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# Advancing the Grounded Study of Religion and Society in Latin America

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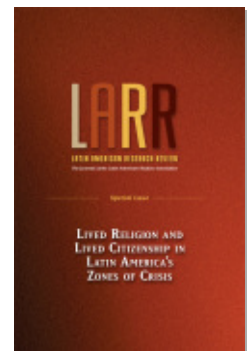
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## **Advancing the Grounded Study of Religion and Society in Latin America: Concluding Comments**

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ADVANCING THE GROUNDED  
STUDY OF RELIGION AND SOCIETY  
IN LATIN AMERICA

Concluding Comments

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*Abstract: In rediscovering the interpenetration of popular culture and politics in Latin America, and thus the ways these realms mutually constitute one another, scholars have also witnessed the analytic irruption of one particular cultural field: religion. Close attention to grassroots political culture allows us to probe how people's spiritual subjectivity and political subjectivity overlap and cross-fertilize one another. In the process, religion shapes political outcomes in ways often unintended. Two further analytic insights are discussed: First, analysis of lived religion must partially decenter religious institutions from the focus of analysis but also pay attention to how institutions shape spiritual and political subjectivities. Second, our theoretical frameworks—while rightly rejecting dominant Western forms of anti-body dualism—must preserve analytic place for a realm of human experience termed here “embodied dualism” or “experiential dualism.”*

Latin American society is in a state of flux today, with alternative economic and political models vying to be identified as the best way forward for whole societies but also being advanced by particular sectors pursuing their own narrow interests. Although scholars are often accustomed to think of these economic and political dynamics as occurring separately from culture, this special issue shows that cultural dynamics strongly impact politics, with an eye to the oft-overlooked role of religion in sociopolitical movements targeting political and economic policy, and in sociocultural movements that reshape identities.

Religion is at the core of these deep cultural dynamics. Latin America has been deeply shaped by religion in a variety of forms: preconquest indigenous cultures deeply bound up with small tribal or large civilizational religious forms, the high Catholicism and popular religiosity of the colonial period, the vibrant syncretic fusion of these with African influences, the more than century-old influences of historic Protestant traditions, and the more recent explosions of Pentecostal, liberationist, and new Catholic apostolic movements. We distort the picture when we fail to appreciate this religious influence. Thus, understanding Latin America's past, present, and future requires paying analytic attention to the diverse ways religions and religious practices are interwoven with other societal dynamics. This special issue highlights a variety of ways that religion shows a surprising social and political relevance in the region today. The articles clearly mark two crucial dynamics; the first is the irruption of religion into social scientific analysis of politics and society in contemporary Latin America. Second, the fact that we are often

surprised by those findings marks not that religion's dynamic influence is new but rather marks the long-standing erasure of religion's influence via scholars' own selective attention, implicit bias, and/or ignorance of religion. These causes are no doubt the product of the secularizing angle of view of most graduate training in the social sciences.

These articles also help us see how the spiritual subjectivity and the political subjectivity of human beings overlap, intersect, and cross-fertilize one another in important, interesting, and complex ways. That the analytic gaze of the secular European and North American mind wants to hold these subjectivities as separate represents a denial of the overlap, intersection, and cross-fertilization going on all around us. The key analytic questions concern the size of that area of overlap and the dynamics within it whereby spiritual identities and commitments come to shape political identities and commitments, and thus to drive politics in new directions. Among those directions is what James Holston (2008) calls "insurgent citizenship," the claiming and enacting of the rights of citizenship on behalf of previously marginalized groups—often by those groups themselves. In helping train our analytic gaze to look for the tracks of religion on this terrain, these articles help the reader see more clearly how practices of insurgent citizenship play out within disjunctive democracies, because often insurgent citizenship draws on religious practices and identities in ways we have hitherto missed.

In keeping with some of the best recent work on grassroots politics in Latin America, but here with richer attention to the role of religion, these articles give us a richer interpretive lens for understanding the dynamics of political culture where those dynamics actually occur in barrios, *pueblos jóvenes*, favelas, *rancherías*, and *colonias* all over the region (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Dagnino 2005, 2007). Thus to think about political culture no longer places analytic emphasis on cultural dynamics among political elites, nor on abstract values that putatively drive politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1988; Norris and Inglehart 2002). Rather, analytic attention focuses here on politically relevant dynamics within the religiously infused terrain on which societal struggles are so often played out.

In the past, with antidemocratic political institutions (including military dictatorships) combining with vast economic inequality to marginalize the masses and prevent their significant influence on national direction, it was easy to exclude "the people's culture" from serious attention when analyzing the political culture of Latin America. In such settings and periods, politics appeared to be fought out solely on elite and/or military and organizational terrain with little link to the broader society, and analysts often focused their causal arguments on the actions of elites and formal organizations. Of course even in such cases, elites and organizational actors mobilized support partly via appeal to mass culture, as in the remarkable linkage built between Eva Peron's political-cultural personality and mass popular culture in Argentina, or the PRI's invocation of *indigenismo* and the *mestizaje de la raza* in Mexico. Thus even under authoritarian regimes, we only understand the "hard" structures of politics if we see them in relationship to the "soft" dynamics of culture, as shown in work by Carlos Forment (2003) on "civic Catholicism" in Mexico and Peru in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; by

Jean Meyer (1976) and Jeffrey Rubin (1997) on popular culture under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico; and by other authors on societies around the globe (Ikegami 2005; Laitin 1986; Mosse 1966).

If this was the case under authoritarian rule, it is true a fortiori as formal democratic institutions—of a variety of forms, reflecting differing pursuits of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000)—take hold throughout most of the region. We must not be naive regarding the representativity or democratic depth of all of those institutions; in many cases (like democracy in the contemporary United States) they face deep challenges in adequately channeling popular demands into effective public policy while protecting human rights within societies of vast inequality. But it would be analytically blind to miss the difference made by the significant, albeit problematic, deepening of democracy in Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, or elsewhere. In all such settings, but especially where press freedoms, religious freedom, indigenous rights, and human rights gain real substance and legitimacy, mass culture emerges more fully as the ground on which fundamental political struggles are waged. More precisely, those fundamental struggles now occur in a context of greater linkage between ruling regimes and grassroots political culture in civil society, such that the historic chasm identified by Forment (2003) between civic democracy and ruling authoritarianism is being challenged more effectively than has generally been possible before. As relatively legitimate institutions channel popular will into the political arena and thus shape social and economic policy, mass cultural dynamics have new causal impact—or at least more obvious causal impact—on political outcomes.

This process has by no means resulted in perfect democracy; hence the diagnosis of “disjunctive democracy” in the region (Holston 2008). Cultural dynamics in civil society influence institutional politics profoundly, not only in immediate struggles to mobilize supporters during electoral campaigns but much more fundamentally for political struggles of the *longue durée*. It is in the culture of everyday life, including its religious and spiritual expressions, that fundamental building blocks of political culture are constructed: understandings of authority, experiences and assumptions about gender and race, class dynamics of deference or contestation, what counts as legitimate representation, what group boundaries matter—and, in religious terms, what God wants in this world. Political culture then becomes a way of conceptualizing and analyzing all those cultural dynamics that are politically relevant in a given society, including religious dynamics in myriad forms.

This perspective broadens attention not just to religion but to culture generally. From within the analytic view opened here, we can move well beyond the specifically religious terrain and see already the wider vista. In terms of the questions raised during one of the author meetings that generated this collection: What kinds of citizens are being made in Latin America today? What are the cultural genealogies of the “pink tide” of left-oriented political parties, social movements, and elected officials that have swept much of the region in the last decade? On such a wide terrain, explanatory and interpretive accounts will surely draw significant insight from specifically religious cultural dynamics, but those

accounts will also necessarily turn to cultural dynamics more generally. Those dynamics will include the complex cultural dimension of globalization as it interweaves cultural “Americanization”—via the spread of the consumer ethos associated with North America and neoliberal-tinged “American religion” (Bloom 2006)—and the marketing and (at times) empowerment of local/national cultures, including highly Latin Americanized forms of religion that originally arrived via North American missionary activity. They also include the rise in influence of indigenous cultural strands in some societies, the continuing influence of Afro-Brazilian cultural forms (both religious and nonreligious), and the important increase of atheism and “religious nones” (the unaffiliated) in many Latin American societies, as documented by the Latinobarómetro surveys.<sup>1</sup> Even as the influence of religious forms continues unabated in many ways throughout Latin American societies, the “secular age” analyzed by Charles Taylor (2007) also recasts the cultural and societal terrain in new ways. Although the present collection focuses on religion, it also throws secular dynamics into new and illuminating relief.

The angle of vision that places religious dynamics center stage does, however, risk overemphasizing the intentionality associated with religious conversion and with religiously rooted efforts to refashion society (whether of the liberationist, prosperity gospel, or other varieties). Lest we fall into that narrowing of the analytic view, let us keep in mind the powerful unintended consequences of religion. In this issue, such unintended consequences are captured in Mary Roldán’s insightful analysis of the way that Catholic-sponsored radio broadcasts in Colombia generated surprising cultural dynamics that empowered *campesinas* and other women in unexpected and unplanned ways, with repercussions for the patriarchal dimensions of traditional Catholicism as well as for national politics. They are also captured in Margarita López Maya’s groundbreaking account of how the origins of Hugo Chávez’s “Bolivarian democracy” and the current national constitution simply cannot be understood coherently except via the early influence of Catholic social teachings on Venezuelan Christianity and political culture and subsequently upon the Christian Democratic political party COPEI and President Luis Herrera Campíns.

Note also how religious dynamics penetrate even what initially appear to be purely secular realities, such as the social spaces of ongoing conflict and contested legitimacy conceptualized in this issue as “crisis zones.” On one hand, these are indeed fertile spaces for purely secular maneuvering: neoliberalism *needs* crises in order to justify breaking open market barriers and to advance policy changes in the interests of corporate capital, such as the “liberalization” of labor regimens or environmental restrictions. Meanwhile, politicians of various ideologies mobilize support by generating a sense of crisis, proposing solutions, and identifying themselves or opposing those neoliberal or socialist or democratic projects. Lest we hold ourselves above any such maneuverings, let us recognize that we social scientists publish our work partly by connecting it to such crises! All these can be understood from a purely secular line of analysis. But a variety of religious

1. See Burdick 1999; Yashar 2005; and Corporación Latinobarómetro, <http://www.latinobarometro.org>.

projects also foster a sense of crisis in order to pursue their own ends: to justify conversion to a new faith or to intensify spiritual practice within an adherent's long-standing faith; to legitimate the urgency of "Christian citizenship" or of liberationist political praxis; to call believers to escape from the impending darkness via otherworldly spiritual reality or via internally focused new age or traditional spiritual practices; or a myriad of other religious alternatives.

Thus crisis zones and other seemingly secular concepts may be constructed via religious or secular understandings, but in either case may become religiously, politically, culturally, and analytically fertile territory, notwithstanding the very real human suffering that occurs in such zones. This special issue's overall analytical perspective frames citizenship as a form of political subjectivity in which religious structures and spiritual experience shape people's understanding and sense of self. Those religious structures are at different times primarily organizational, cultural, or institutional; and those spiritual experiences may flow directly from institutionally centered practices or from (at least apparently) more spontaneous sources. In any case, by shaping people's identities and the cultural resources on which people draw as they engage in the political arena, these religious structures and subjective spiritual experiences can no longer be disregarded as potent influences upon societal dynamics far beyond the realm of religion. This is not a new insight, either within Latin American studies or within the disciplines of sociology and political science.<sup>2</sup> But its reemergence to analytic centrality represents an important shift.

Finally, two analytic strands invoked in these articles strike me as still unresolved and deserving of continued theoretical and empirical attention. The first strand is straightforward and builds on the work of Robert Orsi (2005, 1982, 1996, 2011) and others on "lived religion." The literature on lived religion, including that presented here, continues to offer profound new insights into personal, communal, and societal dynamics as they relate to religious practices in people's lives, often underneath or behind any officially sanctioned religious institutions.<sup>3</sup> That literature rightly argues for decentering the study of religion away from such institutions. However, as shown by the articles in this issue, the power of lived religion is typically dependent on previously institutionalized religious forms. For example, lived religious practices may have profound impacts on society via the religious conferral of legitimacy on state or nonstate actors. But those practices themselves were previously legitimated via religious institutions and gained their own power of legitimation from those institutions. While the sociological study of religion in Latin America, as elsewhere, can well benefit from deepening attention to lived religion outside institutional religious settings, it should simultaneously continue to analyze institutionalized religion. That is, decentering institutions should not

2. For example, the influential book *The Cristero Rebellion* by Jean A. Meyer (1976) gave serious attention to religion as a causal influence in that major historical event in Mexico, which had previously been seen in narrowly political terms. The key foundational strands of sociology, rooted in the work of Weber, Durkheim, and Marx (especially in its Gramscian offshoot), all placed religion near the center of analytic attention.

3. Examples of work broadly within the lived religion inspiration, besides that of Orsi, include Bender et al. 2013; Cadge 2005; Mahmood 2005; Marti 2010; and Smilde 2007.

mean excluding institutions from our analytic lens; rather, as exemplified here, lived religion occurs precisely in a relationship of tension with institutional forms.

The second strand is rather more complex: the whole question of the status of dualism as an analytic stance and ontological reality in people's lives. This remains very much in debate. On one hand, most contemporary scholars—including Jeffrey Rubin, David Smilde, and Benjamin Junge writing about embodied religion in the introduction to this issue—rightly argue against a form of dualism that would focus our attention on religion as abstract morality and disengaged reflection rooted narrowly in “beliefs, texts, and cognition.” These are critically important insights, rightly rejecting the way that sociological analysis has often isolated religion from wider dynamics in society and from the flow of daily experience in people's lives. On the other hand, the sociological tradition descended from Emile Durkheim's later work asserts a sacred/profane dualism at the heart of human society from its origins to the present.

Although I, too, reject the first form of dualism, I am unconvinced that such a rejection undermines a different kind of dualism rooted in Durkheim's fundamental sociological conception. This essay is not the place to fully pursue this debate, but it seems useful to flag the outlines of another way forward, so that new work on the impact of religion in Latin America may be informed by insights emerging in this area.

The critique of dualism remains inconclusive because what is meant by “dualism” shifts meanings. Talal Asad (2003) rightly argues against any theoretical dualism that is rooted in a narrowly construed rationalism (and ultimately in Greek anti-body Neoplatonism). Likewise, the critics rightly reject the kind of empirical dualism that divides people's experience into a this-worldly/daily life vs. otherworldly/religious dichotomy.<sup>4</sup> For the social scientist, all experience must be accessible to empirical analysis.

But that interpretation of dualism is not the only way to understand the term. The crucial insight that I think the sociology of religion—in Latin America or anywhere—cannot do without is already embedded in the title of one of the field's classic works, “The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions” (Durkheim [1914] 1975). The core argument is that religion does not simply *construct* a dualistic view of the human person but rather taps into a preexisting dual structure of the human person as a social animal rooted in society. That dual structure is constitutive of what it means to be human, because each person is always already both a separate organism pursuing the individual needs of daily life and simultaneously a socially constituted being at least potentially aware of a reality that transcends the self and its needs. That “transcendent” reality is conceived sociologically as society, culturally as meaning, and religiously under various guises. For the sociologist, it is transcendent not in the sense of pursuing otherworldly goals or otherwise being separate from the world, but rather in its capacity to pull the self beyond the

4. That is, the critics' rejection is correct if the otherworldly dimension of religion is taken to mean that religious realities have negligible relationship to daily life. However, see Bellah (2011) for a quite different way of thinking about the otherworldly as alternate ways of understanding and experiencing the one lived reality.



immediate needs of daily life and illuminate those needs within a wider horizon of meaning. Here, I can only gesture at this insight by suggesting it might best be captured via a term such as “embodied dualism” or perhaps “experiential dualism.”<sup>5</sup>

A specific analytic concern drives me to defend this understanding of embodied or experiential dualism. While it is true that the study of religion has lost its analytic bite by focusing excessively on religion’s often otherworldly self-understanding, at the other extreme lies an equally costly outcome. Religion draws much of its psychological and social dynamism from the way it taps into the human experience of our dualistic human nature. If we reject all forms of religious dualism as an analytic construct, we risk failing to fully understand the psychological and social dynamism of a wide range of phenomena: liberation theology (Peterson 1997); the charismatic Catholic movement (Cleary 2011; Hagopian 2009; Parker Gumucio 2005); Pentecostal Christianity in its dominant Evangelical (Burdick 1999; Cantón Delgado 2005, 2009; Miller and Yamamori 2007; Smilde 2003; Steigenga 2001) or liberationist (Wadkins 2012, 2013) forms; or the continuing influence of revived African and indigenous spiritual movements—all of which shape zones of crisis as well as other dimensions of Latin American reality. That is, if we lose the conceptual frameworks that allow us to understand religion in its social sources, we will also lose our capacity to analyze, appreciate, or critique the ways religion shapes political culture in Latin America and thus matters for how citizenship and governmental regimes evolve in the region.

In summary, if religion is in fact rooted in an experiential dualism embedded deep in the evolutionary origins of the human species (Bellah 2011), a dualism that is thus not simply a construct or projection of Western rationalism, then we will not explain religion’s power in Latin America or around the world without a theoretical framework that allows us to grasp rather than elide the power of such experiential dualism. In analyzing religion and society in Latin America, we should embrace that analytic understanding of dualism, while rejecting others that lack a basis in the shared matrix of deep human evolutionary history.

I see nothing in the articles collected here that necessarily contradicts such a stance. These authors beautifully reveal religion’s fascinating role as people live out their citizenship in zones of crisis throughout the diverse social worlds we call Latin America. Let us pursue that analytic agenda vigorously into the future, paying full attention to both lived and institutional religion and the generative tension between them, with a conceptual apparatus that allows us to see Latin American religion in its surprising power and dynamism.

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5. While the terms “embodied dualism” and “experiential dualism” are my own, the underlying theoretical foundations were laid by in the final work by Robert N. Bellah (2011). A careful reading of that book shows the kind of unified analysis of human reality in its full dimensions possible from within a fundamentally Durkheimian theoretical position that affirms this very specific kind of dualism.

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