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Rethinking Latino Religions and Identity (Pilgrim Press, 2006),

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In this essay, I make a case for the inclusion of Mexican-American religions in the religious studies curriculum, as the Other Within that has for too long been at the margins of the academy. I propose that an ethno-phenomenological method and approach is one of many possible alternatives to interpreting Mexican-American religions at secular colleges and universities where they are required by the state and/or college mission statement not to promote or endorse a theological or religious worldview.

The Latino community in the United States has doubled from 22.4 million in 1990 to 44.3 million in 2006, making it the nation's largest minority group. The dramatic upsurge in the population and in scholarship on religion has created a need for new courses that take into account the changing demographics of American society. Despite these demographic shifts, little has been published on the history and theory of Mexican-American religions and even less on how to approach and discuss the subject at state and public universities that serve the U.S. Latino population, where restrictions on the separation of church and state are in full force.

This essay offers one approach to Mexican-American religions by examining the rationale for the field based upon the demographic and religious profile of the community, a working definition of Mexican-American/Chicano religions, and an ethno-phenomenological theoretical approach to interpreting Mexican-American religions that may help bridge the growing chasm between religious and theological studies. This essay is an outgrowth of my larger study on “History and Theory in the Study of Mexican American Religions,” in editors Miguel de la Torre and Gastón Espinosa’s *Rethinking Latino Religions and Identity* (2006).

Why Mexican-American Religious Studies?

There has been a flurry of scholarship in the field of Mexican-American religions over the past thirty-five years. Despite this fact, the field has largely been subsumed under the rubric of U.S. Latino religions. People of Mexican ancestry have lived in the Southwest for more than 400 years — since 1598. Their history in the American Southwest predates that of the Pilgrims and Puritans at Jamestown in 1608 and Plymouth Rock in 1619. They have a number of rich and unique religious traditions (e.g., New Mexican popular Catholicism, Chimayo Pilgrimage site, Días de los Muertos), saints and spiritual healers (e.g., Our Lady of Guadalupe, El Niño Fidencio, Francisco Olazábal), brotherhoods and social-spiritual movements (e.g., Penitentes, Cursillo, PADRES, Las Hermanas), political leaders (e.g., Antonio José Martínez, César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Dolores Huerta), and religious leaders (e.g., Junipero Serra, Eusebio Kino, Patricio Flores), all of which have influenced U.S. Latino and American religious history.

César Chávez and the Birth of Mexican-American Religious Studies

Although missionaries, church historians, sociologists, anthropologists, museum folklorists, and others have written on the Mexican and Mexican-American religious experience in the American Southwest, the first self-conscious modern academic attempt to examine and define Mexican-American religions as a unique scholarly enterprise and field of study did not take place until 1968. That year the writings and intellectual foment stimulated by César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Enrique Dussel, Carlos Castañeda, and others served as major catalysts in the methodological and theoretical development of the field.

The spark that helped ignite the field came from an unlikely source — a former community service organizer (CSO) named César Chávez. Inspired by Father Donald McDonnell to fight for social justice and to unionize Mexican-American migrant farm workers in 1965, Chávez and Dolores Huerta organized the United Farm Workers organization in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Delano, California, to fight for better wages, housing, and civil rights. In March 1968, during his first major fast for social justice, Chávez penned one of the first significant historical,

social, political, and theological critiques of the Catholic Church by a Mexican American in his essay “Mexican Americans and the Church.” Echoing other Latinos throughout the Americas in the 1960s struggling for justice, he criticized the institutional Catholic Church’s lack of support for the Mexican-American people and called on it to work for social change and political and economic justice.

Chávez’s critique and faith-based activism had a profound impact. His writings were widely cited and followed in Chicano periodicals such as *El Grito del Sol* (1968) and by a number of Chicano and Latino scholars and theologians such as Rodolfo Acuña, Octavio I. Romano, Francisco García-Treto, Virgilio Elizondo, Juan Hurtado, Antonio Soto, Moisés Sandoval, Anthony M. Steven-Arroyo, and later by Andrés Guerrero and others. Chávez’s efforts, along with that of the African-American, Chicano, American Indian, feminist, and other liberation movements, inspired an emerging generation of Mexican Americans and U.S. Latino scholars to use their scholarship to fight for social, political, and economic justice.

At the same time that Chávez, Tijerina, and others were fighting for social justice in the United States, Catholics and Protestants were engaged in a similar struggle in Latin America. Catholic bishops, priests, and scholars met at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, where they began to articulate a theology of liberation. Liberation theology grabbed the imagination of Mexican-American scholars when the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez asked his colleagues if their theology would “be a theology of development [i.e., capitalism] or a theology of liberation?” Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation* (Spanish, 1971; English, 1973). This question directly affected Mexican-American scholars like Virgilio Elizondo, Yolanda Tarango, Andrés Guerrero, Jeanette Rodriguez, and many others. Gutiérrez argued that the authentic starting point for any Christian theology is commitment to the poor, the “nonperson,” and that conscientization, contextualization, and praxis are the keys to realizing this liberation. He called on scholars and clergy to focus on the importance of economic factors in oppression.

Chicano Catholic Influences

Virgilio Elizondo also played a pivotal role in the birth of Mexican-American theology and religious studies. A native of San Antonio, Elizondo was convinced that Chicano historian Jesus Chavarra was right when he stated, “As long as you do not write your own story and elaborate your own knowledge, you will always be a slave to another’s thoughts.” This was one of the reasons why he co-founded and used the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, to publish such scholarship on Mexican-American and U.S. Latino religions as editor Moises Sandoval’s *Fronteras: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA Since 1513* (1983). He went on to write his own now-classic studies

Christianity and Culture
(1975),
La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas
(1980),
Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise
(1983), and
The Future Is Mestizo
(1988).

Elizondo's academic writings signal the formal birth of Mexican-American theology and religious studies. He was one of the first persons to argue that Chicano/a scholars should create their own field of study and publish revisionist theology and church history that is academically "objective" and rigorous. His mestizo paradigm contended that Mexican Americans are like Jesus because they are religious outsiders who are rejected by the racial and religious establishment for being from a racially and theologically impure multicultural region of Galilee. For this reason, Elizondo called on all Mexican Americans to be proud of their mixed racial and popular Catholic theological heritage. The work of Elizondo and other U.S. Latinos contributed to what Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo called a resurgence in the study of U.S. Latino religions.

Chicana Feminism, Women, and Religion

Gutiérrez and Elizondo directly influenced (along with other women like Gloria Anzaldúa) to varying degrees the rise of Chicana religious feminism and later *mujerista* theology through the work of Chicanas María Pilar Aquino, Yolanda Tarango, and Cuban-born Ada María Isasi-Díaz. Díaz and Tarango wrote

Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church
(1988), one of the first U.S. Latina feminist theologies. They, along with Jeanette Rodriguez in her book

Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican American Women
(1994), sought to create a Hispanic cultural, feminist, and liberation theology that captured the sentiments and struggles of women. They saw their work as scholar-activists "militantly" fighting against Anglo-American and Latino multilayered sexism, patriarchy, classism, and economic oppression. Their work was methodologically important because it called for: a) a sharp critique of Latino sexism, classism, elitism, and patriarchy; b) Latino men to share leadership and the theological enterprise with women; c) more inclusive theologies; and d) Latina agency and a shift in the focus away from "orthodoxy" (right belief) to "orthopraxis" (right practice).

David Carrasco and the Decentering of Mexican-American Religious Studies

The intellectual and methodological development of the emerging field of Mexican-American religious studies comes to its maturity in the work of David Carrasco. His work marks the methodological crystallization of a Mexican-American religious studies paradigm that expanded the theoretical boundaries of the field. His scholarship shifted the focus away from the orbit of liberation theology and institutional church histories to the increasingly pluralistic framework of religious studies. He analyzed Mesoamerican and Mexican American/Chicano religions in light of interpretive categories such as sacred time, sacred centers, sacred spaces, world-making, world-centering, world-renewing, and what Carrasco calls “center/periphery dynamics.” Unlike early cultural anthropologist Manuel Gamio’s negative view of Mexican Indian influences on Catholicism, Carrasco celebrated the cultural and religious hybridity of the Mexican-American religious experience.

Toward a Working Definition of Chicano Religions

At the 1996 *New Directions in Chicano Religions Conference*, Charles Long challenged the participants to define what they meant by Mexican-American/Chicano religions and to then explain how it differed from any other religious phenomena. I argue that the Mexican-American cultural blending, reimagination, rearticulation, and poetic reconstruction and aesthetic practice of “Mexican” and “American” religious rituals, customs, traditions, practices, beliefs, and symbols in the United States gives them a Mexican-American or “Chicano” inflection that sometimes differentiates them in application and form, though not necessarily in function, from Anglo-American religious practices. Mexican-American religious practices and traditions both resonate with their Mexican counterparts while at the same time exhibiting a blending, a combining, a fusing, or a mixing with Anglo-American practices and traditions to create a new combinative hybrid reality that is neither entirely Mexican nor entirely American but is in fact Mexican-American or Chicano. This blending is illustrated in religious traditions like the Catholic Cursillo and in the East L.A.-birthed Victory Outreach Pentecostal movement.

Ethno-Phenomenological Approach to Religion

One approach to interpreting Mexican-American religions is an ethno-phenomenological methodology that seeks to bridge the open hostility between religious studies and theology. Such a method listens to and draws upon the important discoveries and insights from religious studies, theological studies, and the above-noted disciplines and influences. Scholars using this approach seek to analyze the world of their subjects on their own plane of reference through a methodology that respects and holds in balance both the perspective of the skeptical, irreligious, and noncommitted secular outsider and the devout and committed religious insider. An ethno-phenomenological approach offers a scholarly framework that engages in what Ninian Smart has called “bracketed realism,” whereby the scholars’ own religious beliefs (or lack thereof) and ideological political positions are bracketed or suspended and not superimposed or projected on to their subjects. While personal subjectivities and values are unavoidable, a scholar should nonetheless try to describe and analyze the religious phenomena in such a way that is not only critical but also recognizable to the practitioner. The ethno-phenomenological

approach desires to generate new scholarship that examines the way ordinary people find hope and interpret their very real and imaginary universes. Perhaps by so doing, we can transform the Mexican-American religious experience as the Other Within into a robust and rigorous academic field of mainstream scholarly inquiry.