty of Mexicans to the Virgin, because the conquered people had found their mother and their hope all in one fell swoop.

Allow us a historical comparison at this point. The Virgin provides a very different source of identity from that of La Malinche, who is perhaps the most notorious woman in Mexi-



can history. The latter was originally known as Malintzin (or Doña Marina by the Spanish) and served Hernan Cortés (the conqueror of Mexico), as mistress and interpreter, as she spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan.¹⁵ Today she is regarded throughout Mexico as a Judas figure, as she not only was bedded by Cortés but provided information to him and the conquistadores which was useful in overthrowing the Aztec empire. Her name is sometimes spoken with revilement¹⁶ and she was both iconic and infamous, her mythological status far overshadowing her actual historical persona.

Large amounts of literature have gone into detail about this comparison

between the raped and helpless woman, and the holy and untouched Virgin. Likewise, there is a corresponding shame and dignity attached, respectively, to being either the offspring of a raped and dominated woman or the offspring of a pure Virgin mother who is free of male dominance. The Mexican populace not only regards La Malinche as the violated mother but also as a traitor to the indigenous people. She went from being Malintzin, one of the twenty slave girls presented to Cortés as a gift from Aztec Emperor Moctezuma, to being La Malinche, meaning “woman of the conquistador.”¹⁷ And yet, at the same time, her treason went hand in hand with having no other option—she was a slave, who became Cortés’ lover and child-bearer, and mother to a new people. She gave birth to his first son, Martín, who was one of the first *mestizos* and thus the primogenitor of a new race. Yet, the children of conquistadores and Indians were not acknowledged as legitimate. Again, this was much the same as in the American South when white slave owners could produce offspring with their black slaves in order to increase their slave population.

Herein lies the irony of Mexican identity: both the Virgin and La Malinche offer an indigenous or *mestizo* identity but only one offers dignity to inferiors in a power relationship, and that makes all the difference in being seen as a scorned or venerated symbol.¹⁸ “Por contraposición a Guadalupe, que es la Madre virgen, la Chingada es la Madre violada.”¹⁹ [In contraposition to the Guadalupe, who is the virgin Mother, the Chingada is the violated mother.] The Virgin thus offers an alternative identity which is not based on historical reality—while the mixed-race identity of most Mexicans today is historically explained by rape and conquest, it is spiritually reinterpreted through the Virgin, who offers a much more palatable and attractive identity. Instead of being illegitimate children of the rapist father,

they are granted legitimacy through the pure Virgin mother.

In a way, this reinterpretation may be analogous to Muslim appropriation of the Judeo-Christian story of Abraham attempting to sacrifice Isaac, and their replacing the son with Ishmael. It is a vindication of the “other” woman (Hagar over Sarah) and a legitimizing of the illegitimate son who is seen as the forefather of Arab-Muslims. Yet, it was even more complex with the conquistadores because Cortés’ son with La Malinche, Martín, was baptized and even recognized to a certain extent. However, Cortés’ second son, who was from his actual Spanish wife, Catalina Juárez, was also called Martín, but in his case he was afforded full privileges of sonship. The predicament lay in this:

La legitimación del bastardo, la identificación del huérfano, se convirtió en uno de los problemas centrales, aunque a menudo tácitos, de la cultura latinoamericana.²⁰

[The legitimization of the bastard, the identification of the orphan, became one of the central problems, even though often tacit, of the Latin American culture.]

However, this complex problem was solved early:

el primer arzobispo de México, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, quien halló la solución duradera: darle una madre a los huérfanos del Nuevo Mundo²¹

[the first archbishop of Mexico, Fr. Juan de Zumarraga, found the lasting solution: he gave a mother to the orphans of the New World].

She was the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Beyond these historical reasons, there are also modern reasons for looking to a female as a more ideal inspiration than a male. Males are largely missing in Mexican society today, whether through divorce (a contemporary category—divorce implies marriage first, but in the colonial period rape and fornication were more prevalent), infidelity (again, until recently divorce was

The Virgin provides for the people politically in terms of social acceptance, citizenship, power, immigration, and geography.

unheard of even if the husband was unfaithful in marriage—the woman just had to tolerate it), or absence (fathers working in the United States who send money home to their families). Given all this, it is not surprising that women have greater significance in Latin America than they do in North America.

The idea of God the Father does not have the same implications to Latin Americans as it does to North Americans. The difference between the Virgin and God is that

la Madre Universal, la Virgen es también la intermediaria, la mensajera entre el hombre desheredado y el poder desconocido, sin rostro: el Extraño.²²

[The Universal Mother, the Virgin, is also an intermediary, the messenger between the abandoned man and the unknown power without a face: the Stranger.]

God the Father is the one regarded as the distant Stranger, whereas the Virgin provides a context of familiarity and recognition. Octavio Paz further explains:

No existe una veneración especial por el Dios padre de la Trinidad, figura más bien borrosa. En cambio, es muy frecuente y constante la devoción a Cristo, el Dios hijo, el Dios joven, sobre todo como víctima redentora. En las Iglesias de los pueblos abundan las esculturas de Jesús—en cruz o cubiertas de llagas y heridas en las que el realismo desollado de los españoles se alía al simbolismo trágico de los indios: las heridas son flores, prendas de resurrección, por una parte, y, asimismo, reiteración de que la vida es la máscara dolorosa de la muerte.²³

[A special veneration for God the Father of the Trinity does not exist; he is a blurred figure. In turn, the devotion to Christ, God the Son, is more

frequent and constant—the young God who, overall, is a redemptive victim. In the churches, sculptures of Jesus are abundant—on a cross and covered with sores in which the realism of the Spanish allies with the tragic symbolism of the Indians: the wounds are flowers, symbols of resurrection, but at the same time that life is a painful mask of death.]

The Mexican people venerate Christ the Son because he is humiliated, bleeding, and abused. They identify themselves with him, as they also reach out to the Mother figure which gave him birth.

For many Latin American women especially, Mary is accessible whereas the Bible is not. Part of it may have to do with illiteracy and some of it has to do with culture and Catholicism (the Bible being neither promoted nor encouraged among the female laity), but there is no intentional slight.²⁴ However, the reality remains that the persons of Mary, God the Father, and Jesus are more approachable than the Bible, but this is especially so with Mary. Her gender contributes to her accessibility for women who may have a harder time identifying with the male persons of the Trinity. The Virgin intercedes for the people, and acts in an incarnational way that appears like “one of us,” and who *is* “one of us.”

Political: The Virgin and Class

The examination of the racial and gender qualities of the Virgin of Guadalupe provides the background for understanding the political aspect of the Virgin, a power dynamic that encompasses both of the first two. The Virgin provides for the people politically in terms of social acceptance, citizenship, power, immigration, and geography.

As explained above, the fact that the Virgin is indigenous and female provides for the natives in connecting them relationally with the Virgin in this more familiar way. She is indigenous, meaning one of their own. This racial and political connection is stressed further in the nature of her apparition: she reveals herself to Juan Diego, a new Catholic convert who belonged to the poorest class of Aztecs.²⁵ The Virgin is also a mother, thus a nurturing and comforting figure. This newfound place in the established religion of the Spanish translated into a newfound place in the established social system of the Spanish. Through the Virgin of Guadalupe, the indigenous population realized a more dignified identity in Spanish society.

The Spaniards were not ignorant of the preference of the Indians toward the Virgin of Guadalupe, nor of the probable syncretism taking place. In fact, the Franciscans opposed this movement, declaring it to be idolatrous.²⁶ However, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe was permitted, encouraged, and promoted by the Spanish. This decision played a vital role for two populations: the indigenous and the *criollos*, as explained above. The Marian cult was confirmed and encouraged by having the account of her apparition printed in both the Spanish language and in Nahuatl. The reason was to encourage *criollos*, not just the indigenous, to venerate the Virgin.²⁷ In this way the *criollos*, like the indigenous, felt more tied to New Spain than Old Spain.

Often in Latin America the Virgin is seen as higher than Christ, whether by physical placement on the altar or by her being symbolically crowned by the persons of the Trinity. This is especially puzzling when it is the Virgin over Jesus. Although God the Father is seen as the distant Stranger, shouldn't the Christ be sufficient for the people? It is precisely in this contrast with Jesus that this is most important. The Virgin was needed as a victorious image

as opposed to the Christ of sorrows. All Mexican Christ-figures are dead, bleeding, and solitary, whereas the Virgin is celebrated with glory, flowers, and processions.²⁸ But she had to be a victorious image who identified with the lowliest of people:

La Virgen es el Consuelo de los pobres, el escudo de los débiles, el amparo de los oprimidos. En suma, es la Madre de los huérfanos.²⁹

[The Virgin is the Comfort to the poor, the shield of the weak, the protection of the oppressed. In short, she is the Mother of the orphans.

For Mexico, from the beginning of its national history, through the Independence of 1810 and even the Revolution of 1910, it has been about



a struggle for power. This power dynamic is accentuated when contrasted to the United States, which began with settlers, not conquistadores, and sought independence to establish a democracy for free people.

In addition to this, the Virgin is a symbol of migrant Mexican identity, a physical image that can accompany people. Before 1980, the Virgin of Guadalupe was hardly seen outside of Latin America.³⁰ Today, her image is splashed across North America in almost any Mexican religious community, and as such, through her image, Mexico can accompany the people to wherever they move in the world.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, among all Marian images in the Americas, has a special place of importance because she is

the only one that can be said to result from an apparition held to be supernatural... In other places on the continent devotion to the Virgin centers around an image, either found or sculpted by the natives or brought by the missionaries themselves.³¹

This means her identity as Guadalupe was not imported. She belongs to the Americas, and to the people, or perhaps it might be better said that the people belong to her. The following states it comprehensively yet succinctly:

Fundamentally, its meaning is that the Virgin maternally adopts the "natives" of Mexico and with them the whole Latin American people. The apparition of the woman later called the *Indita* (little Indian woman) or *Morenita* (little dark woman) to the Indian Juan Diego has important historical implications. It demands absolute respect for *the other*; we must welcome this otherness and allow its right to be so. In this apparition the "divinity" of the white ones takes on the indigenous, or rather the indigenous takes this divinity as its own in order to assert its right to life in the face of white power... The divinity appears to be taking sides with the weak, with the one to whom it is speaking and revealing itself. The Indian understands her and feels absolutely certain of her protection... The apparition becomes an ally of the Indian, collectively, as the representative of an oppressed culture. The mission given to the Indian by the Virgin is to build her a temple. The initiative or this building comes from her, but the work of building it is done by the Indian. In this indigenous popular tradition it is the woman Mary who sends him out on a mission; in the Christian scriptures it is Jesus who sends. The Virgin does not have the same problems as the white oppressor. She loves the Indian and adopts him as her son. This gives him strength to fight for his own cause against the established church authorities. The carrying out of

the Virgin's request means the affirmation of the identity of a people beginning a new moment in history. The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the growing devotion to her plays an important part in the restoring to an exploited people a religious identity that will help in the construction of a new national identity.³²

This is where land and dignity are tied together: to be Latin American is a single identity, and a proud one. The people made the Virgin of Guadalupe what they needed her to be for themselves, but by doing so, they really allowed her to control their destiny. Latin Americans are united under her banner, which is really more of a political symbol than a Catholic one, as it encompasses power, authority, race, language, government, history, geography, and the identity of a people.

Contextualization vs. Syncretism: The Virgin and Religion

When discussing the Virgin, inevitably the question of her role in contextualization vs. syncretism will be brought to the fore. The former is forming and communicating theology in a culturally relevant way, while the latter combines Christianity with indigenous religion such that it creates something new, something no longer authentically of either religion. Missiologically, Christian mission hopes for the former and not the latter. Yet, the answer to this question is not always so clear-cut; there are ways of navigating this apparent dichotomy that are more nuanced.

One missiologist who articulates this well is Don Richardson, the author of *Eternity in Their Hearts* and *Peace Child*, who posits the principle of redemptive analogy based on biblical characters like Melchizedek (Genesis 14) and the Apostle Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17).³³ How did Melchizedek become the priest of the Most High God, though he was living in pagan Canaan? How did the pagan men of Athens worship this

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“unknown god” who actually was the Christian God, according to Paul? In other words, how did people in non-Christian lands somehow know God, whether directly or indirectly, though they lacked Scriptures (special revelation)? The answer, according to Richardson, is general revelation (“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men”—Eccl. 3:11), that all people have at least an inkling of the true God planted in them, even if they do not have the Bible.³⁴

Beyond the Canaanites and Greeks, the principle of redemptive analogy can be seen in civilizations throughout the world such as the Incas (their creator god Viracocha), Ethiopia's Gedeo people (their omnipotent god Magano), and the Chinese (their supreme god Shang Ti),³⁵ whose deities all have certain uncanny resemblances to Yahweh. To equate these gods to the Christian God may, at first glance, seem to be blatant syncretism, but perhaps it is something more subtle than that, more akin to how Abraham and Melchizedek both knew the same God though neither had the Bible, one being from Ur and the other from Salem.

The accusation of syncretism surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe lies in its location on the Tepeyac hill where Juan Diego saw his vision. This was the site of the old pagan temple affiliated with the virgin mother of the Aztec god, Tonantzin, and the Virgin's basilica would be built on this very site. Perhaps in this case, the principle of redemptive analogy can be seen in the

mestizaje of the Roman Catholic Church. In order to communicate their message, missionaries needed to learn the native languages. But that was not enough; they also needed to couch their teachings in images and metaphors that the natives could

understand. And by doing so, the Catholic Church in the Americas was forever transformed (my italics).³⁶

Therefore, this indigenous movement was not just a racial and cultural *mestizaje*, but also a religious *mestizaje*.

While the Virgin remains central in this *mestizaje*, other elements blended into its powerful hold on the people. The Virgin mother implies a father and a son, each which introduces earlier notions and events into the mix of this religious movement. Any religious idea of father surrounds the arrival of the conquering Cortés and the anticipated return, according to prophecy, of the plumed serpent god of the Aztecs, Quetzacoatl.

También encontraron un padre. México le impuso a Cortés la mascara de Quetzalcóatl. Cortés la rechazó y, en cambio, le impuso a México la mascara de Cristo. Desde entonces, ha sido imposible saber quién es verdaderamente adorado en los altares barrocos de Puebla, Oaxaca y Tlaxcala: ¿Cristo o Quetzalcóatl?³⁷

[They also found a father. Mexico imposed the mask of Quetzalcóatl on Cortés. Cortés rejected it and, in turn, imposed the mask of Christ on them. Since then, it has been impossible to determine who is truly worshiped on the baroque altars of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Tlaxcala: Christ or Quetzalcóatl?]

The subtlety here is that the indigenous people wanted a father in Cortés, whom they mistook for the indigenous Quetzalcóatl.

Cortés' rejection of fatherhood countered with a notion of Son (Christ). This evoked even more complex notions of Son and sacrifice:

En un universo acostumbrado a que los hombres se sacrificasen a los dioses, nada asombró más a los indios que la visión de un Dios que

se sacrificó por los hombres. La redención de la humanidad por Cristo es lo que fascinó y realmente derrotó a los indios del Nuevo Mundo. El verdadero regreso de los dioses fue la llegada de Cristo."³⁸

[In a universe accustomed to men sacrificing themselves for the gods, nothing astounded the Indians more than the vision of a god who sacrificed himself for men. The redemption of humanity through Christ is what fascinated and ultimately defeated the Indians of the New World. The true return of the gods was through Christ.]

However, this is where the lines begin to blur between any potential redemptive analogy and total syncretism. In Mexican theology, the question lies in whether the Virgin and the Christ truly cause the reawakening of a story deeply embedded in their cultural psyches which can be a foothold for Christianity, or whether this is an unholy marriage of two ideas that should never mix.

Cristo se convirtió en la memoria recordada, el recuerdo de que en el origen los dioses se habían sacrificado en beneficio de la humanidad. Esta nebulosa memoria, disipada por los sombríos sacrificios humanos ordenados por el poder azteca, fue rescatada ahora por la Iglesia Cristiana. El resultado fue un sincretismo flagrante, la mezcla religiosa de la fe Cristiana y la fe indígena, una de las fundaciones culturales del mundo hispanoamericano.³⁹

[Christ became the recovered memory, the remembrance of the origins in which the gods sacrificed themselves for the benefit of humankind. This clouded memory, dissipated by the somber human sacrifices by the Aztec powers, was now rescued by the Christian church. The result was a flagrant syncretism, the religious mixture of the Christian faith and the indigenous faith, one of the culture foundations of the Hispano-American world.]

It is Carlos Fuentes' view that this blending is total syncretism, but the way he describes it above could just as well be a contextualized redemptive analogy.

Syncretism is perhaps much more evident in relation to the key notion of sacrifice in the Aztec story of creation. It is a story of two gods who threw themselves into a fire in order to be reborn as the sun and the moon. But the implications for humanity were severe:

Si los dioses se habían sacrificado a fin de que el mundo y la humanidad existiesen, entonces con más razón la humanidad estaba obligada a arrojarse, de ser necesario, en las grandes hogueras de la vida y de la muerte. La necesidad del sacrificio era un hecho indudable en la sociedad indígena, no sujeto a discusión o escepticismo de cualquier tipo.⁴⁰

[If the gods had sacrificed themselves so that the world and humanity could exist, even more so, humanity was obligated to throw itself, if necessary,



into the great sacrificial place of life and death. The necessity of sacrifice was an indubitable act of indigenous society, not subject to discussion or skepticism of any kind.]

The indigenous believed they were necessarily expendable for the continuation of the universe. The concept of sacrifice seems like an ideal redemptive analogy, but herein lies the syncretism: the people accepted Christianity because of how it related to their old religions, not because they rejected their old religions. The Aztecs had male and female gods, but when the male gods were defeated by the Spanish, they clung on to the female goddesses as represented by

Tonantzin. Even today, in a complete acknowledgment of syncretistic belief, the Virgin of Guadalupe is sometimes referred to as Guadalupe-Tonantzin by indigenous worshippers.

The distinction between contextualization and syncretism in this religious movement is not at all clear. Without a doubt, the phenomenon of this Virgin of Guadalupe is approached in both ways by Latin Americans. The task at hand (to mix metaphors) is to be discerning in separating the wheat from the chaff, rather than throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Conclusion

If there is one thing that can be said about the Virgin, it is that she belongs to the people. Through her, the people feel like Christianity is their religion. And it is not only their faith as a system of belief—their whole identity is given dignity and meaning through the Virgin. She has shaped the indigenous way that Christianity is understood and expressed in Mexico and throughout Latin America. The Virgin is so important because she *is* Mexico, and she is one of the people. She is the mother that everyone knows, because everyone has a mother (something that cannot be said of fathers in Latin America).

Evangelicals may remain reluctant to embrace this historical movement due to its central focus on Mariology. Tim Perry argues in his book, *Mary for Evangelicals*, that “Mariology is not by definition unbiblical and need not justify or culminate in impiety.”⁴¹ Though he does acknowledge the extremes and abuses that the Marian cult has suffered, Mary is nonetheless important in the Bible and anti-Catholic sentiment can be harmful in either ignoring or denigrating her. He calls Mary the “first and model disciple ... [who] is first and foremost the first-century Palestinian woman.” She is “well familiar with the challenges that continue to threaten the faith of even the most postmodern of disciples: doubt, misunderstanding, almost unimaginable grief. She is a model

because she rises to meet these.”⁴² In other words, she is God’s representative on earth to identify with the marginalized. But she is also triumphant: she is a fulfillment of several Old Testament themes and can even represent Israel herself as the redeemed people of God.⁴³ As such, the idea of the Virgin of Guadalupe representing Mexico in terms of race, gender, and class, does not seem so far-fetched after all. **IJFM**

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- can Immigration and the Future of Race in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 33–34.
- ³ If there had to be a fourth category of power dynamics, it would be age, as Paul also highlights this in Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20. But given that age is a transitory thing (everyone old has, at some point in their lives, been young), it is not as permanent a category as the other three in terms of identity.
- ⁴ Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 145.
- ⁵ Rodriguez, pp. 47–48.
- ⁶ Rodriguez, p. 37.
- ⁷ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 108.
- ⁸ The Black Madonna’s coloring can be explained as of African origin or perhaps even Semitic; but she was still required to be contextualized to be brown for the indigenous Americans.
- ⁹ Rodriguez, pp. 35–36.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹¹ Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 56–57.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ¹³ Rodriguez, p. 37.
- ¹⁴ Carlos Fuentes, *El espejo enterrado* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), p. 156.
- ¹⁵ Williamson, p. 17.
- ¹⁶ The word “*malinchista*” which is derived from *La Malinche* is a modern-day term for a Mexican who regards anything foreign as better than anything Mexican simply because it is not Mexican.
- ¹⁷ Fuentes, p. 119.
- ¹⁸ In modern slang in Spain, one of the greatest insults is “*hijo de puta*,” lit. “son of a prostitute.” However, in Mexico, it is “*hijo de la Chingada*,” lit. “son of the violated one.” See Paz, p. 103. Though it may seem from a North American Christian perspective that the former would be worse because the woman is voluntarily giving herself over whereas the latter had no fault in the matter, from a Latin American perspective, everything is about power. Therefore, to be raped or victimized is actually worse than being a prostitute.
- ¹⁹ Paz, p. 109.
- ²⁰ Fuentes, pp. 155–156.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ²² Paz, p. 109.
- ²³ Paz, p. 106.
- ²⁴ Ada María Isasi Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p. 149.
- ²⁵ González and González, p. 54.
- ²⁶ Rodriguez, p. 36.
- ²⁷ Rodriguez, p. 37.
- ²⁸ Fuentes, p. 157.
- ²⁹ Paz, p. 109.
- ³⁰ González and González, pp. 304–305.
- ³¹ Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer, “Mary” in Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 175.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ³³ The principle of redemptive analogy is “the application to local custom of spiritual truth. The principle we discerned was that God had already provided for the evangelization of these people by means of redemptive analogies in their own culture. These analogies were our stepping stones, the secret entryway by which the gospel came... and started both a spiritual and a social revolution from within.” Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura: Regal, 1974), p. 9. Redemptive analogy was later affirmed by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization at the 2004 Forum in Pattaya, Thailand, “Hidden and Forgotten People,” Occasional Paper No. 35, p. 41: http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP35A_IG6A.pdf.
- ³⁴ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal, 1981), pp. 18–33.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–71.
- ³⁶ González and González, p. 54.
- ³⁷ Fuentes, p. 156.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ⁴¹ Tim Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 269.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Endnotes

- ¹ “The Virgin of Guadalupe,” in Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, eds., *Religion in Latin America: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), pp. 96–98.
- ² Gregory Rodriguez, *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds: Mexi-*