Introduction

Exploring the relationship between religious phenomena and gender dynamics in Latin American countries sheds light on the societies’ cultural heritage and continuity, as well as on the means by which traditional forms of social organization are maintained and transformed. This relationship challenges long-standing institutions and drives the creation of new ones to either promote or resist changes.

The first part of this chapter will focus on one of the long-standing institutions in Latin America: the Catholic Church. It will address how female Church leaders have been challenged by understandings of gender roles within this institution that persist in the prohibition upon ordaining women for pastoral leadership, in closing up leading roles for them, and in controlling different aspects of their lives. The landscape of “women religious” (sisters/nuns), their ministries, social impact, and female subjectivity construction within the framework of a patriarchal institution, relates to broader gender dynamics in Latin American societies. Both transformative and conservative forces amongst high-profile Catholic women will be addressed to illustrate tensions in religious- and gender-identity construction in the largest countries of the region.

Latin American countries are undergoing a deep process of religious reconfiguration, where religious pluralism is increasingly noticeable. The second part of the chapter will address changes in religious reconfiguration and in gender dynamics, how they affect each other and impact both religious identity construction and resistance. Modernity has changed Latin America in many ways; however, the religious landscape remains vibrant. The ongoing interaction between modernity and religion in Latin America does not result in the diminishment of religiosity, which subsequently accounts for what some scholars define as an “enchanted modernity” (Morello, Romero, Rabbia, & Da Costa, 2017). Theorizing the relationships between religious/spiritual and cultural meaning systems and women’s agency allows for an understanding of women’s reasons to keep on struggling for their own, their families’, and their communities’ well-being.

Consecrated women in the Catholic Church: women religious in the margins

From the beginning of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th century, many female Catholic religious communities started their missions in Latin American countries, opening
up a new option of consecrated religious life for women that until then could only be accomplished in the monasteries by nuns living in the cloisters. These women religious (commonly known as “sisters”, members of congregations of active apostolic life) arrived mostly from France, Italy, and Spain. A few of these female members of religious institutes assisted the clergy and hierarchy—all men—in their essential “continuance” functions in the parishes. However, most of them started their mission in the different Latin American countries with the venture of building social institutions for the service of the population. In fact, these new female religious orders played an important role mainly in the field of education. At a time when education was expanding in the countries of the region, they founded Catholic schools, most of them only for female students, thus fostering greater social inclusion of girls. The sisters also had important roles in the health field, working in hospitals or asylums looking after vulnerable sectors of the population. In synthesis, they took on supplementary tasks and subsidiary roles to those of the State, therefore gaining social legitimization (Bianchi, 2015; Lecaros, 2017; Patiño, 2018).

The growth of female apostolic congregations—such as the many communities of Franciscan sisters, Dominicans, Mercy sisters, Salesian sisters, among numerous others—during this period (the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century) was unprecedented, and women religious became the face of missionary commitment. During this period, Catholicism in Latin America is considered to have become feminized (Folquer, 2012). Academic work—still scarce today—has begun to illustrate the relevance and impact of this new “actor” in the Latin-American social and ecclesial field. Historians such as Cynthia Folquer, Alicia Fraschina (2010), Susana Bianchi (2015), Caroline Cubas (2014), and Susana Monreal (2015), among others, have highlighted women religious’ new social roles, providing interesting insights into the ecclesial and social logics from which these women gave meaning to their daily practices, identities, and commitments. These new congregations/orders were female spaces under the control of a patriarchal institution, the Catholic Church, in which male regulatory power was present in many different ways. The vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience worked as powerful mechanisms of control. The social structure of these communities, mostly white middle-class women, reproduced the class, race, and ethnicity patterns of Latin American social structure. They also reproduced the social moral standards by not allowing entrants born out of wedlock or with homosexual identities.

The expansion of female consecrated life in Latin America reached its peak at the beginning of the 1960s. Until then, as in other parts of the world (particularly Europe and North America—see www.fides.org), female communities grew at a much higher rate than did those of priests and religious men. By 1960, women religious represented about 70% of celibate consecrated life in the region. This numerical supremacy of religious women over their male peers, also expressed in the greater number of institutes of feminine religious life over masculine ones, was never associated, however, with a pre-eminence of power within the field of consecrated life. Religious men (priests and brothers) played a decisive role in the creation of female institutes—without their authorization no new female community could start working—and in the organization of their ways of life, controlling key aspects of each community’s dynamics (Hostie, 1983). After 1960, statistics show a constant decline in the number of religious women compared to a moderate growth of priests (driven by an increase in the number of diocesan priests). Taking Argentina’s data as reference, currently women religious represent 52% of the overall consecrated people in the country, while in the 1960s this percentage was 68%. Women religious today number half of what they did in the 1960s (7,665 and 13,423 respectively). Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay—among other Latin American countries—follow a similar trend in the diminishing numbers of women religious over the last decades. In some other countries, such as Perú and México, numbers have not changed much. Compared with Europe and North
America, Latin America’s declining numbers of women religious are less significant, but they seem to follow the same pattern.

How to understand the considerable decline in women religious? And, why was this decline much stronger in consecrated women than in priests and brothers? The answer must be framed within the dynamics of the persistent patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church. Since the middle of the last century, both social and ecclesial roles, as well as the lifestyle of consecrated people, began to be questioned from different social sectors. Changes driven by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) raised questions about several issues of religious life itself. The Catholic Church, due to this council, went through profound changes that had many positive implications for the institution. However, it did not question the supremacy of men in leading roles. In contrast to other Christian churches that carried out reforms in the direction of opening up governing structures to equal leading roles for men and women, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church persisted in refusing to do so.

By the late 90s, feminist theology had begun to impact the identity of consecrated women in Latin America, questioning their inferior role within the Catholic Church. In short, the way women religious understand themselves has changed significantly over the last decades, giving women a clearer sense of the ways in which structures of the Catholic Church could be seen to have been working against them. Women religious have increasingly experienced a profound crisis of meaning as they attempt to find their way in a church dominated by men and a culture of masculinity. While opportunities for women religious to develop multiple social identities, including that of professional women in teaching, nursing, and social assistance roles (Chandler, 2002), are not questioned at present, empirical research indicates the existence of high levels of distress in members of religious communities (Gafford, 2001; Leung & Wittberg, 2004; O’Brien, 2005; Brock, 2010). Despite the increasing awareness of gender inequality that Latin American feminist movements are providing in Latin America, women who are Catholic sisters are still positioned by the Church as self-sacrificing servants of that institution (Brock, 2010). Although the Second Vatican Council promoted renovation in religious orders and congregations, the culture of submission remains present in the institutes of female religious life in Latin America. The culture of patriarchy that is reproduced within the female religious congregations is expressed in abuses of authority by both priests and women superiors, which are increasingly being reported by nuns/sisters or ex-nuns/sisters. Many of these experiences—some of them exposed in the mass media—refer to control, brainwashing, secrecy, and fear; all these are evidence of dehumanizing practices within the Church.

Little is known yet, through academic studies, about the composition, structure, conflicts, internal debates, and reconfigurations of current Latin American Catholic female religious congregations. Despite their numerical weight, institutional presence, and social role, invisibility characterizes this group, especially when compared to religious men. A pioneering study undertaken by the Latin American Conference of Religious People (CLAR), led by historian Ana María Bidegain (CLAR 2003), reconstructed the path of this collective of women from 1959 to 1999 using a participatory research method, collecting testimonies of these women from 160 congregations present in various Latin American countries. The CLAR’s study, as well as others, focused on specific countries, has raised the profile of this topic within the academy. The studies of María Eugenia Patiño (2018) on Aguascalientes, México; Veronique Lecaros (2017) on Perú; Caroline J. Jacques Cubas (2014), and Brenda Carranza (2015) on Brazil; and Ana Lourdes Suárez (2017) on Argentina are all academic works that account for contradictory issues: the relevance of religious women in the social field through their teaching, nursing, and community work, and the stress they experience due to the rigidities of ecclesial structures. All these studies indicate that, at present, women religious are facing strong difficulties in sustaining
the structures they created (schools, asylums, etc.) and in dealing with their aging members and few new entrants; that is, in facing the crises their numerical decline implies. They are struggling to try to make sense of their social and pastoral role as consecrated women within a structure—the Catholic Church—that persists in closing up leading roles for them.

A positive aspect of the process women religious have been through during the last five decades is the emergence in many of them of an increasing awareness that their mission is to work in favour of the most marginalized. They have been very radical in following the “the preferential option for the poor” launched as a challenge by the Document of the Latin American Bishops in Medellín, 1968.¹ Many religious orders—particularly female ones—began to renew their structures, updated the purpose of their social and pastoral missions, and changed the way they faced their ministry. Some of them made radical choices, not only working for the poor, but also living among them as women religious, in what came to be known as the inserted option. These religious congregations left their schools, nursing homes, and hospitals and moved their homes to poor neighbourhoods, living and developing their activities among the poor. This choice resulted in many positive impacts both for religious women and for the poor communities they served (Quiñones, 1997; Bidegain, 2014; Suárez, 2017, 2020; Touris, 2010). This new impulse, launched by the late 60s, to mission for and among the poor, helps understand why women might choose to stay in or join religious orders.

For some of them, living and working for the poor meant persecution and even death. Under totalitarian regimes or by instructions of powerful landowners, nine religious women living in the region were killed: Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet, in Argentina, 1976; ITA Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, in El Salvador, 1980; Teresa de Jesús and Ramirez Vargas, in Colombia, 1989; and Dorothy Stang, in Brazil, 2005. Their commitment and martyrdom have become increasingly well known through academic studies (Viñoles, 2014; Temporelli, 2014).

The conceptual and pastoral approaches that accompanied the decision to live among the poor, analysed in terms of their implications for women religious, had varied effects. From a gender perspective, some effects were positive but others negative. Living and working among the poorest contributed to making the rigid patterns of religious life more flexible. Their proximity to the poorest acted as a source of meaning for them as women religious. It also had positive implications for the neighbourhoods they missioned in. However, the socio-pastoral practices that accompanied these approaches did not result in reducing the gender gap in the Catholic Church or in providing them more senior roles within the Church hierarchy. Despite their commitment and active involvement with the poorest, these women continued to be barely visible, while the prominence of their male peers (priests) increased. The option for the poor in the 70s developed following the insights of Latin American liberation theology, to which were added those of the theology of the people (Teología del Pueblo) soon after. Both are theological-pastoral approaches that proposed new views on poverty in Latin America. The former understands the poor as victims of injustice from which they must be liberated; the latter, framed in a more cultural perspective, conceives of the poor as a model of what the Church is called to be: a poor church among the poor. These two perspectives converge in the belief that expressions of folk religiosity need to be recovered and valued, as well as poor people’s traditions and ways of living—an understanding emphasized by Teología del Pueblo.² Poor people are conceived not as those who must be catechized, educated, and guided so that they adopt the true beliefs, as has been the Church’s main approach until the beginning of the 20th century, but as sources of intrinsic values for the Church and society. Both approaches postulate a new way of conceiving the poor, promoting them as a socio-political actor. With liberationist theologies, the concurrence between religion and politics is sealed, with a distinctive Latin American note.
For these approaches, raising awareness among the poor and fostering their struggles is key to achieving radical change in society.

Why did these two liberationist theological-pastoral approaches not help to highlight the role of religious women, although providing interesting insights about how to accompany poor people? Ultimately, they contributed to women religious’ invisibility by reinforcing a crucial belief: those that are meant to “sacralize” the “people” are men (priests), not women. In Latin American countries the “people” still expect priests to deliver the symbols of sacralization—sacraments, individual and collective blessings, and so on (Suárez, 2017). Religious women play a crucial role promoting poor people, but are not considered as possible agents that can “sacralize”. Priests—men—are seen as “sacred”/“holy” persons; sisters—women—are not. In short, the structures of the Catholic Church work against women religious, and they are being reinforced by the practices framed within the liberationist theological approaches. Clericalism is reinforced not only because priests govern and control, but also because the pastoral practices construct them as leaders by “sacralizing” them. These practices keep women in inferior positions within the structure of both the Church and society, disempowering them. Many women religious silently suffer the consequences of the Catholic Church’s gender dynamics, acknowledging that for the time being not even a reformist pope such as the current one—Francis—will change it.

In the late 1990s, feminist theology helped to unmask the patriarchal structures of the Catholic Church. It first impacted on consecrated theologians (Ivone Gebara, Brazil; Consuelo Velez, Colombia; Virginia Azcuy, Argentina; Antonieta Potente, Italian living in Bolivia, among others) and from them, on religious communities (Vélez, 2013). Feminist approaches shaped the identity of consecrated women, encouraging them to question their role within the Catholic Church and the persistent masculine control over them, leading to redefinitions of the 1970 liberationist approaches. Rethinking the “preferential option for the poor” from a gender perspective led to conceiving “liberation” and support to the most vulnerable from a more holistic spirituality, in which the corporal and experiential dimensions increased in relevance.

Popular readings of the Bible, including bibliodrama, reciprocal listening, among others, have all been tools to empower women. The “liberation” emphasis is thus modified: the starting point is not the great political movements of liberation but the hardships and joys of “everyday” life (Eckholt, 2007). This led some female congregations, who in the 70s and 80s had understood their option for the poor within the framework of liberation theology, to reorient their mission towards “healing” women, in particular the poorest ones. Since these two female communes—women religious and poor women—experienced the hardship of the margins (women religious in the margins of the Catholic Church and poor women in the margins of society), they connect well through sorority ties. Sorority is a term born in the Latin American feminist field; it refers to the women alliance that feeds their struggle against oppression, creating spaces in which women can deploy new possibilities (Lagarde, 2012). The term refers to sisterhood between women who, by perceiving themselves as equals, can ally themselves, share and, above all, influence and change their socio-political context. Sorority among poor women and women religious has a profound impact on the empowerment of marginalized women, who gain leadership in their neighbourhoods.

For many women religious, feminist theology had a strong effect on their identity as consecrated women. An important exchange began with Latin American feminist theologians and those from Western countries (Europe and the United States), which helped consolidate vibrant transnational networks of feminist theologians from Catholicism and other Christian denominations. Transnational networks such as Teologanda, based in Argentina, and Conspirando, in Chile, among others, build more horizontal ties among Christian women, regardless of their denomination or role within their institutions.
Feminist approaches among women religious helped to identify their shared subordinate status under conditions of patriarchy. The increasing meaninglessness of belonging to a persistently patriarchal institution is at the root of the decline in women religious across the region. However, there are female religious communities that have been less affected by this crisis, some of which arose in the last few decades. Most of them are part of a conservative counter-offensive move that resists change, attempting to restore the social and moral order in Latin American contexts.

The conservative counter-offensive

Progressive changes among women religious within the Catholic Church have been accompanied by movements in the opposite direction. New conservative orders recognized by Catholic hierarchies have been emerging all over Latin American countries. Some of them have grown rapidly. Most of them arose under a new format for consecrated life offered within the Catholic Church by the so-called new ecclesial movements (NEMs).

These NEMs were strongly fostered and supported by the Vatican, the headquarters of the Catholic Church, particularly since the pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), who publicly expressed his support on several occasions. The structure of these movements allows for various types of membership, including consecrated life for women through the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, similar to those of women religious. Many of the NEMs (Schonestant, Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei, Focolare Movement, Community of Sant’Egidio, and the Neocatechumenal Way, among others) originated in European countries and have expanded since the mid-20th century in various Latin American countries. Others were founded in different countries of Latin America: FASTA and Punto Corazón, Argentina; Heraldos del Evangelio, Shalom, and Canción Nueva, Brazil; Talleres de Oración y Vida, Chile; Movimiento de Seglares Claretianos, Encuentros de Promoción Juvenil, and Movimiento Misionero Seglar, Colombia; Movimiento de Vida Cristiana and Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, Perú; and Escuela de la Cruz, Regnum Christi (known as “Legionarios”), and Alianza de Amor con el Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, México.

Many of these NEMs developed a very conservative agenda. Of the 130 NEMs currently present in Latin America (Soneira, 2010; Suárez, 2014), most of them, to different degrees, subscribe to the conservative postulates. Opus Dei, Sodalitium, and Regnum Christi are amongst those with greater commitment and visibility in the public space. They oppose issues of sexual and reproductive health, homosexual marriage, sexual education in schools, and especially the decriminalization of abortion. They tend to produce narrative conflicts that favour the emergence of moral panic. Many of the progressive religious women discussed in the previous section may agree on some of these moral points, particularly in opposing abortion. However, they would not base their mission on opposing moral issues, and much less would they judge people on sexual identity or sexual behaviour. The conservative groups, instead, fear using the word gender because it might entail the acceptance of homosexuality, the destruction of the patriarchal family, and the dissemination of feminism (Lima Costa, 2014: 28). They fight against what they call “gender ideology” (Carranza & Vital De Cunha, 2018). Their defence of a heteronormative family structure and of social roles to be played by men and women in society emerge in a context that is undergoing profound transformations in more general behavioural terms (Fry & Carrara, 2016; Machado & Burity, 2012, 2017; Vaggione, 2006). Their discourse is framed within the rhetoric of loss, revealing their attempts at the resumption of male dominance in the family and in society as a whole. From their perspective, social imbalance has its genesis in family imbalance produced by the transformation...
of gender roles. The social emancipation of women and the promotion of sexual diversity is considered the epicentre of the problem, according to these religious actors (Carranza & Vital De Cunha, 2018). They seek to build a society in which differences are controlled and eliminated, where tradition determines the actions of people, and the Church is the organism that regulates these actions. It is notable how consecrated women emerge and become leaders in these movements, defending ideas of “controlling sexual behaviour and the procreative capacity of the female body, as well as an active vigilance against abortion . . . they are also part of this imperative of publicizing the faith by controlling the faithful body” (Segato, 2008: 209). These movements seek to influence the field of education: many have founded their own private schools and universities that focus in general on an elite education. In addition, they tend to develop their own educational materials to be distributed on a large scale, lobbying to get them into the national curriculum. The Regnum Christi legions, to take an example, administer the Anahuac University Network, a private university system. The network is composed of several universities located in different countries of the world, having presence in México, its homeland (8), United States (1), Chile (1), Spain (1), and Italy (2). The network is also affiliated with the international education system of the Legion of Christ called the Education Consortium Anáhuac (CEA) in 18 countries and serving over 100,000 students from kindergarten to graduate school (see www.regnumchristi.org/es/educacion/). The organization concentrates on ministering to the wealthy and powerful in the belief that by evangelizing society’s leaders, the beneficial impact on society is multiplied. Their financial power constructed through their networks puts them as one of the strongest powerful groups in México lobbying in the educational and political field.

Many of these NEMs tend to work in coordination with large international conservative organizations. They coordinate with pro-life organizations, such as Centro de Promoción Familiar y de Regulación de la Natalidad (Ceprofarena); Population Research Institute (PRI); la Alianza Latinoamericana Para la Familia (ALAPA); Focus on the Family; and Family of the Americas Foundation (FAF) (González Ruiz, 2005). Within these networks, the organizations build mechanisms to influence public policies, pressing to remove or pass laws. NEMs’ strategies include alliances with Evangelical groups organizing networks from which they exert pressure in the public sphere. In the National Congress, in some countries—notably the case of Brazil—Catholics and Evangelicals work in collaboration on agendas identified by them as “moral”. The demands for the extension of LGBT rights that began to be identified in Brazilian national and state public programs and policies, especially since 2005, have become the focus of attention of parliamentarians and Christian leaders (Carranza & Vital De Cunha, 2018). During public debates on abortion or equal marriage, there have been convergences of Catholics and Evangelical groups, as in México (1999), Nicaragua (2006), Brazil (2015), and Argentina (2012 and 2018). Growing connections among conservative groups are shaping a new scenario in which the battles for gender issues are being waged.

The hope of a less patriarchal society in Latin America is being challenged. Women Catholic leaders, as seen in the first part, at present are still being excluded from both ordained ministries (they cannot access priesthood) and governing roles. Widespread Latin American pastoral practices keep reinforcing priests’ roles in sustaining male clericalism. Many Latin American Catholic women leaders are aware of these unjust gender dynamics. They are ready for a change but acknowledge that it might not come in the short term. Other Catholic women leaders, on the contrary, resist changes, content with a conservative agenda on gender issues.
Religion in Latin American societies

Religions, gender, and society in a context of “enchanted” modernity

Catholicism has long been represented as an element of cultural unity and a defining feature of the historical identity of Latin America. Recent investigations suggest, however, that the religious sphere is going through a process of recomposition that is challenging the hegemony and monopolistic status of Catholicism (De la Torre & Martin, 2016).

Census data from Brazil and México (the only countries in the region with census data that allow for measurement of the historical development of religious change on a national scale) and different research based on survey data undertaken in recent decades in many Latin American countries (Mallimaci, 2013; Suarez & López Fidanza, 2013; Mafra, 2013; Teixeira & Menezes, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014; De la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga, 2007, 2016) have revealed increased affiliation to various Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. These studies have also noted that this has been simultaneously accompanied by the growth of those “without religion”—citizens who might consider themselves believers but who do not affiliate with any one particular religious tradition or denomination. Religious change is also occurring at the margins of institutional churches through New Age, neo-pagan, neo-Indian, neo-esoteric, and self-styled religiosities, as well as through popular religious syncretisms, indicating new experiments with what is considered sacred in Latin America (De la Torre & Martin, 2016: 473).

Data from the studies mentioned earlier indicate that the biggest trend in religious belonging in Latin American societies reflects a transition from Catholic hegemony to Christian supremacy. According to the Pew Research Center survey (2014), while 69% of adults in the region identify themselves as Catholic, 84% were raised in a Catholic environment. In contrast, 19% claim to be Protestant, although 9% grew up in a family of that denomination. As can be seen, religious affiliation shows changes, but these mutations tend to occur within a Christian atmosphere (Esquivel, 2017). Up to 88% of the Latin American population at present identify as Christians (Hackett, Murphy, & Mcclendon, 2016).

In Christian regions, the “gender gap” as indicated by Hackett, Murphy, and Mcclendon (2016) tends to be higher than in regions dominated by other faith groups (Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and the religiously unaffiliated). Latin American societies follow that trend. On all the standard measures of religious commitment examined in the Pew study—religious affiliation, frequency of worship service attendance, frequency of prayer, and whether religion plays an important role in a person’s life—Latin American women report higher rates than men. Christian women in Latin America, in short, are more religious than Christian men are. They tend also to perceive themselves as more religious than men do (Hackett, Murphy, & Mcclendon, 2016). The various Latin American survey studies mentioned previously also confirm greater levels of religious practice amongst women.

How can this gap be explained? As the 2016 Pew Center Research report concludes, there is a growing consensus in the academic community that the religious gender gap probably stems from a confluence of multiple factors, but there is still no agreement on exactly which factors are most responsible for the gender differences (Hackett, Murphy, & Mcclendon, 2016: 15). More empirical studies need to be done in Latin American countries to understand this gender gap. Different hypotheses may shed light on this issue. One notable characteristic of the gender gap is that it is higher among Catholics. There is evidence that there is greater interest on the part of families and communities for women to develop a subjectivity committed to the meanings and values of their religion (mainly Catholic). Becoming more involved in religion seems to be part of gender normative behaviour. This reinforces the idea that in Latin American societies’ moral transmission and socialization have been associated with women’s roles. Women are supposed to be responsible for the education and raising of children. Where Catholicism has
been the source of moral standards, the maintenance of social moral order has been associated with women.

As stated earlier, Catholicism is decreasing in popularity in favour of other Christian denominations (particularly Pentecostals) and the non-religiously affiliated. The trend toward religious deinstitutionalization and the growing consequences of individual spirituality is evident, as recent studies indicate (Morello, Romero, Rabbia, & Da Costa, 2017; De la Torre & Martin, 2016, among others) in the distance between lived beliefs and practices and ecclesiastic positions. This detachment affects not only the Catholic world but also the Evangelical landscape (De la Torre & Martin, 2016). The category of “my-way believers”, coined by Parker (2008: 337), to characterize the Chilean religiosity as “a postmodern culture [that] has guaranteed the renewal of old values under new conditions”, has been helpful in understanding that lived religiosity in Latin American societies is not governed by the institution of affiliation (De la Torre & Martin, 2016: 482).

As for gender issues, the religious deinstitutionalization and increasing Pentecostalism, even if both narrow the gender religious gap, are having social impacts that tend to go in different directions. In the latter—Pentecostalism—the construction of new religious identity after conversion (mostly from Catholicism) comes with gender identities being contested in many of the various groups of the Evangelical field in Latin America. Pentecostal growth tends to be part of a conservative counter-offensive that battles against the increasing flexible understandings in gender issues in wider Latin American society.

The former deinstitutionalization and “my-way believer” belonging comes with greater autonomy in religious commitment, thus also a tendency to question existing gender stereotypes. The process, transversal to all religious affiliations, is parallel to an increasing appreciation of spiritual approaches outside the Judeo-Christian world, either of Oriental or pre-Hispanic origin. In practices associated with these approaches—yoga, meditation, exercises of self-energy charging during equinox at sacred places, rituals at home altars, and so on—men and women commit equally (De la Torre, Gutiérrez Zúñiga, & Hernández 2016), transcending models and practices related to what has been instituted as feminine and masculine. This greater flexibility may be related to gender identities less built upon religious models. In the case of women, it could be argued that this greater autonomy with respect to religious institutions and the social roles that this entails is articulated with feminist and ecofeminist resistances (De la Torre, Gutiérrez Zúñiga, & Hernández 2016).

The universe of Christian symbols and beliefs merging with pre-Hispanic approaches and new spiritualities account for what some scholars define as an “enchanted modernity” to describe the Latin American religious field (Morello, Romero, Rabbia, & Da Costa, 2017). The ongoing interaction between modernity and religion for Latin America is not diminishment of religiosity but the transformation of religious practices due to the creative freedom of the believers. The increasing institutional autonomy combined with the persistent presence of the transcendent in the midst of modern achievements impacts also in new scholarly understandings of expressions of popular religiosity (Ameigeiras, 2008; Suárez, 2015) and its links to multiple social implications.

Many women, particularly those living in poverty, find that their religious/spiritual cultural meaning systems provide them with reasons to keep on struggling for their own, their families’, and their communities’ survival. From a “lived religion” inductive approach, scholars are finding many “creative” ways in which women “sacralize” their places and commit with their communities by resorting to beliefs and practices of their religiosity. The following phrases are extracted from longer narratives of women interviewed for qualitative research projects (Suárez & Zengarini, 2015): “Every day you have a miracle that you may not be aware of . . .
miracles . . . they are always there”; “I made a promise to the Virgin de Lujan. The Virgin is the one who gives me the strength to keep going on”; “I touched the Virgin on her hand . . . and found peace”. Phrases such as these—said by women engaged in informal community activities—help to go deeper into the understanding of the linkage between religious experience, popular religiosity, and agency. This language speaks of a spiritual experience that goes beyond religion (nonetheless it is supported and articulated in a religious language and symbology). It is an emotionally lived faith in which devotion, promises, and belief in everyday miracles play a crucial role in shaping agency by supporting a cosmological and holistic cultural matrix from which “hope” and a positive way of facing life emerges.

The social commitment of these women, however, as much as it may empower them and rebound for the good in their communities, has a dynamic that is independent of patriarchal social structure and may even increase its tension. The point is that these women go through the diverse disadvantages of their female lives—symbolic violence, disappointments, exclusion, and so on—giving them meaning and through rituals and practices that motorize their daily lives and give them reasons to hope.

These women’s community commitments relate to a very Latin American way of female empowerment. Not at the individual level, but at the community one. Their understanding and practices challenge the way in which the state tends to manage poverty—particularly true when neoliberal policies are in place. Sorority comes to be an experienced category built upon women struggling for the survival of their communities.

**Feminicides and the #NiUnaMenos movement**

Sorority ties that build upon women struggling together as a collective actor, is a distinctive characteristic of the #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) movement. “Ni una menos” is a group formed in 2014 by journalists, artists, and activists, which invited people to participate in meetings, lecture journeys, and actions against feminicides. Its first massive gathering was on June 3, 2015, in Buenos Aires, where about 150,000 people gathered. Since then, this event is organized annually, and thousands of women take part to fight for their rights, carrying messages in posters, in their songs, and in their bodies, in a horizontal movement inspired by their desires and subjectivities. What are the symbols, images, and proclamations of these claims? They are underpinned by a clear wish: ¡Ni una Menos, Vivas nos queremos! (Not one less; we want us alive!), an emblem against feminicide. This extreme form of violence against women has been shaking Latin American societies, as a reaction against patriarchal structures being challenged. Latin American academic feminists explained that this extreme violence against women is a consequence of gender inequality and social structures such as patriarchy, as well as impunity and institutional violence. The Catholic Church is perceived, as many of the movement’s slogans indicate, as one of the institutions exercising violence. Feminicide can be seen as a means through which it is made clear that power is a masculine exercise over women’s bodies, behaviours, subjectivities, and rights.

Going back to the #NiUnaMenos movement, besides emphasizing feminicide, this is a space to express different gender proclamations. LGBTQI+ claims, including those of trans people and transvestites, are presented with slogans such as “Basta de travesticidios” (Stop murdering transvestites), showing how specific this community’s problem is as well as resistance to their sexual identities. Proclamations against feminicide and transvestites’ murders reunite to defend the lives of women in danger, in societies in which women’s deaths show their worst face when they resist change to patriarchal structures and the machista culture. The horror of these murders motivates women to go out into the streets to defend themselves and to affirm their place in
society. The many proclamations against patriarchalism are expressed in different slogans against what is conceived as the control of women by patriarchal institutions. The Catholic Church is the institution most “criticized”; slogans attack its structures and moral doctrines. These new movements of resistance construct solid ties of sorority based on an increasing awareness of structures working against the “collective” of women. They work changing the landscape of Latin American gender dynamics with unique experiences that call for rethinking the meaning of being a woman today.

Concluding remarks

The chapter has explored the relationship between gender dynamics in Latin American societies through two lenses. Firstly, women religious leaders’ identity construction and, secondly, between religion and the construction of gender identities, and resistance to this with increasing pluralism and religious reconfiguration in Latin American societies.

To address the first part, we focused on Catholic women religious (sisters) who, at present, are still excluded from both ordained ministries (they cannot access the priesthood) and from governing roles. Patriarchal beliefs and practices within the Catholic Church sustain male primacy, visibility, and power. Many Latin American Catholic women leaders are aware of these unjust gender dynamics, but the falling numbers of women religious in most Latin American countries accounts for their increasingly meaningless identities as religious leaders. They are ready for a change, but acknowledge that it might not come in the short term. Other Catholic women leaders, on the contrary, resist changes, content with a conservative agenda on gender issues. They support conservative counter-offensive movements that fight against what they call “gender ideology”, within the rhetoric of loss and narrative that favour the emergence of moral panic.

The #NiUnaMenos movement illustrates the tensions in Latin American patriarchal structures. The movement makes visible sorority ties that build upon women’s collective struggles—a very Latin American feature—against one of the worst consequences of patriarchy: feminicides. Not surprisingly the Catholic Church, even if legitimized as a “good” social actor in different fields, is perceived to be one of the perpetuators of that structure, as the slogans of the movement highlight.

Modernity has changed Latin America in many ways. Increasing deinstitutionalization and “my-way believer” belonging, comes, as argued in the second part, with greater autonomy in religious commitment, thus also with a tendency to question existing gender stereotypes. The ongoing interaction between modernity and religion in Latin American does not result, however, in the diminishment of religiosity. The religious landscape remains vibrant, accounting for an “enchanted modernity”. Many women, particularly those living in poverty, find that their religious/spiritual cultural meaning systems provide them with reasons to keep on struggling for their own, their families’, and their communities’ survival.

Notes

1 The Second General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops was convened by Pope Paul VI in 1968, in Medellin, Colombia. The agenda of the Conference, influenced by a group of progressive Latin American clergy and by the modernizing tendencies of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), began an effort to apply the principles of Vatican II to Latin America. The Conference established the importance of the Church’s addressing contemporary socioeconomic realities, endorsed new pastoral practices, and marked the emergence of the new, distinctly Latin American “theology of liberation”. The Conference shifted the Catholic Church’s emphasis toward the poor majority.
2 The theology of the people stresses that people’s religious experiences are not irrational or chaotic but a coherent symbolic whole (see Lucio Gera, 1974). The people (el pueblo) have a symbolic set of rites, festivals, and customs from which they express their style of seeking the sacred and from which a political commitment must be boosted, anchored in the idea of decolonization and liberation from the popular. Popular piety channels the expressions of a poor, but believing, people (pueblo).

3 To understand Latin America’s religiosity, the idea of the sacred is important. The concept stands in a continuum with daily life, as a “differential texture of the inhabited world” (Martín, 2009: 281). This “texture” is activated at specific moments or in certain spaces, through “practices of sacralization”: the many ways of constructing the sacred, of inscribing people, places and moments in a differentiated level of the inhabited world.

4 Bibliodrama is a form of story exploration/interpretation that loosely uses the tools, methods, and techniques (often called “interventions”) of psychodrama. These methods are applied to the exploration of literature and biblical stories in small groups of participants. The experience of “reciprocal hearing” (escucha mutua), as a means in the healing process, was created by sister Verónica Rafferty, a Dominican nun, who adapted the technique known as Re-evaluation Counseling of Harvey Jackins, from the USA. She created a new tool that spread rapidly in popular sectors of southern Latin America. The technique is known as M.Ap.A. “Women learning to help yourself” (Mujeres Aprendiendo a Ayudarse).


6 Opus Dei does not count among these 130 NEMs officially recognized by the Catholic Church. In 1982 it was structured as a prelature, that is, the jurisdiction of its own bishop covers the persons in Opus Dei wherever they are, rather than geographical dioceses.

7 Moral panic can be defined as “the mechanism of resistance and control of societal transformation. . . . They emerge from social fear in relation to changes, especially those perceived as sudden and, perhaps for this very reason, threatening” (Miskolci, 2007: 103).

8 Marcial Maciel (1920–2008), founder of the Legionaries of Christi, was found guilty in 2010 of reprehensible actions, including sexual abuse. Catholic Church authorities were criticized for a slow pace of investigations, with conjecture that it was because Maciel was close to Pope John Paul II and had well-placed connections among senior clergy.

9 The Centro de Promoción Familiar y de Regulación de la Natalidad (Ceprofarena) was founded in 1981 and is directly related to Human Life International (HLI), an international conservative organization.

10 Both the headquarters of the PRI and its subsidiary in Perú have a strong dedication in lobbying state organizations, advising congressional members, and proposing laws that support conservatives’ ideas such as avoiding a lay country, the use of contraceptive methods, and homosexual marriage, among others.

11 The Alianza Latinoamericana para la Familia (ALAFAn unun) was founded in Venezuela by Cristina de Marcellus de Vollmer and has extended all over Latin America. ALAFA’s interests are focused on promoting and defending the typical family model (heterosexual, monogamous, and with a reproductive instruction).

12 In Central American countries—Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador—around 40% of their population identified in 2014 with an Evangelical denomination. Brazil, considered the country in the world with most Catholics, at present (2014) has 26% of Evangelicals. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Uruguay, and Venezuela have percentages of Evangelicals between 10% and 20%. In the overall region, according to the Pew Center study, there has been about a 23% Catholicism loss and around a 15% Evangelical growth from 1970 to 2014. See Pew–Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2014) Religion in Latin America. Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region.

13 A list drawn up by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) indicates that of the 25 countries with more feminicides, 14 are from Latin America. México, Brazil, and Argentina are the countries with the highest rates. In México, seven women are murdered every day, victims of gender violence (www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/dia-de-la-mujer-nada-que-celebrar-suman-304-feminicidios-en-2019/1300789).

### Bibliography


Religion in Latin American societies


