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IMMIGRATING WITH GOD:
RELIGIOUS COPING AMONG CENTRAL AMERICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

Aubrey Parke

Anthropology 1301-1: Introduction to Anthropology

November 20, 2016

Introduction

Maria sat next to me on the sofa, smiling as she told me that she had been gang raped and kidnapped twice on her journey from El Salvador to Mexico. When I asked Maria how she could be so happy, she answered by speaking to God instead of to me: "Sometimes one has to suffer. I did not suffer like you suffered, Jesus, and I am a sinner."¹ During my year and a half of volunteering at Casa RAICES, I have heard many stories like Maria's, stories that combine extreme suffering with extreme faith. I am touched and fascinated by the way asylum seekers from Central American cling to God during a singularly difficult time of their lives.

A wave of preliminary research on religion and migration emerged in the early 2000s. For example, in 2002, the *Journal of Refugee Studies* produced an issue on "Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration."² The next year, *International Migration Review* published a summary of current research on religion and migration, and proposed a structure for future research.³ Despite the brief surge of interest in the subject, there has been little follow-through. Extant research examines the ways religion-based social networks affect migration, not the religious experience of migrants themselves.⁴ Research that does probe migrants' personal use of religiosity has focused on groups like East African refugees⁵ and unaccompanied minors,⁶ not Central American asylum seekers. This gap can and should be filled. Latin America is one of the most

¹ In discussion with the author, May 2016

² Elzbieta M. Gozdzia and Dianna J. Shandy, "Editorial Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 129-135.

³ Peggy Levitt, "You Know, Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant': Religion and Transnational Migration," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 847.

⁴ Cecilia Menjivar, "Religion and Immigration in Comparative Perspective: Catholic and Evangelical Salvadorans in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Phoenix," *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 1 (2003): 40.

⁵ Jessica Gladden, "The Coping Skills of East African Refugees: A Literature Review," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2012): 177.

⁶ Muireann Ní Raghallaigh and Robbie Gilligan, "Active survival in the lives of unaccompanied minors: coping strategies, resilience, and the relevance of religion," *Child and Family Social Work* 15, no. 2 (2010): 226.

religious regions of the world, and certainly the most Christian.⁷ Moreover, migration from Central America to the United States is rising, creating a greater need for the U.S. to understand the Central American migrant experience.⁸ Religion plays a significant role in that experience.

Every year, tens of thousands of people flee violence in Central America. Thousands of them find refuge in Casa RAICES, a shelter for women and children seeking asylum in the United States. When women at Casa RAICES tell their stories, they often combine accounts of extreme suffering with expressions of religious devotion. To investigate the relationship between religion and suffering among Central American asylum seekers, I visited Casa RAICES sixteen times over a two-and-a-half-month period. During my visits, I worked as a volunteer, listened to the migrants' stories, observed their interactions, and gathered information from both interviews and informal conversations. I initially planned to study the way women seeking asylum use God to interpret personal suffering. I expected religious women to filter their suffering through their beliefs about God. Towards the end of my research, however, I realized that the women actually use personal suffering to interpret God. Instead of explaining their suffering in terms of who God is (e.g. "God punishes sin, so God must be disciplining me"), they explain God in terms of their suffering (e.g. "I am suffering, so God will comfort me"). Women at Casa RAICES focused on the attributes of God that directly related to their circumstances, thus filtering their concept of the divine through their lived experience.

Although migrants at Casa RAICES have experienced significant physical suffering, the women say that their greatest challenge is separation from family. Additionally, they identify as

⁷ Daniel H. Levine, *Politics, Religion, and Society in Latin America* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 26.

⁸ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Explaining Undocumented Migration to the U.S.," *International Migration Review* 48, no. 4 (2014): 1056.

victims of structural problems in their home countries such as insecurity, poverty, and corruption. The women believe they are affected by forces beyond their control. This sense of powerlessness is compounded by their experience on the migrant journey and in detention centers. Because migrants suffer most from uncertainty and powerlessness, they tend to approach God as an imminent, all-powerful guide and protector, one who comprehends and controls even the most difficult circumstances. Prayer to and belief in God seem to compensate for feelings of helplessness.

Casa RAICES

Casa RAICES is a shelter run by the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), a San Antonio-based non-profit, and staffed in part by volunteers from the Interfaith Welcome Coalition (IWC), a loose network of churches in San Antonio. The history of Casa RAICES runs parallel to the Central American migrant crisis. Migration from Central America to the United States spiked in the 1980s because of upheaval in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.⁹ The U.S. welcomed Nicaraguan refugees because the Reagan administration opposed the left-leaning Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) that had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship.¹⁰ By welcoming Nicaraguans as refugees, the administration implied that the government of Nicaragua could not protect its own people. For years, however, the United States had backed the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador in the name of fighting communism. In 1953, the CIA provided aerial support to a coup that installed a military dictatorship in Guatemala.¹¹ During the Reagan administration, the U.S. also

⁹ Elizabeth G. Ferris, *The Central American Refugees* (Westport: Prager, 1987), 8-35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹ Douglas V. Porpora, *How Holocausts Happen* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 85.

funneled multi-million dollar military aid packages to El Salvador.¹² The governments of both countries engaged so-called death squads to quash resistance. In Guatemala, General Efraim Rios Montt let paramilitary groups eradicate entire villages.¹³ The human rights situation in El Salvador was so atrocious that President Reagan had to alter federal law to justify continued aid disbursements.¹⁴ Violence plagued Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, displacing tens of thousands of people. Although the United States only offered a path to citizenship for Nicaraguans, thousands from El Salvador and Guatemala still sought refuge in the U.S.¹⁵ With only minimal legal protection, Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants were especially vulnerable. RAICES was founded in 1986 to provide legal assistance to these migrants.¹⁶

Since the 1980s, civil war in Central America has quieted and given rise to what Douglas Massey calls "new violence."¹⁷ At least 64,000 active gang members operate in El Salvador, Guatemala, and neighboring Honduras.¹⁸ Migrants who fled to the U.S. in the 1980s and did not integrate into U.S. society formed two of the most powerful gangs, M-18 and Mara Salvatrucha.¹⁹ The United States increased deportations in 1996, exporting these gangs to Central America in 1996.²⁰ As a result, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras all rank among the five

¹² William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 150.

¹³ Douglas V. Porpora, *How Holocausts Happen* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 85.

¹⁴ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 229.

¹⁵ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Explaining Undocumented Migration to the U.S.," *International Migration Review* 48, no. 4 (2014): 1031-2.

¹⁶ "Who We Are," *RAICES Texas*, accessed November 20, 2016, <https://www.raicestexas.org/pages/about>.

¹⁷ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Explaining Undocumented Migration to the U.S.," *International Migration Review* 48, no. 4 (2014): 1040.

¹⁸ Clare Ribando Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," *Congressional Research Service*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sfp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

most dangerous countries in the Western Hemisphere.²¹ Central Americans who are not members of the gangs are victimized by gang violence and caught in the crossfire between rival gangs.²² In 2014, violence in Central America skyrocketed. Street violence displaced 174,000 in Honduras alone.²³ Many sought refuge in the U.S. In 2014, the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border nearly doubled and the number of family units more than quadrupled.²⁴ Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) places women and children apprehended on the Texas-Mexico Border in detention centers in Karnes or Dilley. Upon release, ICE sends families to rejoin sponsors elsewhere in the U.S., using San Antonio as a travel hub. The 2014 migrant influx created a minor humanitarian crisis in the downtown San Antonio Greyhound bus station. Dozens of asylum seekers spent the night in the station without legal counsel, money, or shelter. Local churches collaborated to form IWC in response to this crisis.²⁵ IWC then created a shelter, later named Casa RAICES.

Casa RAICES is a Victorian-style house in downtown San Antonio. ICE brings families to a street corner five minutes from the shelter because city law prohibits buses in the historic neighborhood. A volunteer or staff member then transports the families to Casa RAICES. Families line their few belongings up against the kitchen wall, just underneath a 10-foot map of the world. The kitchen is open to the women, who prepare a hot meal for themselves and their

²¹ David Gagne, "InSight Crime's 2015 Latin America Homicide Round-up," *InSight Crime*, January 14, 2016, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/insight-crime-homicide-round-up-2015-latin-america-caribbean>.

²² Mimi Yagoub, "Why Does Latin America Have the World's Highest Female Murder Rates?," *InSight Crime*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/why-does-latin-america-have-the-world-s-highest-female-murder-rates>.

²³ Zach Dyer, "Gang threat drives growing displacement inside Honduras," *UNHCR*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2016/9/57c8392e4/gang-threat-drives-growing-displacement-inside-honduras.html>.

²⁴ Jeh Johnson, "United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016," *U.S. Customs and Border Protection*, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>.

²⁵ "Our Story," *Interfaith Welcome Coalition*, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://texasiwc.org/about/>.

families. After the families have eaten, a volunteer or staff member helps them procure bus or plane tickets and arranges for transportation to the bus station or airport. Finally, families are assigned bedrooms and told to make themselves at home until their bus or plane leaves. With a few exceptions, the families are on their way in a matter of days.

Religious coping in context

Most of the guests are women between the ages of 20 and 40, accompanied by one or more children. During my two and a half months of research, Casa RAICES processed 902 of these family units.²⁶ Three-hundred and seventeen came from El Salvador, 219 from Guatemala, and 319 from Honduras.²⁷ Most of the women come from a religious background. Of the 902 total women who passed through Casa RAICES, 349 identified as evangelical,²⁸ 286 as Catholic, 86 as Christian,²⁹ and only 100 as having no religious affiliation.³⁰ Thirty-nine identified as "other", ranging from Adventist to Orthodox.³¹ In percentages, these numbers come to 52% Protestant,³² 32% Catholic, and 11% unaffiliated. These numbers have an interesting relationship to religious demographics in the women's home countries, shown in the chart below:

	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
CATHOLIC	50%	50%	46%
PROTESTANT	36%	41%	41%
UNAFFILIATED	12%	6%	10%
OTHER	2%	3%	2%

²⁶ Casa RAICES Intake Documents, September 8, 2016-November 12, 2016

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ In Latin America, "Protestant" and "evangelical" are often used interchangeably. CITE PEW

²⁹ In Latin America, the descriptor "Christian" is often used by Protestants who do not think Christianity includes Catholicism.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Christian" and "other" are included here as Protestant.

All of the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) have a plurality of Catholics, but the women who come to Casa RAICES are majority Protestant. While the women at Casa RAICES disproportionately represent Protestantism, they accurately represent the current religious shift in Latin America. The Pew Research Center found that roughly 90% of people in Latin America identified as Roman Catholic between 1900 and 1960, but now only 69% of the region identifies as Roman Catholic.³⁴ In most Latin American countries, a third of Protestants were raised Catholic.³⁵ Percentages in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are slightly lower but still significant, ranging from 23% to 38% of current Protestants who were raised Catholic.³⁶ The Pew survey presented converts who participated in the study with eight possible explanations for conversion. The most popular was seeking a more personal relationship with God.³⁷ Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador ranked in the top four countries in Latin America for personal religious commitment. Northern Triangle Christians are statistically more likely to report religion as an important part of their daily life, seek a personal relationship with God, pray at least once a day, and attend worship services.³⁸ All of these practices are more common among Protestants than Catholics. Thus, the women at Casa RAICES belong statistically to the most devout group in the most religious part of Latin America. With one exception,³⁹ all the women I had extensive conversations grew up in a

³³ “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Northern Triangle Christians are also the most likely to be socially conservative, believe in Biblical literalism, and practice Spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues and divine healings.

³⁹ Deysi’s parents died when she was young, so she grew up with her two older sisters, who are not religious. However, Deysi still went to church regularly in Honduras.

religious household. The women are thus able to draw on their religious backgrounds in times of need.

The act of drawing on religion in difficult circumstances could also be called religious coping. In his seminal work, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, Kenneth Pargament defines coping as a process by which people search for significance in times of stress.⁴⁰ Significance does not mean importance, but order, reason, and purpose. Stress refers to the strain put on people by difficult circumstances. People engaged in religious coping use religion to explain and endure hardship. Migrants' socioeconomic background may incline them towards religious coping. Pargament writes: "Studies also suggest that religious coping is more common among blacks, poorer people, the elderly, women, and those who are more troubled. Many of these groups also show higher levels of religious commitment."⁴¹ Minorities are both more religious and more likely to experience suffering. Pargament theorizes that people become more aware of human limitations when crisis situations push them to the brink of what is bearable. He argues that crises make us aware of our frailty, causing us to look beyond ourselves to some sort of divine or spiritual explanation for pain. Given that vulnerable groups suffer more and that people who suffer are more likely to seek religious solutions, female asylum seekers from Central America are doubly likely to find comfort in religion. As a marginalized group, they are structurally most likely to suffer.⁴² This suffering pushes them nearer to the brink of the bearable, which would, according to Pargament's analysis, make them more likely to find solace in religion.

⁴⁰ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 90.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴² Wendy A. Vogt, "Crossing Mexico: Structural violence and the commodification of undocumented Central American migrants," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 4 (2013), 764-80.

Structural violence and a powerful God

Religious coping is especially common among women at Casa RAICES because they are victims of structural violence. Paul Farmer defines structural violence as the way "various large-scale social forces come to be translated into personal distress and disease."⁴³ People who study structural violence are concerned with the way social forces like poverty and racism "crystallize" into individual experiences of suffering.⁴⁴ The experience of Central American migrants is a prime example of structural violence. Gangs are a legacy of the militarization, poverty, and inequality that has afflicted the region for years.⁴⁵ Now gangs inflict those same social pressures on non-members through extortion and violence. When I ask women at Casa RAICES why they left their home countries, they do not usually begin with narratives of their particular circumstances – for example, "I was threatened by a gang member" or "My husband was abusive." Instead, they cite *pobreza* (poverty) and some form of violence, whether that be *delincuencia* (delinquency), a moniker for gang activity, or *amenaza* (threat). Some women, like Delmy,⁴⁶ explain these structural forces in great detail.

Delmy is a lawyer in her mid-thirties. She fled El Salvador because gang members threatened to harm her family if she did not provide them with free legal services. Delmy situates her own experience within a web of social forces including poverty, insecurity, nepotism, and corruption:

Immigration from my country is 50% for economic reasons and 50% security. What you earn is not enough for your lifestyle. There is not sufficient employment for both partners

⁴³ Paul Farmer, "On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996), 261.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Clare Ribando Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," *Congressional Research Service*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Due to safety concerns, I have changed the names of all migrants in this study.

[in a relationship] to work; bosses give jobs to relatives and friends. As a lawyer, my main job is to survive because there are more professionals than there is employment. The government has lost control of its country. Bandilleros extort money from people and pay bribes to law enforcement...Our president is incompetent. He puts up a façade and says that everything is fine.⁴⁷

Delmy's analysis of immigration from Central America matches with studies that link rising street violence with migration to the United States.⁴⁸ Such violence leads to desperate actions. In Delmy's words, "I know I committed a crime when I came here illegally, *pero tuvo que hacerlo por la necesidad* - I had to do it because of necessity."⁴⁹ Like Delmy, women at Casa RAICES often justify their actions by necessity. The women identify social forces like poverty, violence, and corruption in their home countries and explain that those forces compelled them to leave. They self-identify as victims of structural violence.

The asylum-seeking process in the United States reinforces this identity by requiring migrants to think of themselves as victims. When new families arrive at Casa RAICES, volunteers ask each mother a few questions and record the answers on a spreadsheet. Towards the end of an intake, volunteers ask "*Tuvo una entrevista de miedo creible* - did you have a Credible Fear Interview?" The answer is almost always yes. When Border Patrol apprehends a woman and she requests asylum, ICE detains her and then an asylum officer screens her in the detention facility, in what is called a Credible Fear Interview (CFI). To stay in the United States, a woman must convince the officer that she will face persecution in her home country because of

⁴⁷In discussion with the author, October 2016.

⁴⁸Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Explaining Undocumented Migration to the U.S.," *International Migration Review* 48, no. 4 (2014): 1040.

⁴⁹Ibid.

her race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group, or political opinion.⁵⁰ Andrea, a RAICES lawyer who prepares women in detention for their CFIs, told me that it is essential for women to be specific in the way they explain their cases.

Saying “There’s a lot of delinquency, I came because gangs are taking over” doesn’t show past harm or fear of future harm...[We tell them to] emphasize [why they can’t go to] the police because it shows that government agents can’t protect you...[The women] need to show why specifically they are here; for example, the gangs targeted their child particularly, or [they have been affected by] underlying domestic violence that women have been normalized to and don’t realize is a viable asylum claim. That’s what we try to elicit from them and get them to understand as relevant.⁵¹

This is the epitome of structural violence: large-scale social forces like crime, poverty, and domestic violence crystallize into the specific suffering of certain women and children. Asylum seekers have to be acutely aware of *delincuencia*, *pobreza*, and *amenaza*, and show these social forces at work in their individual lives. Women come to Casa RAICES from detention centers, meaning they have passed a CFI. Before arriving at Casa RAICES, then, women have had to prove they are victims of structural violence.⁵²

The bureaucracy, inefficiency, and language barriers that plague the immigration system exacerbate the families’ experience of victimization and powerlessness. Lilian, a young mother

⁵⁰ Chelsea Mullarkey, “*Sí, Tengo Miedo – Yes, I Am Afraid: How the Current Interpretation of Asylum Law is Contrary to Legislative Intent and What the Courts Should Do About It*,” *Cleveland State Law Review* 64, no. 3 (2016): 751.

⁵¹ In discussion with the author, January 2017.

⁵² This is only the beginning of a process that conditions migrants to think of themselves as victims. Migrants must continue to prove that they are part of a threatened group throughout the asylum process, which can take years.

from Guatemala, said that ICE "moves you from place to place and no one tells you why you are moving or where you are going."⁵³ After crossing the border, families spend one to five days in the *hielera* (icebox) and the *perrera* (doghouse). The *hielera* is a set of portable buildings. Several people are crammed into a small room with the air conditioning set at sixty degrees. Everyone shares one toilet in the middle of the room. The *perrera* is similar, but less cold, and blankets are provided. Finally, families are incarcerated in a detention center for two to four weeks. Post-release, women arrive at Casa RAICES in identical solid-color T-shirts, jeans, and ID tags. They carry packets of forms and papers, all in English, and wear *grilletes*, ankle monitors that notify ICE if they move outside a certain radius of their reported location. Asylum seekers hand over their autonomy when they turn themselves in to immigration officials.

Deprived of personal freedom by structural violence and the asylum-seeking process, the women I spoke with focused on finding and following God's will. Karla said she left El Salvador because of "*delincuencia y pobreza* – delinquency and poverty."⁵⁴ As a woman, the most Karla could earn was three dollars a day, working ten hour shifts. Because she could not support herself and her three sons, she became economically dependent on a series of abusive partners.

You earn just a little and life costs you a lot. My life was hard. Before leaving [El Salvador], I asked God if it was his will for me to go. If it turns out well, I know it is his will. If it doesn't, it's not his will. If he has brought me here, it's because he wants me here.⁵⁵

⁵³ In discussion with the author, November 2016.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Karla's desire to discern the will of God before leaving her country is common among the women at Casa RAICES. They seem to conceive of God's will as a plan he fixed at some prior time. Humans are supposed to discover this plan and follow it as closely as possible.

Circumstances become after-the-fact revelations of God's will. A positive outcome, like passing a CFI, affirms that a person is following God's will. A negative outcome, like deportation, means God did not want her in the United States. Either way, God has the final say. Considering that asylum seekers know forces outside their control act upon them, they may seek God's will to reclaim that control through a powerful, involved deity. They believe that their journey to the United States is not ultimately imposed on them by poverty or gang violence, and their ability to stay is not ultimately decided by the *migre*. Finding God's will becomes an alternative to being ruled by an oppressive system. God is not only powerful; God is on their side.

That women find control *through* a relationship with God is key. Women seeking asylum are not simply passive objects of social forces, and they do not use belief in an omnipotent deity to avoid personal responsibility. One chaotic evening at Casa RAICES, I had to tell an exhausted mother who had just recently arrived that she had to pack up and wait at the Greyhound station for six hours until her early-morning bus departed. Her face fell; she had hoped for time to rest and recover for the next leg of the journey. But she quickly forced a smile and said to me, “*Vamos a luchar* – we will keep on fighting.”⁵⁶ Women at Casa RAICES display this kind of determination and perseverance alongside their religious devotion. In their ethnographic study of a transnational Mayan community in Guatemala and Houston, Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Rose Ebaugh conclude that migrants “innovatively employ religion” in their migration journeys.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ In discussion with the author, November 2016.

⁵⁷ Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Rose Ebaugh, “Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants’ Use of Religion in the Migration Process,” *International Migration Review* 37, no. 4 (2003): 1145.

According to Hagan and Ebaugh, religion is not a passive coping mechanism, but a way of grasping otherwise overwhelming circumstances. This framework applies well to the women at Casa RAICES. For example, when Karla prayed to God about her decision to migrate, she first discerned his will through prayer, and then actively carried it out by leaving El Salvador. Through her faith, she found strength to radically change her circumstances. Pargament calls this a “collaborative” rather than a “deferring” use of religion⁵⁸: although the women believe that God has a predetermined will and the power to enforce it, they actively seek and carry out his plan. This dynamic relationship between divine providence and individual agency may relate to demographic trends in Latin America. As already noted, the women at Casa RAICES represent a regional shift from Catholicism to Protestantism. The Pew Center’s comprehensive survey of Christianity in Latin America found that Catholics most often converted to Protestantism because they sought a more personal connection with God.⁵⁹ Women at Casa RAICES tend to profess such a relationship with God.

Because women at Casa RAICES believe that God is in control and that they have a relationship with him, they include God in their accounts of personal suffering. Delmy went so far as to say that “suffering and God go hand in hand” and that “God is always present in the life of human beings, even through economic necessities and violence.”⁶⁰ Structural violence, however, seems to challenge the idea that God can be both powerful and good. If God is in charge of the world, why would he allow evil to plague it systematically? This dilemma is often called the “problem of evil.” But Delmy had no problem reconciling God with evil: in her

⁵⁸ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 143.

⁵⁹ “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.

⁶⁰ Written communication to author, October 23, 2016.

perspective, God uses for evil for good. When I asked Delmy how she could accept that a good God permits evil, she said that he used her own difficult journey through Mexico to draw her close to himself.⁶¹ Karla also touched on the problem of evil in one of our conversations. She was troubled because some mothers had lost their children while crossing the Rio Grande River: "Sometimes I ask why this happens if God is good. Later I say I believe, even though I still have questions...Yes, we suffer, but God helps us, He gives us strength."⁶² Karla then used the success of her own journey as evidence that God gives strength to those who ask. Both Karla and Delmy coped with unresolved questions about divine goodness and suffering by recalling their personal experiences with God. Women at Casa RAICES also use this intimate approach to confront a form of suffering they discuss even more often than loss of control.

Uncertainty and a benevolent God

Lilian talked to me about the *hielera* while we sat at the Greyhound station, waiting for her bus. She held her three-year-old son on her lap while she spoke; he played with her hair and affectionately patted her cheek every few minutes.

It was a torture. I just wanted them to deport me because I didn't want to suffer anymore.

The guards mistreat you and sometimes they get angry. When you ask for toilet paper they either refuse or they say *ahorita, ahorita*, in a minute, but don't bring any. The life of an immigrant is costly, we suffer much. *Pero lo peor es no saber de sus familiares* – the worst part is not knowing about your family.⁶³

Lilian came from Guatemala to live with her father, whom she has not seen for 11 years. He has been working to bring Lilian and her siblings to the United States. Two of Lilian's siblings are

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² In discussion with the author, November 2016.

⁶³ In discussion with the author, November 2016.

already with her father. She travelled with the other four, who were still in detention when we spoke. Lilian had no way of contacting her detained siblings. Even though she had been traumatized by her experience in the *hielera*, not knowing the status of her siblings' cases cost her infinitely more.

All migrants face fear of the unknown, and the women at Casa RAICES feel it acutely. Families from Casa RAICES usually practice serial migration, in which one family unit arrives in the United States and is later joined by another.⁶⁴ Lilian's case is a prime example: her father came first, and then the children joined in two separate waves. Serial migration causes separation, and separation limits contact, especially for families who cannot afford to pay for international calls. As Lilian experienced, families can be separated even when they migrate together. The inability to communicate with loved ones causes anxiety in the women at Casa RAICES. Although these women have known poverty, hunger, cold, fatigue, physical pain, brutal violence, and imprisonment, they consistently say that not knowing about their families is the most agonizing challenge they face.

The environment at Casa RAICES can foster anxiety and fear of the unknown. Women at the shelter let total strangers write down their information. They trust volunteers with their travel arrangements and depend on us to get them to the airport on time. Sometimes Casa RAICES workers cannot find a driver in time and a family misses their flight. Other days, one or two volunteers have to care for over a dozen families, and women are left in the dark for hours about how and when they are leaving. On top of this, volunteers have to communicate a sense of urgency to the women who arrive at Casa. While taking down their information, volunteers must

⁶⁴ Joseph M. Cervantes, Olga L. Mejia, and Amalia Guerrero Mena, "Serial Migration and the Assessment of Extreme and Unusual Psychological Hardship With Undocumented Latina/o Families," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 32, no. 2 (2010): 275-291.

remind the women that missing a court appointment means an automatic deportation order. Especially when there is an influx of arrivals, the Casa environment can be stressful, rather than homelike.

Mired in uncertainty, women at Casa RAICES often find solace in religion. When Estefania had a nervous breakdown because she could not contact her husband, who was still in detention, she interspersed little prayers between her sobs: "*Dios, yo se que tú puedes* – God, I know that you are able."⁶⁵ Cristiana turned to me, smiling through her tears. "What is impossible for men is possible with God,"⁶⁶ she said, quoting a passage repeated in the Biblical gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Carolina, another mother, consoled Cristiana from her seat on the sofa. "*Con dios, todo va a salir bien* – With God, everything is going to turn out alright."⁶⁷ This phrase is often spoken by women at Casa RAICES, either after describing their own difficulties or while comforting a distraught companion. Although the women have endured intense and drawn-out suffering, they are quick to express confidence in God's provision.

Women at Casa RAICES are also quick to attribute all positive events to divine intervention. Because asylum seekers usually leave their countries with few resources, they depend on help from strangers. Cristiana said that she knew God was with her on the journey because "people with incredible hearts" helped her along.⁶⁸ Delmy also described assistance from people as evidence of God's hand:

Although I suffered, I never doubted that there was a God that was with me, helping me, protecting me and my children and my travelling companions. Even if you never realized it there was a God present in our lives, always protecting us. He manifested himself

⁶⁵ In discussion with the author, November 2016.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

through the people who took care of us, His hand to help us when we needed it most. I have never seen my God but he has always been with me, until the end of my journey, and he will always be with me...Sometimes I question him [about my suffering], and he hasn't given me an answer yet, but I know he will. I still rejoice in the blessings he gives me, like my family and my health. His blessings are answers.⁶⁹

Delmy not only attributed human assistance to the hand of God, but also saw the absence of misfortune as proof of his care. Delmy and her son were assaulted twice in Mexico. The second time, thieves sequestered her and her son in a room with a dead body and made them stay in the room until they had been stripped of all their possessions. Delmy said that her first thought when she saw the body was "*Dios está conmigo – God is with me.*"⁷⁰ She said the corpse reminded her that she was still alive only because of God's protection. Similarly, Cristiana praised God because "He did not let us die of hunger."⁷¹ The average U.S. citizen is unlikely to think of not starving or being murdered on a given day as a particularly wonderful occurrence, but the danger Central American migrants continually face makes survival seem like a miracle.

Women at Casa RAICES view God as both a powerful ruler and benevolent provider. They express these views in their prayers, another method of collaborative coping. Many women reported praying for God to help them on their journey. Delmy described prayer as instrumental not only on her migration journey but also in her spiritual awakening. Before she started having economic problems, Delmy said her life consisted of "work, school, going to church on Sunday, and playing afterwards."⁷² When she struggled financially, Delmy began to pray. For Delmy,

⁶⁹ In discussion with author, October 2016.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ In communication with author, November 2016.

⁷² In communication with author, October 2016.

prayer catalyzed a new, intensely devoted spiritual life that peaked during her journey through Mexico.⁷³ Delmy identifies as evangelical, but many of the women at Casa RAICES are Catholic. Their prayer takes a more structured form. On a given day, at least one or two women at the shelter wear rosaries or icons around their necks. One afternoon I asked Marta, a young woman from El Salvador, about the medallion she always wore. Marta explained that it was a picture of Our Lady of Peace, the Salvadoran version of Virgin Mary. Marta then recited *La Salve*, a prayer to the Lady she had learned at church. The prayer is redolent of the migrant journey, speaking of a "valley of tears" and appealing to Mary as "our lawyer."⁷⁴ Marta prays to Mary every morning and every night. Although Catholic prayer tends to be more ritualistic than evangelical prayer, Catholic migrants still primarily relate to God through prayer. Prayer seems to be a way of accessing divine power. Thus, migrants derive consolation not only from believing God is powerful but also from actively drawing on divine resources in times of need.

Because women at Casa RAICES face terrible uncertainty, they need assurance. Belief in a benevolent God meets that need and enables women to handle highly stressful circumstances. Thinking of God as a generous provider also helps women cope with painful estrangement from loved ones. Seeing past events as evidence of divine intervention allows women at Casa RAICES to believe that God can also work miracles in their uncertain futures.

Conclusion

The women at Casa RAICES seem to draw consolation out of religion like water from a well. Each woman's spiritual reservoir is filled by her religious background, which in turn is a component of Latin America's history as a very Christian region. Just as we look for water when we thirst, the women reach towards their religious backgrounds when they suffer. The type of

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

suffering particular to women at Casa RAICES is victimization by structural violence and fear of the unknown. These experiences of suffering shape the way the women approach God. Because the asylum process requires migrants to think of themselves as victims, women within the process realize that larger social forces trap them in violence and poverty. Aware of their own powerlessness, they focus on finding and carrying out the will of God. In spite of the physical suffering structural violence produces, the women at Casa RAICES maintain that fear of the unknown, especially the unknown status of loved ones, is more distressing. When faced with overwhelming anxiety, they console each other by talking about God's sovereign power, and seek his protection through prayer.

Of course, this argument is just a hypothesis. Research on asylum seekers' religious lives before and after the migration journey is needed to substantiate it. Additionally, research on spiritual activity during the different phases of the migration journey would be helpful. If migrants' experience of suffering does in fact shape the way they approach God, it seems likely that women would approach God differently during the journey through Mexico and in detention centers than they would post-release. Researchers could also study specific moments of suffering, such as when asylum seekers relive traumatic experiences through a CFI. My research at Casa RAICES was limited to a small set of people over a short period of time. Future study should include multiple interviews with the same people over a longer span of time.

Finally, future research must raise the question of trends in Latin America as a whole: is the tendency among asylum seekers to find consolation in a relationship with God really a result of personal suffering, or is it part of the larger trend in Latin America towards an involved, Protestant Christianity? Alternatively, there is no doubt that poverty, instability, and religiosity are endemic in Latin America. Perhaps structural forces in the region produce individual

suffering, which causes people to turn towards religion, just as the women at Casa RAICES appear to do. If ethnographers continue to study Central American migrants' use of religion, we may be able to gain a deeper understanding not only of the migrant experience, but also of the interactions between structural violence and religion in migrants' home countries.

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