

This paper will bring together the notion of Christian practices and the notion U.S. Latina/o popular religion in order to consider their implications for Latina/o religious education in the United States. Specifically, I will survey the Lilly Endowment project on Christian practices, place it in dialogue with Latina/o popular religion, and then explore "Shaping Communities" or good governance as a Christian practice that has implications for Latina/o religious education.

### The Emergence of Christian Practices

Religious historian Dorothy C. Bass directs the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a Lilly Endowment project based at Valparaiso University. Lilly Endowment is a private, Indiana-based, family foundation committed to enhancing the vitality of local congregations (Farnsley 2004, 143). Working closely with Craig Dykstra, the Senior Vice President of Religion at Lilly Endowment, Inc., Dorothy Bass and the Valparaiso Project are engaged in an on-going effort to make Christian practices widely accessible through a growing number of popular and scholarly books, articles, seminars, curricula for academic institutions and congregations, and leadership development experiences. The Valparaiso Project is dedicated to the recovery of Christian practices – hospitality, Sabbath-keeping, discernment, forgiveness, shaping communities and so on – as a contemporary synthesis of belief and action that is expressed in concrete, non-dogmatic, ecumenical, down-to-earth ways. Christian practices are an experiment in response to the gospel; they are exercises of faith that prize solidarity with the poor and lowered barriers between people (Pohl 1999, 162-163). Dorothy Bass defines Christian practices as "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's grace to all creation through Christ Jesus" (1997, 5). Christian practices emerge as a synthesis of human needs, understanding of biblical texts, and the activity of God's Spirit in the world (Bass and Dykstra 1997, 199). Crucial to our later discussion on Religious Education, Christian practices can be taught and learned through an experience or feeling rather than doctrine alone (Boys 1989, 41). When woven together these Christian practices offer a healthy way of life for contemporary people that is consistent with scripture, Christian beliefs, and tradition, and these "gain credibility when they are embodied in patterns of shared life" (Bass 2003, 507)

In order to clarify what Bass and Dykstra are trying to accomplish by developing Christian practices as a model of formation, it will be helpful to examine what they are reacting against in the dominant culture within the United States (Bass 2003, 509; Lee 2005, 52-53). The Christian practices movement aims to counteract the corrosive effects of an ahistorical, destructive individualism and an excessive utilitarian approach to life in the United States which erodes the vitality of congregations and makes people reticent to help each other in ways suggested by scripture (Bellah 1996, 251 and 335; Dykstra and Bass 1997, 11). Dykstra and Bass argue that critical thinking on Christian practices is necessary to appreciate their strengths, to critique their destructive applications or distortions in Christian life and in broader society, and to help ensure their fidelity to scripture and tradition (2002, 27). Similarly, they assert that Christian practices are not a self-help movement, but a mutual-help movement wherein Christians share responsibility for Christian practices by laboring cooperatively with others who may be different

from themselves. Christian practices articulate a wisdom that is accessible to all Christians regardless of their culture, language or denominational affiliation (Dykstra and Bass 1997, 11-12). By their nature, then, I suggest that Christian practices are *intercultural practices*, “[a] term that can express the dynamic interaction of cultural identities brought by individuals into the communal life of the church” (Irizarry 2003, 371).

#### Dialogue Between U.S. Latina/o Popular Religious Practices and Christian Practices

Similar to Christian practices, I assert that U.S. Latina/o popular religious practices are also intercultural practices, and that fruitful dialogue between these two sets of concepts and discourse is possible even if it is not always easy. According to José Irizarry, “[t]he intercultural experience refers then to an inherent process of shared-identity-formation which exists within faith communities whether observable cultural diversity could be identified or not” (2003, 371). I think that intercultural dialogue at the level of popular religion is crucially important because it aptly describes the actual, contemporary, everyday experience (*lo cotidiano*) of ordinary believers in nearly every region of the United States. I suggest that the *sensus fidelium* or the faith intuition of Christian laypersons is being shaped by more frequent ordinary encounters with other believers who are different from themselves (Espín 1997, 66). From the following dialogue between Christian practices and U.S. Latina/o religious practices, I hope to arrive at a more interculturally-responsive (and thereby a more effective) approach to religious education.

To begin the dialogue, I note that Christian practices would bring an ecumenical vision to U.S. Latina/o popular religion that would allow for fresh interaction at the grassroots level among Protestants and Catholics. I think that it is difficult to overstate the importance of this intentionally ecumenical character of Christian practices. Despite this ecumenical posture of Christian practices, I am not sure how widely U.S. Latina/o and other Catholic educators are entering the conversation on Christian practices. Yet, my sense is that Catholic educators are starting to show an interest in the Christian practices movement (Lee 2007). To underscore their ecumenical commitment, the Valparaiso Project has commissioned a group of authors from a broad range of denominations. For example, in *Practicing our Faith*, Catholic religious sister Ana María Pineda introduces the Christian practice of hospitality through a description of *Las Posadas*, a Latina/o Catholic popular religious practice that re-enacts Luke 2 and Joseph and Mary’s unsuccessful search for a room at an inn in Bethlehem (1997, 42). As a Christian practice, *Las Posadas* retains its cultural distinctiveness and particularity. I suggest that Christian practices are not only ecumenical, but also non-assimilative. As part of the dialogue, Christian practices would challenge U.S. Latina/o religion to be more reliant on scripture and to engage in critical reflection on practices to ensure their fidelity to scripture and to denominational traditions.

For its part, U.S. Latina/o popular religion would introduce a more-pronounced aesthetic to Christian practices. In its rich use of symbols, many U.S. Latina/o popular religious practices help people to grow in faith and to express their piety, as for example in relation to the passion of Jesus on Good Friday. The communal use of such biblically-rooted narrative attests to the

capacity for religious symbols and stories to mediate the divine and to serve as focal points for prayer. Yet, to remain in meaningful dialogue with Christian practices, U.S. Latina/o popular religion would need to re-consider its many non-biblical Marian devotions and their accompanying images. Given its 500-year history of resistance to clerical control, U.S. Latina/o popular religion could offer insights on how Christian practices might become a self-sustaining, popular movement that is counter-cultural and also independent from the Lilly Endowment. U.S. Latina/o popular religion could also broaden and deepen the emphasis in Christian practices on training for leadership. U.S. Latina/o religion is sometimes considered a school of leadership because of its ability to gradually initiate new adherents who in turn instruct others (Rodríguez 1994, 206). At a fundamental level, any dialogue between Christian practices and U.S. Latina/o popular religion must also include an exchange that directly addresses the faith encounter with Jesus Christ. As Miroslav Volf suggests, some insights into belief can only be attained through actions that echo the actions of Christ: feeding the hungry, tending to the sick, offering hospitality to a stranger or praying with others and these actions offer a framework for intercultural understanding that transcends language (Volf 2002, 262; Dykstra and Bass 2002, 25).

Further dialogue would be grounded in characteristics that are common to popular religion in general, namely, it tends to resist assimilation (Rodriguez 2004, 333; Bass 2003, 509); tolerates diversity in doctrine and worship (Irizarry 2007, 126), as oral tradition it adapts quickly to changing circumstances, and popular religion provides opportunities for multi-generational encounters between mentors and those less experienced in a particular practice (Rodriguez 2004, 339). As a corrective to the dominant U.S. culture, Dorothy Bass asserts that Christian practices (and I would include popular religion) introduce a healthy asceticism and esteems communal approaches to life (Bass 2003, 510).

#### "Shaping Communities" in the Idiom of U.S. Latina/o Popular Religion

I now want to present the case of Dolores Mission, a culturally-diverse, predominantly Mexican American faith community located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, CA. I offer it as an example of good governance, or shaping communities which is one of Dorothy Bass's Christian practices. My overall purpose in examining shaping communities as a Christian practice is to correlate it with Latina/o popular religion, and later to apply these insights to U.S. Latina/o religious education.

As is true of all Christian practices, shaping communities is a broad concept. I will present four distinct kinds of shaping communities as they manifest themselves in Dolores Mission's pastoral ministry. The first kind of shaping community addresses the Sunday worship particular needs of three distinct sub-groups: the English-speaking, the Spanish-speaking, the bilingual community, and the multi-lingual worship needs of the inmates at nearby Central Juvenile Hall of Los Angeles County. This kind of shaping community involves prayer, spiritual conversation, planning, scheduling, and coordinating with musicians and numerous other groups and individuals. A second kind of shaping community involves neighborhood outreach which at

Dolores Mission entails initiatives such as a Women's Cooperative, a Head Start program, an after-school program that is staffed by volunteers from a local high school and university, as well as the over-night use of the church building as a shelter for homeless men. A third kind of shaping community encompasses mutual support and faith development which is effected by widespread membership in small groups that meet weekly for scripture study, shared prayer, and for fellowship.

The fourth kind of shaping community is the integration of discipleship-citizenship which is one of the hallmarks of ministry at Dolores Mission. This involves community organizing efforts which are modeled on those of PICO, a national network of faith-based community organizations in urban areas, but which have been adapted for use at Dolores Mission (PICO 2007). For example, the congregants of Dolores Mission have adapted the traditional *caminata* or night-time, outdoor, popular religious procession in order to meet the community's needs. The typical *caminata* provides: an evening's stroll, an opportunity to meet one's neighbors, heightened neighborhood awareness of church activities, promotes a sense of belonging among congregants, and frequently concludes with a speech by an invited politician who shares the stage with lay leaders from the Dolores Mission community. The custom is for outstanding lay leaders from Dolores Mission to enter into a public conversation with politicians on issues that impact life in the neighborhood (Garcia 2007). Consider the composition of place for these political speeches. Before the procession ends, the people take their place between the church and the school which are located on opposite sides of the street, and they crowd in to hear the politician and speak. With her back to the school building, the politician sees before her the juxtaposition of the people and behind them the façade of the church. Literally it is the church in the public square. After an opportunity for questions, the *caminata* ends at the nearby church plaza for conversation and a light meal served by church members. Organizing a *caminata* requires considerable leadership skills such as selecting responsible persons, assigning areas of responsibility, and coordinating among numerous individuals and groups. As a way to continue the dialogue between Christian practices and U.S. Latina/o popular religion, I want to analyze this case in light of Dorothy Bass's work on the Christian practice, shaping communities.

### Shaping Communities as a Christian Practice

"Shaping communities," is one of the original Christian practices identified in *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. In 1997, Larry Rasmussen, then the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, defined shaping communities as

the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements - indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is

the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society (1997, 120).

The shaping of communities is the Christian practice of community governance and leadership undertaken to the hope of allowing the ensemble's best talents to shine "while rendering the weaknesses as irrelevant as possible" (Rasmussen 1997, 121). As with other forms of choreography, the shaping of communities demands careful planning, coordination, and rehearsals. I suggest that shaping communities is an intercultural educational practice insofar as it is successful in bringing different people with different knowledge and different gifts together in a joint project. For Craig Dykstra, members of congregations are bound together not only by their common faith and beliefs, but also by their willingness to engage in Christian practices with those who might be different from themselves. Whether in the context of U.S. Latina/o popular religion at Dolores Mission or in the context of Christian practices, I suggest shaping communities directly impacts the day-to-day life of congregations that are engaged in the process of shared-identity-formation.

#### Implications of Shaping Communities for U.S. Latina/o Religious Education

Building on the work of Craig Dykstra, I suggest that Christian practices and U.S. Latina/o popular religious practices can be useful in re-thinking the ministry of Christian education and especially culturally-responsive forms of U.S. Latina/o religious education that may be conducted by non-Latina/os (Valparaiso Project, What are christian practices?). I suggest that shaping communities as a Christian practice correlates with good governance practices of U.S. Latina/o popular religion and that both are intercultural educational practices. As with other practices, I think that shaping communities is well served by the dialogue between U.S. Latina/o religion and Christian practices because such dialogue makes possible a synthesis of aesthetic and critical reflection. As an intercultural educational practice, shaping communities in the context of U.S. Latina/o religious education combines a bilingual aesthetic that is accompanied by a near-simultaneous, bi-cultural, process of critical reflection (Irizarry 2007, 125-126). Let me explain this in parts by drawing on the work of José Irizarry (2007). Bilingual instruction is one distinguishing characteristic of U.S. Latina/o religious education. Irizarry suggests that a bilingual aesthetic is particularly well suited to religious education as a ministry of the Word, and it simultaneously engages the somewhat incompatible worldviews of Spanish and another language. In an artistic fashion, the religious educator moves from one language and culture to another in the pursuit of accurate and meaningful expression of religious experiences, feelings, and beliefs. It is an artistry that defies literal translation. In like fashion, U.S. Latina/o religious education almost always requires bi-cultural, critical self-reflection in which the religious educator is drawing upon modes of religious experience and their expression that are shaped by a particular culture. This self-reflective critical component can help those engaged in U.S. Latina/o religious education to make sense of it as a complex of intercultural educational practices.

For a neat definition of religious education that I think operates effectively in an intercultural environment, I turn to Religious Educator Mary Boys who defines religious education as "the

making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connections between traditions and transformation” (Boys 1989, 193). Christian practices and U.S. Latina/o popular religion both correspond to this definition in that each invites people into a life of faith and helps them to continue growing in intimacy with Jesus. Mary Boys’s definition acknowledges a plurality of communal traditions and modes of religious transformation that are shaped by one’s culture. This definition allows for Christian practices, popular religion, a bilingual aesthetic, and bi-cultural critical self-reflection in that each somehow serves the fundamental elements of her definition: traditions, transformation, making accessible, and making manifest. For Boys, *making manifest* means teaching for social justice and being critically attentive to ways that it can be subverted by systematically ignoring or misrepresenting the contributions of women, U.S. Latina/os, and others. This involves careful preparations of teachers and leaders in religious education so that they not only have theoretical knowledge, but also familiarity with cultural symbols and popular religious customs. Mary Boys offers an innovative approach to inter-religious education, that given the necessary changes, applies equally well to U.S. Latina/o religious education. In a series of workshops funded by Lilly Endowment, Mary C. Boys and Sara Lee found that religious pluralism resulted in people retreating into enclaves that resulted in the loss of a sense of identity, but as they engaged each other in dialogue and in common activities Christians and Jews raised awareness of each one’s distinctive practices. In effect, interaction among Jew and Christians mutually clarified a sense of religious identity and promoted inter-religious understanding as they engaged in common activities (Bass 2003, 508). I suggest that this might also apply to U.S. Latina/o religious education.

In conclusion, I offer Craig Dykstra’s exhortation for teaching and learning Christian practices: “[t]he fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals – indeed whole communities – learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and into their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them” (Dykstra 1999, 71).

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