

New Forms of the Relationship between Politics and Religion

Ecclesiastical Base Community Activists in Mexico City

by
Hugo José Suárez

Beginning in the 1960s, new forms of living the faith emerged in Latin America that linked it with a political dimension. The Catholic Church changed its pastoral orientation, and ecclesiastical base communities were established as part of an "option for the poor." The reflection that accompanied this process was known as liberation theology. By the end of the 1970s these communities were organizing conferences, publications, and theological reflections with strong international links and included hundreds of believers both in the countryside and in the city. During the following two decades, they were active participants in the construction of leftist political alternatives. While a minority pastoral practice today, they continue to hold national gatherings and maintain their international contacts. In-depth interviews with three members of ecclesiastical base communities in a working-class neighborhood in Mexico City show how these individuals have built their socio-religious practice and their religious beliefs. Their experience is part of a global reconstitution of belief systems in Mexico that affects all of the salvation enterprises in their various expressions.

A partir de la década de los sesenta, nuevas formas de vivir la fe surgieron en América Latina que las asociaron con una dimensión política. La Iglesia Católica Romana cambió su orientación pastoral, y las comunidades eclesiales de base nacieron como parte de una "opción por los pobres". Se conocía la reflexión que acompañó a este proceso como teología de liberación. Para finales de los setenta estas comunidades estaban organizando congresos, publicaciones, y reflexiones teológicas con fuertes lazos internacionales, comprendiendo centenares de creyentes tanto en la campiña como en la ciudad. Durante las siguientes dos décadas, fueron participantes activas en la construcción de alternativas políticas de izquierda. Si bien es una práctica pastoral minoritaria hoy en día, continúan convocando reuniones nacionales y mantienen sus contactos internacionales. Entrevistas a fondo con tres miembros de comunidades eclesiales de base en un barrio obrero en la ciudad de México demuestran cómo estos individuos han construido su práctica socio-religiosa y sus creencias religiosas, que implican una comprensión de Dios no como juez sino como aliado. Su experiencia forma parte de una reconstrucción de sistemas de creencias en México que afecta a todas las entidades salvíficas en sus varias expresiones.

Keywords: Christianity of Liberation, Religion and politics, Liberation theology, Ecclesiastical base communities

Hugo José Suárez is a researcher with the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. This article is part of an IIS project on the sociology of religious groups in the El Ajusco neighborhood funded by the Programa de Apoyo a Proyectos de Investigación e Innovación Tecnológica (IN 306909-3).

Beginning in the 1960s, new forms of living the faith emerged in Latin America that linked it with a political dimension. The global social transformations in the economic, cultural, and social orders went hand in hand with change in the religious sphere (Houtart, 1961). At an institutional level, on the one hand, the Catholic Church changed its pastoral orientation, and, on the other hand, a series of theological and pastoral adjustments gave rise to the Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1955. The Conference organized subsequent meetings in Medellín (in 1968), Puebla (in 1979), Santo Domingo (in 1992), and Aparecida (in 2007). Concurrently with the institutional process of what was known as the *aggiornamento* (updating) of the global church—as voiced in the Second Vatican Council—a different way of conceiving religious practice tied to the social process emerged. Ecclesiastical base communities were born as a pastoral effort whose theological method was known as “look, judge, act” and that clearly announced its “option for the poor” (Boff, 1993; Pixley and Boff, 1987). The reflection that accompanied this process was called liberation theology. Systematized by a large group of Latin American theologians, this theological experience gave rise to an expansive and diverse literature addressing a wide range of subjects.¹ This experience/movement has been analyzed by multiple writers with varied emphases and intentions (del Valle, 1996; Follmann, 1994; Gaiger, 1991; García, 1990; Levine, 1980; Silva, 1989). The experiences range from the participation of religious leaders such as Camilo Torres in Colombia and Néstor Paz in Bolivia in the guerrilla movements at the end of the 1960s (H. J. Suárez, 2003; 2004), the drive toward the creation of political parties (e.g., Izquierda Cristiana in Chile), and the establishment of human rights centers and pastoral care for indigenous communities to the Zapatismo of the 1990s.

In the case of Mexico, liberation theology has had an impact since its early years. The Mexican Congress of Theology in 1969 proved to be a sort of manifesto that opened a politico-religious line with the articulation of the idea of history, liberation, and faith.² From the 1960s on, in the light of international and national events such as the massacre of 1968, voices began to promote a new form of being a church. In Cuernavaca, Iván Illich founded the Centro Intercultural de Formación in 1961 and later, in 1966, the Centro Interamericano de Documentación and the Centro de Pastoral para América Latina. These institutions became centers for discussion about religion, economics, and pastoral care and began to bring together thinkers from all over the world (Romero, 2006: 490). Gregorio Lemerrier, for example, promoted a psychoanalytic process at the Benedictine monastery in Morelos (González, 2011), and Sergio Méndez Arceo, bishop of Cuernavaca, became an important voice and his diocese one of the bastions of this theological-pastoral orientation. Bishop Méndez Arceo would later proclaim the transformation of society toward a “democratic socialism” and critique the “individualist and materialistic capitalist system” with religious arguments (Concha, 1986: 97). At the same time, figures like Samuel Ruiz, bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, promoted reflection on politics from the perspective of faith, and forums such as the Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social, directed by José Álvarez Icaza, became centers of reflection and dissemination (López, 2009).³ Between the late 1960s and the 1970s, Mexico's Christianity of Liberation movement, with all its different

faces, started to take shape with the creation of many political-religious events, meetings, documents, and graphic displays and the organization of study centers, reflection groups, and political movements.

The ecclesiastical base communities, one of the movement's first initiatives, celebrated their first conclave in Guanajuato in 1972.⁴ By the mid-1970s there already were several regions of the country with such communities, and the content of their reflection had taken on an increasingly political tone: "The theological reflection is anchored in the historical progress of Jesus of Nazareth and his political commitment" (Concha, 1986: 241). After several national conferences held during the following years, a big national meeting was organized with representatives from 23 dioceses in preparation for the Third Latin American Bishops' Conference in Puebla and the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the 1968 conference in Medellín. By the end of the 1970s, the ecclesiastical base communities were organizing conferences, publications, and theological reflections with strong international links and, more important, hundreds of believers both in the countryside and in the city. Some communities collaborated with the teachers' movement, urban struggles, and peasant, workers', and political movements (Concha, 1986: 233–267). During the following two decades, the ecclesiastical base communities were active participants in the construction of leftist political alternatives. For example, in the presidential elections of 1988, after the resignation of Heberto Castillo in favor of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, "ECB activists from 23 Mexican states pressed for the different organizations to present a common candidate of the left" (Pastor, 2008: 263). And in 1992 the Xi'nich' March of indigenous communities from Chiapas to the Villa de Guadalupe in Mexico City was widely supported by the communities both en route and in its welcoming reception in Mexico City. Furthermore, in February of the same year, the fourteenth national conference of ecclesiastical base communities was held in Ciudad Guzmán in celebration of their 20 years of existence with the theme "EBCs: Memory and Promise of an Evangelization of Liberation in Mexico—EBCs Transforming the People through Evangelization."⁵

During the past few decades the glow of the ecclesiastical base communities and liberation theology in general has faded. On the one hand, the Vatican attack silencing theologians, closing reflection centers, and appointing conservative bishops was very effective in restraining the growth of this pastoral option. On the other hand, the country entered a new phase of multiple transformations, from globalization to migration and drug trafficking, that created the conditions for the emergence of new problems, movements, and reflections. In the domain of beliefs, Pentecostalism emerged strongly, creating a new religious landscape in the process. Also, there is some truth to the criticism that liberation theology was not Latin American but transnational—that it was unable to break its dependence on Catholicism and that its leaders were enlightened militants rather than popular leaders (Tahar, 2007a; 2007b).

However, during these years the ecclesiastical base communities, while a minority pastoral practice, continued to hold national conferences of varying importance (depending on the diocese or parish) and maintain their international contacts. Pastoral activity was expanded by paying attention to themes such as migration, the solidarity economy, the environment, gender, and

human rights. Also, their migrants' aid centers, centers for the defense of human rights, research and reflection centers, and publications were consolidated and gained increasing importance. In terms of theological reflection, new themes such as ecology, the restoration of indigenous knowledge or "indigenous theology," "feminist theology," "Afro-Latin theology," and the "intercultural and interreligious theology of liberation" emerged (de la Torre, 2009: 38–44; Díaz, 2009: 253–338).

Taking into consideration that this pastoral orientation is a minority one in the national context and that it has undergone a profound transformation from its origins to the present, in this article I will look closely at the lives of some of the militants who belong to this political-religious tradition in a parish in which ecclesiastical base communities are alive and vibrant. I analyze three in-depth interviews with liberation theology activists in a Jesuit parish in the working-class neighborhood of El Ajusco in Mexico City. In order to present the experience of different generations, I have selected the interviews with Juan, a 27-year-old man, María, a 40-year-old woman; and Ana, a 66-year-old woman. These interviews are part of a more comprehensive study that explores the various religious configurations of the El Ajusco neighborhood through 70 interviews, a survey, participant observation, ethnographic work, photographic recording, and the analysis of documents. The study has already yielded several publications that analyze other religious forms not linked to the theology of liberation in an attempt to draw a more complete picture of the religious universe of this neighborhood (H. J. Suárez, 2009; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2015). The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2010, and each lasted more than two hours. The overall goal of the interviews was to explore the religious trajectories of the participants, the principal moments of their religious experience, the most important socializing agents in their practice, and their ways of understanding their faith.

THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The theoretical framework used in this article to understand the religious sphere is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus. In his approach, the religious field—like any field—is built around an *interest* (in this case religious) that is linked to "the need for legitimation of the properties associated with a determinate type of conditions of existence and position in the social structure" (Bourdieu, 1971b: 313). The lay people who participate in the field hope that the specialized agents will satisfy their interests by carrying out actions and practices—magical or religious—to fulfill the promise "that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Bourdieu, 1971a: 5). The field requires of its members a religious habitus understood as "the generative principle of every thought, perception, and action in conformity with the rules of a religious representation of the natural and supernatural worlds" (Bourdieu, 1971b: 319). What is at stake within the field is the control of the production and reproduction of the habitus and the monopoly of the riches of salvation. As we will see later, the religious field at El Ajusco is composed of multiple agents with quite diverse orientations, one of them being the ecclesiastical base communities.

If our goal is to understand the orientations of the ecclesiastical base community militants, how do we work with their words as presented in the form of an interview? The construction of a narrative in which the speaker himself is the scriptwriter and the main character implies stirring up the pool of memories and reframing a picture that probably bears little resemblance to what actually happened. Working with this type of material requires that we concentrate on a micro scale of observation while taking into account that the actor is immersed in an environment and that his particular experience points to a collective cultural model. During the interview process one should pay particular attention to “the built-in past of the individual actors” (Lahire, 2002), the result of their trajectories and the places that they have occupied in the social field at different stages. It is a question of understanding that at every stage of his life the actor has rebuilt—modified, incorporated, recreated, disregarded/rejected—his belief system according to the particular demands of the field in which he has participated. Each of the elements that constitute the system has a genesis that we can locate and then trace through the narratives of the speakers (Lahire, 2002: 19; H. J. Suárez, 2003). Thus we transcribe literal excerpts chosen and organized through entries that entail an interpretation and are framed by the methodological orientation discussed earlier. This *pragmatics of writing*, as Bourdieu (1999: 540) would say, seeks “to direct the reader’s attention towards the relevant sociological traits.”

THE EL AJUSCO NEIGHBORHOOD

The *colonia* or neighborhood of El Ajusco is located south of the municipality of Coyoacán and is surrounded by colonias of similar history and composition. It has an area of 207.57 square hectares (a little more than 2 square kilometers) and is built on volcanic lava (the result of various eruptions of the Xitle volcano), making it difficult to reach and challenging for construction (see H. J. Suárez, 2015). According to data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Geografía, this colonia had a population of 29,388 in 2000 (INEGI, 2005), of which 52.03 percent were women and 47.97 percent men. It was considered “a working-class colonia of average density in the process of consolidation” (A. Suárez, 2000: 394). Half of the population had lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years (Zermeño, 2005: 201) and 76 percent had been born in Mexico City (INEGI, 2005). The average level of schooling was 9 years, and 94.8 percent of the population over 15 was literate, but 36 percent of those over 15 had not finished high school. The socioeconomic level was low (38 percent earned one to two minimum salaries and 37 percent two to five minimum salaries monthly on average), and the economy was oriented toward the service sector (76 percent) (INEGI, 2005).

According to a study by Zermeño (2005: 202), insecurity was one of the main problems in the colonia and was linked to two dynamics: drug trafficking in small quantities and the expansion of the Sunday open-air markets into the neighborhood space around the Mercado de la Bola, established in 1969. The colonia now has running water, electricity, telephone service, paved streets, primary and secondary schools, and health centers. The urban experience in El Ajusco is a far cry from what it was.

THE RELIGIOUS FIELD IN EL AJUSCO AND RESURRECCIÓN PARISH

With respect to the religious field, El Ajusco is experiencing significant diversification, with two Catholic parishes, two chapels, two Protestant churches, seven Pentecostal churches, two non-Evangelical biblical churches, two *Santería* storefronts and two of the cult of the Holy Death, 40 altars, and numerous expressions of folk religion or popular religiosity and street images of the Virgin. On Sundays, 14 Catholic masses are celebrated, and there are 13 celebrations of other cults. Popular religiosity, in all its expressions, is at the heart of the neighborhood's religious and social practices (see H. J. Suárez, 2015).

Resurrección parish is the epicenter of the neighborhood's religious and social life. Its foundation goes back to the 1970s, during one of the moments of major social activism in the area. Therefore, it has accompanied the neighborhood in its settlement, regularization, and acquisition of social and educational services. It is also known for promoting popular education, cooperatives, national and international solidarity events, and the defense of human rights. It is under the administration of the Society of Jesus, and its pastoral activity, linked to liberation theology, has systematically promoted the creation of ecclesiastical base communities.⁶

There are five areas of religious work:

1. The ecclesiastical base communities number around 40 divided into three sectors and include about 300 people. They meet weekly in private homes. The gatherings follow a reflection protocol designed by a team responsible for the specific content for each week, following liberation theology's "look, judge, act" method. The coordinators meet at least weekly.

2. The area of sacraments and popular religiosity consists of six committees: communion, liturgy, sacraments of Christian initiation, catechumenate for adults, choirs, and patron saint festivities and the *Via Crucis*. Besides helping with Holy Week activities, the communion committee is responsible for assisting during the Eucharist and delivering Communion to the sick. The liturgy committee is made up of around a dozen people who assist during the Eucharist and focus their spirituality on the sacraments, with little contact with the ecclesiastical base communities. The presacramental committee is responsible for conducting the lectures given in preparation for baptism. The six-member choir performs during the Eucharist besides participating in other special events. The largest group or committee is the one in charge of the *Via Crucis* and the fiestas, especially those in May and November.

3. The youth area has several programs but very few members. This committee is in charge of the missions, the spiritual guidance and cultural promotion of graffiti artists, and the camps. Its initiatives have precise but sporadic impact.

4. Pastoral care consists of a component with a more political orientation, with its human rights committee and *Siloé* Group, and a component with a social orientation that provides health and educational services. The committee holds monthly workshops that analyze the current state of affairs, tackling subjects such as water, social rights, and citizenship. The *Siloé* Group organizes

conferences and courses about current political issues such as elections, oil, and social movements. These groups are small, and their activities are not well attended. With regard to the health component, there is a working agreement with a doctor, an eye doctor, and a dentist who offer their professional services to the community at low cost. They also promote alternative medicine through homeopathy, massage, and other nontraditional therapies. In addition, the clinic has a day care center that provides services for 150 preschoolers in the mornings.

5. Pastoral work with families is performed by married couples who promote family life in the parish during celebrations and through their work with the ecclesiastical base communities and prenuptial counseling sessions.

The parish also has soccer teams that organize championships on the internal court. There is a coordinating team of four lay people in charge of coordinating this area, but in general they have no connection with the religious structure. For the past several years the parish has published the weekly bulletin *La Voz de los Pedregales*, a double-sided single sheet with practical information about what is happening in the parish and the themes that the ecclesiastical base communities will be discussing in their meetings.

Various studies have shown that the Mexican religious field is undergoing diversification (de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 2007; INEGI, 2005). Mexican Catholicism, in particular, displays multiple and even contradictory orientations (de la Peña, 2004; de la Torre, 2006). Although the experiences that I analyze in this article are clearly linked to the Christianity of Liberation, they are not strangers to this transformation and to the new elements that nurture contemporary forms of belief.

THREE WAYS OF BEING A LEFT CATHOLIC

JUAN: GRAFFITI AND FAITH

Juan is a student of visual arts at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. His mother died two years ago, and he lives with his father. He has one sister. He has participated in several parish committees and has attended various national conferences. He is particularly known for his work as coordinator of the group of young graffiti artists. His father is a butcher and works in a neighborhood market. All his family has been connected to that trade except him. He did not learn about spirituality, social engagement, or art from his family. In fact, he forcefully states, "I think that I'm the only crazy one in my family." His grandparents migrated from the interior, but his parents grew up in Mexico City. Juan has lived in El Ajusco all his life.

Family influences initially directed him toward a life in sports, with a serious prospect of professionalization, but that goal was shattered by an accident that in a random fashion facilitated his encounter with painting. His relationship with art in the public sphere was as a graffiti artist, and he fit all the criteria and stigmas of the case: secrecy, irreverence, marginality, and denunciation. It was the encounter with a pastoral care open to this type of expression that allowed him to undergo a transformation from transgressor to promoter of cultural,

civic, and religious values. Thanks to the support that he received from the parish, he ended up coordinating educational projects, planning workshops, and organizing events. Painting on the walls stopped being the art of the forbidden to become one more cornerstone for civic construction in the neighborhood; the craft had achieved legitimacy. Moreover, his expertise was sought by parents, priests, leaders, and teachers:

I used to paint illegally near this area, putting the emphasis on the social question, denouncing injustice, unemployment, and other issues. I went by the parish several times, and one day I saw a group of kids painting, which seemed strange to me. I heard that they had been invited by a priest, and I said to myself, "How come a priest is giving them permission to paint?" And then I met the priest, and that was my first rapprochement with the parish. I started to organize some activities with him, and we invited the same kids to paint graffiti. One night we went out and organized an "evening expo." It started at 8 p.m., and two hours later the kids were still painting. Normally these activities are organized earlier in the day because later the light changes and the colors get lost and cannot be seen. But the idea was that by doing it at night, even though people could not see us directly they could see the painting. It was something that caused a stir in the neighborhood. Everybody was saying, "Look at these hooligans; they're painting the church. What's going on?" It opened many doors. That was eight years ago. Since then, we have organized a group and offered different workshops on air brushing, graffiti, T-shirt painting, and car painting. It was like learning a trade.⁷

Then a trip "changed his life." His encounter with the hard living conditions of the peasants in Veracruz, together with his Ignatian spiritual exercises, led to the radicalization of his religious practice. His conception of God acquired a more definite outline. Life should be shared with the poor—"God's project is justice." With that clear idea in mind, he started to use the spray can for the defense and promotion of the most dynamic social movements of Mexico's political history in recent years—Chiapas, Acteal, Oaxaca:

I believe in a different God, not as an image but as the person close to me—my father, my mother, my brothers, my friends—even people's glances when I ride the bus, when a girl smiles at you or when a baby stares at you; it's as if God were looking at you. I see God in the oppressed, in the street seller who looks at you with affection when you approach him to talk to him and ask him how he feels. There's reciprocity in that encounter, and I see God's presence there, in that sharing of life with love and hope. I don't go to church every Sunday. I'm learning to pray in a different manner—less words and more action. I like to feel that I'm helping the poor, that I'm sharing with them. When we go to Chiapas and see the indigenous communities, we return filled spiritually with the countless displays of affection. To share the bread, the water, the coffee, the beans, the morning greetings, the embrace when you arrive or when you leave, the smile when you wake up. When we share life with them, we find God's presence. I believe that we are emotional beings and we need to feel accompanied by others. We have to stop thinking about ourselves in order to think about others, knowing that we all form part of a whole.

I believe that justice is God's plan. Many people have lost hope because of all the injustices, for example, the 21 sexual offenses reported with regard to the women of Atenco. That's when one asks oneself, "Where is God?" Or the massacre in Acteal, which took place when people were praying for peace; or the comrades of Aguas Blancas, with 17 indigenous people killed; or the situation

in Oaxaca. But we believe that there is justice. Jacinta, who spent three years in prison and, thank God and faith in the Virgin of Guadalupe, has been released, never lost hope because she knew that God was going to bring her justice. We believe that there can be justice in this world. Despite the many injustices and social needs, there is light, there is hope, and there is faith. Another world is possible.

Now Juan's sociopolitical practice no longer depends on his linkage with the church but in a sense has been secularized and politicized. He belongs to a new group called *Formando Nueva Expresión* that has no direct link with the parish but is influential at the national level. Faith continues to be the source of his commitment:

I want to keep painting, not for personal gain but as a way of sharing, as a way to denounce social injustices. In addition, I want to continue studying. I would also like to make documentaries about the things that are not presented on TV; I want to be a spokesperson for those oppressed groups. Culture could be a very good form of expression for young people, instead of wasting their time or getting involved in some vice. Culture helps, both spiritually and socially.

In this experience we see a passage from the margins to the visible, from a clandestine to a public activity that takes place in a favorable ecclesiastical environment. The result is a model that articulates the social and religious legitimacy of a trade that becomes an instrument for denouncing injustice and supporting social movements. Art, faith, and denunciation point in the same direction.

MARÍA: FROM THE CONVENT TO FOOD JUSTICE

María comes from a Catholic family of seven that has experienced the transition from traditional religiosity to liberation theology. Although for the past 12 years she has lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, where she rents an apartment, she spent her childhood in the working-class *colonia* where her parents still live. Her poor family had to employ various survival strategies during the earliest years of her life. She studied nutrition at a public university, completed two Master's degrees and several specializations, and currently directs a small company that promotes good nutrition and the consumption of fair-trade products. She is single with no children. For many years she participated in different committees of the parish, especially promoting the base communities. Now she is one of the parish's advisers on nutrition.

From her biography we can identify a series of elements that define a model for the relationship between faith, professional fulfillment, and political ideology. Her belief system is built from experiences at different moments of her life. First, she lived in a very poor working-class neighborhood that forced her to work collectively and also left marks on her body:

It was a terrain formed of hard rock, volcanic and very irregular; that's why the houses had different shapes. We had many accidents when we were kids; we all have scars because we were constantly hurting ourselves. I remember that many years went by before we had something that we could call a real house. For me the house was rocks, everything full of rocks, inside and outside.

However, life in the context of the working-class colonia offered her different possibilities: to become a delinquent (as several of her friends did), to work in a grocery store, or to study. Her ties with conservative pastoral agents led her to traditional educational institutions, where she had to resolve the religious dilemma: the “civic-political” option or the contemplative life of the convent, which is where she finally ended up.

Up to that point, the institutions of religious socialization had been working in a coordinated fashion: the mother, the neighborhood priests, and the school all reinforced a similar way of understanding faith. But the tension with the group of right-wing Catholic girls in school spawned a rupture: María went into the convent and her mother cut off relations with the priests in the colonia. A new scenario was created when the previous harmony was fractured. When María chose the convent, she had to make a decision again: to comply with the rules of life of a cloistered nun or to disobey:

I entered the convent with a very pious view. I always had in mind the idea of gratefulness. I used to say, “Why am I so happy? Whom may I thank for so much kindness?” In order to appreciate all the good things I had received, I had to sacrifice myself, something had to hurt for it to be worthwhile: “When you give a flower as a gift, it has to be at its peak, not withered.” And I used to say to myself, “I want to give myself away; I’m 18 years old and here I am. Do with me whatever you want to.” I decided to renounce the world, cut my hair, renounce everything that I had to struggle with because I thought that was good for people—not for anybody in particular but for the whole world. When I was in the convent I realized that life was too comfortable there. We used to beg for food on the streets, and people gave us things; they shared with us the best they had. Poverty? It was really a farce; but it was a lot of fun.

Then the problems began; I was always up for mischief. For example, on Mothers’ Day it occurred to me to serenade the mothers superior. I used to cross the chapel in my pajamas and go to the bathrooms in the early morning to listen to the radio. I bought shampoo for the nuns, and when it was my turn to get up at 4:00 a.m., I would say to myself, “It’s so boring!” and start to play my guitar. I used to go to the roof to see the fireworks in Coyoacán on September 15 and would take the nuns in a pick-up truck to go window shopping. . . . In short, I was hyperactive, and they kicked me out. But I was also paying attention to those voices that were telling me, “You don’t belong there.” I thought that I was going to stay there for the rest of my life, even though I saw this as a big sacrifice. One day a nun told me, “Last night I talked to God, and he told me that you have the possibility of leaving the convent. Maybe you have to think about it.” I left, but I saw it as a failure.

Her irreverent behavior led her to the street and to another significant moment, work:

I started working as a waitress in a restaurant with an entirely male clientele. It was an awakening to reality. I used to wear a very low-cut top with a very open skirt. My coworkers were all alcoholic single mothers who had left their homes. I learned the double meaning of words, rudeness, and many more things. The manager offered me the job because I looked very innocent. I just got there, very pretty, asking to wash the dishes, and I gained his trust. It was very hard to wake up to the glances of men making all kinds of dirty comments; I learned how to decipher them—and I hadn’t even had a boyfriend!

The new space welcomed her with everything that she had not known up until that moment, whether because of her working-class background, her neighborhood, or her religion. Now she had money, showed off her body, and knew the masculine gaze. She worked nights on Insurgentes Sur Avenue—a space reserved for city nightlife—and did not have any moral or religious constrictions with regard to matters such as sexuality and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. At that point her field of action could have led to total dissolution or she could have become, in that context, a good worker. Her passage through work marked a “realist” understanding of the world, with all its human contradictions, culminating in her decision to go to the university. This time of intense exchanges with a previously unknown world went hand in hand with the resignification of her faith as lived through the parish and her involvement with the ecclesiastical base communities:

In the ecclesiastical base communities I came to understand for the first time that God is in the other person. I did not like the rosy picture of God that was presented to me before, I wanted a more liberating God. I did not like this business of “The church is all of us.” We should visit the girls who are sick, go to a march with somebody from the community, look for work for an unemployed friend, or host a student who has no place to stay. For me that’s the way of being a church. At that moment my life began to make sense. I saw human reality and I became more human. True miracles occur in the base communities because those who didn’t see reality now do and women who were silenced dare to speak out. I began to see those miracles of God in people, and it was very impressive. I often ask myself, “How can I tell if something is God’s work?” I believe that God wants the common good. I would not support a social cause if God were not involved in it; the key is always to know if it is done in the name of God or not. If it is on the side of life, then it is in favor of God. If it weren’t for my faith, I wouldn’t have any social commitments.

In the ecclesiastical base communities María found a space where her class origins were in harmony with a “realist” way of living the faith, something that went hand in hand with her university studies in health care and biology. Once she completed her studies and entered the labor market, instead of following a path for social advancement working for a company paying high salaries she chose to promote a “caring company” whose guiding principle was not accumulation but justice in the distribution of products and caring for the health of consumers:

In my work I’ve been invited many times to join international companies. I was even offered the opportunity to work abroad, but I chose to continue with my project here in order to create jobs in Mexico. Also, you realize that big business is not interested in nutrition. They don’t care about the consumers; they only respond to the monopolies and other economic interests. That’s why I have my own company. I employ 17 people here in Mexico City. I’m responsible for their sustenance; therefore, I have to pay them well. I believe that it is a way of being an alternative enterprise. Anchored in my faith, I look for spaces where we can promote fraternity. That’s why I promote solidarity-based models as an alternative to monopoly interests, because, in the end, all these interests want is money. That’s why I have promoted the consumption of corn and its fair commercialization in collaboration with the producer communities.

The specificity of María's trajectory—unlike other accounts of conversion in the ecclesiastical base communities (H. J. Suárez, 2004; 2009)—is that she has the capacity to harmonize three spheres of life that are usually scattered in contemporary society: work, ideology, and faith.

ANA: FROM CHARITY TO HOMEOPATHY

Ana, mother of five and a resident of El Ajusco for the past 30 years, had completed high school but no further schooling. She had dedicated her life to taking care of her family without ever entering the labor market. She had been associated with the parish for more than 20 years, working as a promoter of the ecclesiastical base communities and the driving force behind the solidarity committee. Now she was also in charge of the homeopathic medicine clinic organized by the church and was actively involved in the coordination of pastoral care.

Ana started her story with a description of the construction of the neighborhood, which was at the same time the formation of a certain urban popular class consciousness:

When I arrived here there was a lot to do. The men used to get together every eight days to break stones with their bare hands. They used a sledgehammer and a chisel to hit the stones. On Sundays the men were breaking stones all day; the women made and brought the meals, and the children gathered the stone pieces, collected soil, and started filling the trenches. A street was ready, and then on to the next one. That way we were able to level out the terrain around here. The streets in this neighborhood did not just appear by themselves, nor were they built by the government.

From then on the various political references would have the same tone: the contact with reality as a way of interpreting her social, political, and spiritual life. But at the beginning her faith was nurtured by the conservative priests in the neighborhood, who put all their attention on the sacraments and charity. Offering a place to stay in your house to an orphan was an action tied to sensitive pastoral care, but it was far from the progressive position that Ana would hold later. In fact, her horizon of possibilities was to continue with this type of practice—as many people of her generation did—by getting involved in social welfare initiatives controlled by a central church group. At that moment, her theological reflection was still conservative, reinforced by her explicit excommunication by a priest after she had surgery to prevent pregnancy: "I was completely alone, but I stayed in contact with God, a God different from the one I know now. I used to cry in front of that God, who can only be found in the church, the one hanging on the cross. I used to think that if I didn't pray there I would not find God anywhere else." Her involvement with the ecclesiastical base communities happened by chance: Somebody knocked on her door to invite her to join the group, and the invitation was at first rejected. It was in this new space that, because of her religious tradition and her need for faith and freedom from sin, she started to find another theology that attracted her. Condemnation and guilt began to disappear when faced with new arguments that associated the idea of God not with punishment but with life and commitment.

Ana suffered a serious heart problem that radicalized her way of understanding faith. An inseparable link emerged between health, spirituality, and commitment. Her visit to a community of support for the Zapatista Army for National Liberation in Chiapas put the final seal on the formula: "If I am not going to live very long, I want to do something good before I go." The visit also showed her the indigenous people's particular way of living their religion, and she started to rebuild her view of God in ways that stood in total opposition to the way she had thought before: God was not in the church but everywhere; God did not punish but forgave. The point was not condemnation by the priest but commitment to others. This way of living the faith focused on the latter's relationship with "reality": everything, from everyday life to politics, had to maintain a strong bond with that faith:

I had beautiful experiences with the indigenous Zapatista communities during my trip to Chiapas; they showed me how life should be lived. There God was very alive and close to us. They feel God in the most beautiful way. I fell in love with the way these communities transmit their belief and faith in God. Everything is done with such simplicity; they all come to an agreement. No one is more important than anybody else. I saw what it means to live in a democracy. Everything was held in common, and everybody voted on what needed to be done and how decisions on important things were made. I went to see the trade workshops of the ecclesiastical base communities, where they did everything themselves with a high degree of organization and amazing obedience. They have the vision that God is in their crops. They love the land and are not even capable of spitting on it because they do not like to mistreat Mother Earth. That's the God I opt for, the one I met then, and nothing else satisfies me because I have seen him very human, very close to me, and very welcoming. That's the God we have. God is very close to me in my daily life; I don't need to go to the church. For example, I know that if I offend my brother or my husband, I'm offending God, because there is a part of God in everybody. That's why I'm straightforward and respectful in my dealings with others. To follow God is to spread the word about him. We need to change the vision that many people have—the same one I used to have—of a God crucified on the cross and locked up in a church. In the base communities we are always trying to replace that view of a dead God who does not have anything to say with a living God.

The last turn that led her to become a homeopathic doctor would seal her journey. She started by criticizing the health system not for its medical inefficiency but for its economic inaccessibility. The argument was not technical but social, and this could have led to various outcomes. But this idea was nurtured by the Christian command to heal the sick, which could lead to an explanation that equated the soul with the immunological system. The healing of the soul and the healing of the body fused into one, having as a background the social critique of the business-oriented way of treating illnesses:

One day they invited me to participate in an alternative health project with a doctor from the state of Hidalgo. He taught and prepared us for two years. It was also a little bit out of rebelliousness, because just at that time there was a spike in medicine prices that was having a strong impact on poor families. When they got sick they had to sell their houses or apartments in order to be treated. For us, that was wrong and unacceptable, and, bearing in mind Jesus'

mandate "Go and heal the sick," we had to do something, because medicine was expensive. In fact, the doctor told us the same thing, because he was a strong believer. Now I think that we get sick when we want to and also get healed when we want to. Many people come and tell us that they are very sick, but the first thing that gets sick is the soul and then, because of somatization, the mind, and later, somewhere, the disease shows up. Diseases are a combination of two things—an element of the mind that is manifested in the body. Often people come to the clinic and their physical ailments conceal other kinds of problems: they have hurt a relative, they have a son who is a drug addict, or there is something that is hurting them deeply in the soul. It cannot be that a person has high blood pressure, diabetes, colitis. Is the whole body sick? No, they have pain of the soul. During the visits we talk a lot with people; we ask them to tell us about their problems, and gradually their pain is relieved. The first thing that we tell them is that they need to empty themselves of all the emotional things, and we help them to start clearing their minds and be more relaxed. We have seen great results. The idea is to awaken the life force that we have; the mood starts to ease up, and later all the defense mechanisms start to work in order to move forward. Homeopathy awakens the body's defenses. We call the "life force" what is commonly referred to as "the immunological system." We have that force, and we know it because of Jesus; we know that sometimes the spirit can give more support than the spinal column. When we have a spirit with a wide vision, big, and in good shape, we are happy, and anything makes us live with joy; we have a high spirit, and that's our life force. When that life force starts to die, becoming shorter and shorter, and no longer sustains us, we feel that we don't have any strength to get up. That's why the first thing we need to tell people is "You are worthy, and you are a child of God, and you are loved; he wants you to be healthy and happy." We have helped a lot of people at the clinic that way; we have seen that it really works.

CONCLUSIONS

We have explored how three members of the Christianity of Liberation movement from three different generations have built their religious beliefs and conducted their socio-religious practice in a parish in the working-class neighborhood of El Ajusco in Mexico City. Since the ecclesiastical base communities are part of a diversified religious field, they reflect the different orientations that make up that field. Therefore, we find elements of popular religiosity (which, by the way, is the dominant trend in the colonia), alternative religions, and even elements of conservative Catholicism. Elsewhere (Suárez, 2013) I have analyzed the "purest" orientations of the ecclesiastical base communities, discussing how they function as affective communities. I have also pointed out the importance of these communities as places where we can observe a resignification of theological contents with sociopolitical elements, combined with a holistic perspective involving the body, nature, and faith. In the interviews that I have presented here, I have examined more closely how the religious experience of these communities has affected the lives of the activists Juan, María, and Ana. Although their experiences of participating in the life of the colonia are specific to them—Juan painting the walls and María and Ana helping to build the streets—their relationships with the neighborhood have left a social and political imprint. Similarly, their theologies have common traits: a before-and-after effect following their encounters with the communities; a

different way of understanding God, not as a judge who punishes but as an ally who accompanies us (the difference between the crucified Jesus vs. Jesus the liberator); a gap between the traditional church and the church of liberation; and the reading of sociohistorical reality as the place where God is and where we must intervene.

In the cases of Juan and María, their occupations are in line with their social perspective and their spirituality. This has allowed them to get on with their professional lives—closely linked to the needs of their faith—and to take their own particular political positions. If the gap between these life dimensions is one of the causes of the general malaise of modern society (Bajoit, 2012), striking the right balance is one of the strengths of this way of living the faith. In the cases of María and Ana, we see the incorporation into their belief systems of two very legitimate dimensions of Mexico's contemporary discourse—ecology and homeopathic medicine—that they interpret through the filter of both a social critique (which in María's case translates into the promotion of sustainable corn from indigenous communities and in Ana's case into the critique of the cost of allopathic medicine) and a religious perspective. These two women base their actions on the care of the body in both its material and its spiritual dimensions. In this connection, it is useful to return to Bourdieu's reflection that these actors have the need to administer both the healing of the body and the healing of the soul. This leads us to think about the flexibility of the boundaries between the fields of health and faith and the redefinition of the functions—and the knowledges—of their agents and, therefore, of the religious field itself (Bourdieu, 1985: 257–258).

The detailed observation of the trajectories of these ecclesiastical base community activists in a specific urban low-income setting shows us a global resignification of religious contents and the incorporation of categories from the global culture that, in a process of "elective affinity" (following Löwy's [1988] reinterpretation of that concept), create a novel way of living the faith articulating elements from the Catholic tradition, the interpretation of liberation theology, and elements of the contemporary cultural model such as ecology, the connection to the cosmos, and energy in the body. Finally, there is every indication that, as I said at the beginning, what is taking place in the cases analyzed here is part of a global reconstitution of belief systems in Mexico that affects all of the salvation enterprises in their different expressions.

NOTES

1. According to Löwy (1996: 35), the basic principles of this school of thought are the fight against idolatry, historical liberation as anticipation of the final deliverance, a critique of traditional dualist theology, a new reading of the Bible with emphasis on the Exodus and the struggle for liberation, the moral and social denunciation of capitalism as structural sin, the use of Marxism as an analytic instrument, and the development of Christian base communities. He suggests that the process should be analyzed as a social movement rather than a theological systematization, calling it the "Christianity of Liberation."

2. "We organized a Congress on Faith and Development, and found out that, almost unanimously, the discussion turned to Faith and Liberation. Liberation is in fact a constant condition of development; but this convergence tells us how the Mexican Christians attending the congress perceive today's development: they perceive it through liberation. . . . The big surprise at the

congress was to discover that it is precisely our faith that places us at the center of contemporary history as actors in the world and bearers of life to the marginalized from life and from Mexican history. Then, it was clear that the salvation of Mexico coincided fully with our Christian hope" (del Valle, 1996: 248–249)

3. A clear testimony to the sentiment of the age about the relationship between Catholic spirituality and political commitment is found precisely in Álvarez Icaza, who, having had a solid ecclesiastical link with the religious right as a former member of an anticommunist organization and lay representative at the Second Vatican Council, ended up founding the Partido Mexicano de los Trabajadores (Mexican Workers' Party), the Frente Democrático Nacional (National Democratic Front), and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution). As he puts it, "I joined [the Partido Mexicano de los Trabajadores] in the early 1980s . . . with many of my *compañeros* . . . and rose through the ranks into the most important positions. And notwithstanding that everybody knew about my Catholic origins and my past anticommunist ideology, they welcomed me with open arms. I could then see that there were many Christian activists, ex-seminarians and Christians in general in the PMT, who were then encouraged to announce publicly that their political commitment was a consequence of their faith" (quoted in Pastor, 2008: 261)

4. In closing the conference, Cardinal José Salazar, archbishop of Guadalajara and president of the Bishops' Conference, stated that the ecclesiastical base communities were the result of Vatican II and a source of dynamism for parishes and archdioceses (Romero, 2006: 501–502).

5. The analysis was encouraging: "It is estimated that there are approximately 10,000 [ecclesiastical base communities] in the country, with each made up of 10 to 15 members. They are present in 40 dioceses" (del Valle, 1996: 255)

6. Materially, the parish consists of a large central area covering a block, of which the church occupies 30 percent of the total, an indoor soccer field, a basketball court, a parking lot for seven cars, a courtyard for parties and celebrations, a meeting hall, four classrooms for 20 people each, a garden for children, a clinic with doctors' offices, and the offices. Thus the place serves not just as a center of worship but also as a sociocultural center. The administrative team consists of six priests or Jesuit seminarians, four nuns of the María Reparadora order, a secretary, a concierge/doorman, and some 100 lay people who participate in the pastoral activities with different degrees of responsibility and commitment. The organizational structure consists of the parish priest, the parish council, the monitoring team, the training team, the community center for theology and spirituality, and the economic and governing council, which supervises both parochial and community services.

7. All the excerpts quoted here correspond with people interviewed for the aforementioned research. The names were modified to maintain their anonymity (Suárez, 2015).

REFERENCES

- Bajoit, Guy
2012 "Conclusiones," pp. 403–410 in Hugo Suárez et al. (eds.), *El nuevo malestar en la cultura*. Mexico City: IIS-UNAM.
- Boff, Clodovis
1993 *Teología e práctica: Teología do político e suas mediações*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1971a "Une interprétation de la théorie de la religion selon Max Weber." *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 12 (1): 3–21.
1971b "Genèse et structure du champ religieux." *Revue Française de Sociologie* 12: 295–334.
1985 "Le champ religieux dans le champ de manipulation symbolique," pp. 255–261 in Vincent Gilbert (ed.), *Les nouveaux clercs: Prêtres, pasteurs et spécialistes des relations humaines et de la santé*. Genève: Labor et Fides.
1999 *La miseria del mundo*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Concha, Miguel (ed.).
1986 *La participación de los cristianos en el proceso popular de liberación en México*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI.
- de la Peña, Guillermo
2004 "El campo religioso, la diversidad regional y la identidad nacional en México." *Relaciones* 25 (100): 22–71.

- de la Torre, Renée
2006 *La ecclesia nostra: El catolicismo desde la perspectiva de los laicos, el caso de Guadalajara*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultural Económica/CIESAS.
- 2009 "Vigencia de las teologías latinoamericanas." *Boletín de la Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación: Creencias, Política y Sociedad* 124: 31–48.
- de la Torre, Renée and Cristina Gutiérrez (eds.).
2007 *Atlas de la diversidad religiosa en México (1950–2000)*. Mexico City: CIESAS/El Colegio de Jalisco/El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/El Colegio de Michoacán/Universidad de Quintana Roo/Subsecretaría de Población/CONACYT.
- del Valle, Luis
1996 "Teología de la liberación en América Latina," pp. 230–265 in Roberto Blancarte (ed.), *El pensamiento social de los católicos mexicanos*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Díaz Núñez, Luis Gerardo
2009 *La teología de la liberación latinoamericana hoy*. Mexico City: UNAM.
- Follmann, Ivo
1994 "Les catholiques et le Parti des travailleurs brésilien." *Social Compass* 41: 483–501.
- Gaiger Germani, Luiz Inacio
1991 "Culture, religion et praxis socio-politique: la pastorale de libération et le mouvement des travailleurs ruraux sans-terre au sud du Brésil." Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of Louvain.
- García Ruiz, Jesús
1990 "Du mouvement universitaire catholique à la théologie de la libération." *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 71 (July–September): 25–41.
- González, Fernando
2011 *Crisis de fe: Psicoanálisis en el monasterio de Santa María de la Resurrección 1961–1968*. Mexico City: Tusquets.
- Houtart, François
1961 "Les effets du changement social sur la religion catholique en Amérique Latine." *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 12 (July–December): 63–73.
- INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Geografía)
2005 *La diversidad religiosa en México: XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda 2000*. Aguascalientes: INEGI.
- Lahire, Bernard
2002 *Portraits sociologiques: Dispositions et variations individuelles*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Levine, Daniel (ed.).
1980 *Churches and Politics in Latin America*. London: Sage.
- López, Armando
2009 "Intentamos el cambio por razones de fe: El Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social (CENCOS) y su opción por un cristianismo de liberación (1964–1999)." Bachelor's thesis in history, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Löwy, Michael
1988 *Rédemption et utopie: Le judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale*. Paris: PUF.
1996 *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*. London: Verso.
- Pastor, Raquel
2008 "El proceso de los cristianos identificados con la teología de la liberación," pp. 253–271 in Judit Bokser Liwerant and Saúl Velasco Cruz (eds.), *Identidad, sociedad y política*. Mexico City: UNAM.
- Pixley, Jorge and Clodovis Boff
1987 *Opção pelos pobres*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Romero de Solís, José Miguel
2006 *El aguijón del espíritu: Historia contemporánea de la Iglesia en México (1989–1992)*. Mexico City: Universidad de Colima/Archivo Histórico del Municipio de Colima/El Colegio de Michoacán/Instituto Mexicano de Doctrina Social Cristiana.
- Silva Gotay, Samuel
1989 *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina y el Caribe: Implicaciones de la teología de la liberación para la sociología de la religión*. San Juan: Huracán.
- Suárez, Alejandro
2000 "La situación habitacional," pp. 390–397 in Gustavo Garza (ed.), *La ciudad de México en el fin del segundo milenio*. Mexico City: Gobierno del Distrito Federal/El Colegio de México.

Suárez, Hugo José

2003 *¿Ser cristiano es ser de izquierda?* La Paz: Muela del Diablo.

2004 "Une mystique de la politique." *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 155 (December): 91–100.

2009 "El modelo de catolicismo socioreligioso: análisis de una entrevista a partir del método estructural," pp. 277–300 in León Olivé et al. (eds.), *Pluralismo epistemológico*. La Paz: CLACSO/CIDES/Muela del Diablo/Comuna.

2011 "Un catolicismo estratégico," pp. 273–291 in Antonio Higuera Bonfil (ed.), *Religión y culturas contemporáneas*. Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes/RIFREM.

2012 *Ver y creer: Ensayo de sociología visual en la colonia El Ajusco*. Mexico City: IIS-UNAM/Quinta Chilla.

2013 "Compromiso y fe: reflexión a propósito de las comunidades eclesiales de base en la colonia El Ajusco," pp. 321–342 in Hugo José Suárez, Guy Bajoit, and Verónica Zubillaga (eds.), *La sociedad de la incertidumbre*. Mexico City: IIS-UNAM.

2015 *Creyentes urbanos: Sociología de la experiencia religiosa en una colonia popular en la ciudad de México*. Mexico City: IIS-UNAM.

Tahar Chaouch, Malik

2007a "Mitos y realidades sociológicas de la teología de la liberación en América Latina." *Estudios Sociológicos* 25 (73): 69–103.

2007b "La teología de la liberación en América Latina: una relectura sociológica." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 69: 427–456.

Zermeño, Sergio

2005 *La desmodernidad mexicana y las alternativas a la violencia y a la exclusión en nuestros días*. Mexico City: Océano.