

Unveiling the Human and the Divine: The Revelatory Power of Popular Religiosity Narratives in Christian Education

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Stories are powerful *articulations of meaning and wisdom* that disclose people's interpretations of reality. Overall, stories possess a revelatory character: they say more than the words in which they are expressed. In this essay I pay attention to religious narratives and their revelatory power to unveil what is human and what is divine.

There are stories that have more weight within a faith tradition because of their religious character, official recognition, inclusion in a sacred text, or usage in liturgical settings. Such is the case of biblical stories within the Judeo-Christian tradition. These I call *Sacred/Classic¹ Stories*. There are also stories that remind a particular faith community of its identity by highlighting decisive moments, heroes, struggles, achievements, cherished memories, etc. These I call *Sacred/Memorial Stories*. And there are stories that are born out of people's everyday experience as they articulate the effects of God's presence in their lives within a particular socio-historical and cultural context. Often these stories develop without much intervention of church officials. These I call *Sacred/Popular or Popular Religiosity Stories*. There must not be contradiction among these three types of stories. On the contrary, a close look at each type would demonstrate that most, if not all, *sacred/classic stories* began as *popular religiosity stories*. Yet, not all popular religiosity stories necessarily gain the foundational character of, for instance, biblical stories. In this essay I concentrate on the third type and its implications for theological reflection in contexts of Christian education. In the following pages I divide the reflection into four sections: 1) *Lo cotidiano/the everyday* as the matrix of popular religiosity narratives; 2) hermeneutical approaches to popular religiosity narratives; 3) the revelatory character of popular religiosity narratives; and 4) pedagogical strategies to use popular religiosity narratives in religious education settings.

The matrix of popular religiosity narratives: *Lo cotidiano/the everyday*

German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner spoke of grace as God's divine self-communication to us in two ways: God's own being (uncreated grace) and God's gifts other than God's own self (created grace). Grace is a free gift that constitutes the transcendental horizon that shapes all human experience in the here and now of history (Rahner 2002, 137). Rahner reminds Christians that such self-communication is God's own initiative, thus making the grace-full encounter between the divine and the human in history possible. God meets humanity and humanity meets God in the midst of concrete historical circumstances.

¹ I use the concept of *classic* following the definition that theologian David Tracy proposes: "On historical grounds, classics are simply those texts that have helped found or form a particular culture. On more explicit hermeneutical grounds, classics are those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation. In their production, there is always the following paradox: though highly particular in origin and expression, classics have the possibility of being universal in their effect" (1987, 12).

Similarly, Gustavo Gutiérrez, speaking from Latin America, proposes the idea that the dialectic between the human and divine, namely the hermeneutical circle, is essential to the theological task (Gutiérrez 1990, 104-105). For Gutiérrez the commitment to justice and peace inspired by the gospel is primarily understood in terms of praxis of solidarity in the here and now of history. This he calls “liberating praxis” (1988, xxx). Because divine revelation occurs in history, then God is revealed in solidarity with the poor and the suffering as they struggle to affirm their own humanity.

Both Rahner and Gutiérrez coincide about the locus where the encounter between the human and the divine occur: the concreteness of human history. The use of a-historical categories and the perception of history as an unfolding universal, Hegelian-like idea, constructed largely and exclusively in Western philosophical terms seem inappropriate for more recent trends of contemporary theological reflection. The divine self-disclosure and the human embrace of such an event happen within the defined socio-historical circumstances of human experience. In other words, the encounter of the human and the divine occurs in a concrete socio-historical *context*.

Today theologians and religious educators witness a recovery of the significance of the everyday for theological reflection. One could illustrate this development as the emerging conversation between the realm of everyday and the world of the academy, each with its own perspectives. U.S. Latino/a theologians insist that the everyday, *lo cotidiano*, a category developed initially by feminist critical theory, is an important source for their theology (Espín and Díaz 1999, 38). Latino/a theologians, along with African-American, Asian-American, feminist, and cultural theologians among others, insist that the everyday is as valid a source for theology as any other systematic reflection about reality. A radical separation between these two realms would be damaging to the whole task of theological reflection (Tanner 1999).

Lo cotidiano is not simply the field where ideas produced by experts in their libraries are tested for effectiveness. *Lo cotidiano* is a privileged reality where life unfolds with all its lights and shadows. It is a world shaped by the day-to-day decisions that people make individually and communally. It is the realm where believers enter in relationship with the divine, where God takes the initiative to disclose the divine self, and humanity weighs in freedom and in hope on that self-disclosure. There is no religious experience apart from the everyday. In *lo cotidiano* every person learns about how human one is, for good or for bad. Consequently, one becomes aware of one’s potential for perfection or blemish. The everyday is the *locus* where we relate with one another and God. *Lo cotidiano* is where theology begins.

In the realm of *lo cotidiano*, popular religiosity narratives emerge as 1) existential articulations of personal meaning through which people grasp the dynamics of their relationship with a self-disclosing God and how they respond to that experience in history; 2) hermeneutical interpretations of people’s religious experience –individually and communally; and 3) insights into what is human and what is divine. Let us consider the first characteristic. I will explore characteristics two and three in the next sections of this essay respectively.

Popular religiosity stories are meaningful articulations of women and men’s experiences encountering the divine in history and their response to such transforming event. If one admits that the encounter between God and humanity only happens in the realm of *lo cotidiano*, then it is with the instruments of the everyday that such experience

finds its way into particular forms of articulation. Thus, people use popular imagery, words, expressions, metaphors, biases, ideas, social structures, limitations, and convictions normally born in everyday experience. Ingrained in popular religiosity narratives are concepts, symbols, and beliefs that reveal truths about what is human and what is divine. Could the truths ingrained in these stories be expressed in different words and images? Yes. Would the same stories have a similar effect if used with different audiences? Possibly. Can people unaware of the everyday experiences where such stories were born grasp the fullness of their revelatory power? Doubtful. This does not mean that the meaning of popular religious narratives is totally constrained to the boundaries of experience of a particular group or culture. However, it is important for theologians and religious educators to realize that ignoring the matrix, namely *lo cotidiano*, where the stories were born will limit the access to their revelatory power and thus curtail the impact of their meaning for any community of faith.

Interpreting Popular Religiosity Narratives

Popular religious narratives are people's articulations of the historical events of the encounter of the human and the divine in the context of *lo cotidiano*. In order to bring their meaning to the fullest, these stories must be interpreted by the person/community that appropriates them here and now. To address the hermeneutical imperative, the field of biblical hermeneutics offers a good number of approaches. The most pressing question for us is the suitability of a method to best interpret popular religiosity narratives. Interpreters must not forget that the people's context is highly determined by their socio-historical circumstances; popular religiosity stories are born in the realm of *lo cotidiano*; the voices of scholars and people at the grassroots levels are important when speaking about these stories; and, the meaning of sacred narratives (classic, memorial, and popular) continuously shifts as stories are appropriated in different cultural, geographical, and social settings.

After reviewing some contemporary approaches to the Scripture interpretation, I believe that the model that seems to be more in sync with the nature of popular religiosity narratives and their revelatory meaning as well as with the context where these are born is what Scripture scholar Fernando Segovia calls *cultural studies: the text as construction* approach (2002, 47). The *Cultural Studies* approach relies on a hermeneutical key that highlights the constructed character of meaning. Not only the text, but also its interpretations, the conditions that determine the reading and the study of the text, the tools and methods used by readers, and the reasons why anyone approaches any text are fruits of meaning construction exercises. For Segovia the reader is never faceless; she/he is a "flesh-and-blood" reader (39) who always has a history and is socially and culturally located. In this approach meaning is located in the "encounter or interchange between text and reader... Meaning emerges, therefore, as the result of an encounter between a socially and historically conditioned text and a socially and historically conditioned reader" (42). For Segovia, *Cultural Studies* demand a critical analysis of reading strategies, a critical analysis of real readers, and a critical analysis of all readers and readings (46-47). Such critical character is complemented by the dynamic interaction of two driving forces: On the one hand, a full commitment to diversity—diversity in regards to texts (94), readings (98) and readers (105). On the other hand, a continuous reflection

that “takes the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, as an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming reality in the world” (92-93).

Segovia’s proposal is useful for interpreting popular religiosity narratives primarily because of its attention to meaning as construction. Stories born out of people’s religious experience are meaningful articulations of that encounter between God and people in their everyday –individually and communally. Precisely because not every human group share the same socio-historical and cultural circumstances, such experience can take as many forms as undefined number of circumstances surrounding the players in the revelatory encounter. Therefore, the interpreter must take into account the “diversity factor” as he/she searches for the meaning(s) behind the story. Furthermore, Segovia moves away from hermeneutical approaches that assume uncritically the fixity of texts or the conditions where the texts are born. Such an insight leads to the recognition that texts, readings, and readers are fluid because human experience is fluid and dynamic. Lastly, Segovia’s warning about the looming presence of colonialism and imperialism calls the interpreter to be aware of the dynamic relationship that must exist between the universal and the local.

Though useful, the *Cultural Studies* approach does not solve all questions about interpreting popular religiosity narratives. Segovia’s proposal is primarily framed within the field of biblical interpretation, which deals primarily with texts that embody the attributes of what David Tracy calls the “classic.” Often popular religiosity stories do not enjoy widespread recognition, are perceived as bordering the fine line between orthodoxy and superstition, have no authoritative power to generate dogmatic formulations, and run the risk of being constrained within the asphyxiating boundaries of localism. Segovia’s proposal, then, must be tailored to meet the quality and challenges of popular religiosity narratives. Besides speaking of diversity in texts, readings, and readers, scholars considering the narratives in question must also study the diversity of socio-historical and cultural contexts, primarily at the level of *lo cotidiano*. Such an approach will require both the embrace of what is particular and local as suitable *locus* for theological reflection and the cautious use of articulations of religious experience that may be imposed as normative for everyone.

Unveiling the Human and the Divine

If popular religiosity narratives are articulations of the experience of encounter between God and humanity in *lo cotidiano*, then the interpretive task of the theologian and religious educator ought to coincide with the unveiling of human and divine elements embedded in these stories and the lives of the interpreters themselves –individually and/or communally. Therefore, the main source to access the human and divine is not only the text of the story, but also the experience of the interpreter as being human in relationship with God.

As a way to illustrate the richness of this unveiling, I consider the reflections of several U.S. Latino/a Catholic theologians on the story of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The importance of this popular religiosity narrative lies not only on being a powerful symbol for Mexican and Mexican-American Catholic identity –and that of other Latinos/as as well–, but also for the multiplicity of interpretations and usages that the story has inspired for more than four centuries.

In the sixteenth century the Aztecs found themselves under a new social, political, and religious structure imposed by the Spanish *conquistadores*. Tensions arose among Spanish and the indigenous groups ranging from misinterpretations about culture, language, tradition, and religious practices to a struggle for survival prompted by the ambitious thirst for riches and power of the newcomers along with the understandable hostility of the inhabitants of the land. Christian Catholicism and the Nahuatl's religious convictions were at odds in many ways. The interpretation of the Guadalupe event would demonstrate such difference of perspectives. A number of symbols held by the Nahuatl people are of special interest as we look at the Our Lady of Guadalupe narrative: *Flor y Canto* (song and flower), when present, were warrantors of truth; creation was believed to take place at night; and Tonantzin was the goddess virgin-mother of the gods.

The story² recounts that in the month of December of 1531, on a Saturday "while it was still night," the Indian Juan Diego came to the mount of Tepeyac where he heard the dazzling singing of birds and suddenly met with a beautiful Lady, radiantly dressed. She identified herself as the Virgin Mary. The Lady asked Juan Diego to visit the bishop and ask him to build a temple in her honor on Mt. Tepeyac. Juan Diego did as she asked, but the bishop did not believe the poor, peasant Indian. He informed the Lady about his failed mission and suggested that she send someone else with more credibility. The Lady sent Juan Diego once again and the bishop this time asked more detailed questions, but at the end he said that he would not believe unless the Indian brought a sign confirming that the Virgin Mary had appeared to him. Juan Diego repeated the bishop's words to the Lady and she asked him to return the next day for the sign. Juan Diego could not keep his promise of return because he had to take care of his uncle who was very ill. As he made his way to Tlatelolco searching for a priest to prepare his uncle for death, he avoided Mt. Tepeyac so the Lady would not delay him. She spied him and came down the hill to meet him. Juan Diego told her about her uncle, but she responded that he would not need to worry because she would cure him. Instead, she asked him to go to the top of the mountain and cut some flowers. Juan Diego obeyed and he saw beautiful roses blossoming, something impossible at that time of the year. He cut the flowers, brought them to her, and she placed them in his *tilma*, or mantle, and asked him to take the flowers to the bishop. Juan Diego went immediately to the bishop's palace and there he showed the gift to the bishop and all who were with him. Juan Diego unfolded the *tilma*, the flowers fell on the floor, and the beautiful image of the Virgin Mary appeared on the mantle. All present fell on their knees in homage to the Lady from Heaven. The bishop believed and ordered the construction of the temple at Tepeyac. The *Nican Mopohua*, as the historical narrative is traditionally known, ends with the transfer of the image to the cathedral of Mexico City, so that all would see and admire her.

What does the Guadalupe story reveal about the human? Historically, the story tells of a man, Juan Diego, who belongs to an indigenous tribe that struggled for survival. The struggle for life would become a defining mark for these marginalized groups as well as for their descendants (Cf. Isasi-Díaz 2004). Juan Diego was a poor Indian peasant who, despite the condition of marginalization in which he lived, had the courage to talk to the religious authorities about the Lady's apparitions and make a number of demands that were eventually accepted. Hence the heroic dimension of his actions and what this meant

² I follow the presentation and analysis of the story according to Virgilio Elizondo (1997), Roberto Goizueta (1995) and Jeanette Rodríguez (1994).

to his own people. The bishop's initial reluctance to see Juan Diego, a Catholic convert, along with his incredulity reveals the social and racial tensions of the time. After the apparition of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Juan Diego's *tilma* the image is taken to the Cathedral of Mexico City rather than to Mt. Tepeyac. As a result, the power of the encounter between Juan Diego and the Lady at Tepeyac, along with its social, cultural, and religious implications, moved silently behind the curtains while the devotion to the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a sacred object, took center stage (Goizueta 1994, 43).

For centuries interpreters have offered a rich variety of readings of the story. Some have argued that the apparition had nothing to do with the Virgin Mary, insisting that it is primarily about Tonantzin, while others have rather focused on the Marian dimensions of the narrative. Both positions are more concerned about the historical accuracy of the narrative and even its theology. But the story now belongs to the people. Two theologians, Virgilio Elizondo and Jeanette Rodríguez have explored in detail this dimension of the Guadalupe narrative dedicating part of their scholarship to the meaning of Guadalupe for Latinas/os today in the United States. Many U.S. Latinas/os experience conditions of marginalization, poverty, socio-political disadvantage, and limited participation in the social and Church structures. The Guadalupe story offers these Latinas/os precious elements to reflect about their lives in *lo cotidiano* with a critical eye. For many Guadalupe is an empowering symbol that helps women and men to reassert the value of their own humanity. Some read the narrative with the hope of creating spaces for dialogue among cultures and groups who often sponsor different ideological, cultural, religious, and social standpoints. For others the Guadalupe story is an inspiration to imitate Mary, the mother of Jesus, and grow in their respect for this great woman, mother, and model of discipleship. These and other interpretations confirm that the Guadalupe story continues to reveal what it means to be human here and now in the everyday.

What does the Guadalupe story reveal about the divine? The narrative tells about a specific encounter: a divine Lady and a poor Indian. There are various interpretations proposed not only by those who lived at the time, but also by the many generations of believers, theologians, and other scholars interested in this narrative throughout the centuries. Among the divine elements that emerge in the narrative we could list the following: Contrary to the mainly male depictions of the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Aztecs' Tonantzin was a goddess. Second, the divine chooses the poor and downtrodden to communicate an important message. Hence God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized, similar to many biblical texts. Third, the encounter occurs "while it was still night." Such an observation is important because for the Aztecs, as mentioned above, believed that creation took place at night. Virgilio Elizondo does not hesitate to interpret the Guadalupe event as a new creation (1997). Finally, the narrative guarantees the veracity of the revelatory act by introducing some conditions for truth according to the Aztec mindset: *flor y canto*, flowers and sun (Goizueta, 1994, 40).

Is the Lady of Tepeyac Mary or Tonantzin? Orlando Espín refuses to choose radically between the two: "The Virgin of Guadalupe cannot be simply identified with Tonantzin –not even at the very beginning. But I do not see either how the natives could have simply identified Guadalupe with the Catholic Mary" (Espín 1999, 130). Today Catholic tradition largely sees the Virgin of Guadalupe as Mary the Mother of Jesus. The

question about Tonantzín and the feminine face of God (Rodríguez 1994, 152) is often concealed as the traditional narrative is handed on from generation to generation. Would Mary, the Mother of Jesus, be the prevailing image today if the Aztecs had dominated the cultural and religious world of Mexican-Americans over the last four centuries?

Pedagogical Strategies for Christian Education

Popular religiosity narratives have the potential of inspiring believers to understand, embrace, and live their faith with conviction and faithfulness. The above reflections on hermeneutics can help believers to develop more critical skills to study the content and context of these narratives. For sure, stories of this nature are genuine doors that may lead us to unveil what is human and divine in the midst of our own experience of *lo cotidiano*.

Considering the potential of popular religiosity narratives for religious education and theological reflection, here I propose three pedagogical strategies to use these stories in educational contexts:

Strategy One. Students and educators in religious education must “look beyond” the text in search of the meaning structures behind each story. A study of the historical circumstances, social conditions and religious convictions that led to the development of the story is essential for the interpretive task. The *Cultural Studies* hermeneutical approach described in section two of this essay may serve as a starting point for students and educators. Other approaches can include postcolonial readings, feminist critique, postmodern hermeneutics, critical thinking, critical correlation, etc. The ultimate goal is that students and educators together embark on a quest to discover the human and the divine with the help of these stories, their interpretations, and their own lives as “flesh-and-blood” readers.

Strategy Two. Today religious educators witness a number of efforts that look at cultural diversity as a matrix that can help Christians to understand better other religious traditions and their own faith. We are more aware that *lo cotidiano* is not always the same everywhere. As a matter of fact, it is more evident for scholars and believers today that God and humanity meet first and foremost in the richness of every day’s diversity. In trying to make sense of our faith here and now we realize that factors such as language, culture, ethnicity, gender, history, education, social conditions, politics, economics, and power matter. Popular religiosity stories are not born in isolation from these circumstances. In the United States membership in the Catholic Church is almost 50% Latino/a and the remaining 50% is a mixture of cultural groups virtually from all over the world. To be Catholic in the United States is to be multicultural –certainly a return to the original meaning of the word catholic –*kata holos*: “welcoming everyone” (Groome 1998, 397). Such circumstances are also true at the center of other Christian denominations in the country. In this context, Christian educators must feel compelled to explore the diversity of human religious experience through the lenses of popular religiosity narratives. In any multicultural context religious educators and their students can always learn, compare, contrast, and reinterpret all these stories so they will appreciate the diversity of ways in which the daily encounter between God and humanity is expressed.

Strategy Three. Thomas Groome's "Shared Praxis" model of religious education proposes a moment of "sharing one's story" (Groome 1999, 211). The wisdom of this movement is crucial insofar as it allows the person to tell his/her story as he/she knows it. Besides articulating their own experiences, people also share stories that belong to a larger cultural or religious heritage. However, because they have appropriated these narratives with their own words, in *lo cotidiano* of their lives, the stories become theirs. Such an appropriation reflects a process of interpretation that religious educators and theologians can explore more in their reflections and practices. The work of theologian Jeanette Rodríguez on the understanding and appropriation of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe by Mexican American women is a great example of the use of popular religiosity narratives in Christian education (Rodríguez 1994). Theologians and religious educators ought to be companions to their students in the quest to unveil the human and the divine.

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