

## ***Testimonios and Popular Religion in Mainline North American Hispanic Protestantism***

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“The world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, *a natural constitution* different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct required.”

-William James, *The Variety of Religious Experiences*.<sup>1</sup>

"Virginia, are you lonely?" asked the black (Negrito) cleaning man that had come into her room. Virginia, a Mexican-American woman from California, had been in a hospital's intensive care unit struggling for her life for several days. "Yes," Virginia answers, "I feel bad." "I've been in this hospital for days, away from my family, and I really miss them and wish I could go home with them," she adds. The cleaning man goes over to her and tells her, "Don't worry, when no one is with you, I'm with you." He then proceeds to pick up the trash from the room and leaves.

Immediately after the janitor leaves, Virginia realizes that she should have asked the janitor to keep her in his prayers. Unable to get out of the bed, she summons the nurse to her room. When the nurse arrives, Virginia asks the nurse to find the janitor so that she can ask him to pray for her. But the nurse is perplexed. There was no janitor in the room, the nurse explains to Virginia. Nor did she see anyone leave the room. Nevertheless, Virginia is adamant that he was indeed there and that she wanted him to come back. Upon Virginia's insistence, the nurse looks for the janitor and checks with the other nurses. There is no janitor working on that floor at that hour and none can be found.

Virginia's testimony is one among many that I collected throughout the nation as part of my study of *testimonios*. Her husband, a United Methodist minister in California, sits across from me on a lawn chair under a tree, telling me her story. Virginia sits beside him, listening to make sure he gets it right. Virginia's has shared her testimony with others in her congregation in the past and hopes to continue sharing it with others. As Virginia and her husband try to make

sense of her experience, she feels that in the words of a black janitor she encountered God's comfort and presence. For both Virginia and her husband, this is not a mere story; it is a testament to God's abiding presence in their lives. Neither of them speculates as to the identity of the black janitor. Yet, there is a tacit understanding in their words that indicate that both the pastor and his wife are interpreting this event as an encounter with the divine. Even more significant is that Virginia, a Mexican-American woman, encounters this divine presence in the guise of a lowly janitor from an oppressed minority group other than her own. Thus, Virginia's story is theologically significant in many respects.

It is theologically significant because Virginia and her husband are theologizing about her experience, understanding the encounter with the janitor as an encounter with God's presence.<sup>2</sup> It is also significant because they identify God's presence as being mediated to them concretely by someone radically different from them and from most people's expectations. God's presence does not come to them in manifestations of power, but through a lowly janitor, a servant whose physical appearance is of one from an often-marginalized race --someone who is different from Virginia. Yet, this interpretation corresponds to an understanding of Christianity as encountered through the poor, lowly, and marginalized, an understanding rooted in the New Testament accounts of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Finally, it is also significant that in that encounter with the divine, there is no promise of healing or a miraculous recovery, but only the promise of accompaniment in the midst of her loneliness and suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia and her husband provide us with a glimpse of the richness and depth of theological thought that occurs when people of faith seek to articulate their religious experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Variety of Religious Experiences* (New York: Penguin Books, 1902, 1982), p. 518.

<sup>2</sup> Some might argue that they are not truly theologizing, but merely making a statement of faith based on their religious presuppositions. While they might not be articulating a theological position in the rationalistic-philosophical sense, they are indeed correlating their experience with their understanding of their faith, its presuppositions, and its shared tradition. In other words, they are using their understanding of their faith to interpret their experience within the context of their faith. William James, when addressing the notions of assertions of God's presence also argues against purely rationalistic understandings, noting the limits of rationalism in interpreting religious dispositions. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-75.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia and her husband are not necessarily entrenched in liberation theology or Hispanic theology in a way that would make them more susceptible to identifying Christ with the poor and oppressed, yet the connection in Virginia's experience to such types of identifications is theologically significant.

<sup>4</sup> Generally one would assume that testimonies are primarily accounts of miraculous events that include healing. Yet, this is not always the case. In some instances, the person's illness continues, and the person might even succumb to their illness, as in the case of a testimony in a Miami church regarding a young woman afflicted with a brain tumor who passed away, yet displayed great peace and courage. This fits with William James' fifth characteristic of religious life that includes an assurance of safety and a temper of peace. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 486.

Their theology might not be sophisticated, buttressed by philosophical and theological jargon. Yet, it represents a deep understanding of God as one who becomes present to us through the lowly, the humble, and the marginalized --a view consistent with their understanding of Jesus' life. It also articulates the significance of divine accompaniment in times of needs, a theme that recurs in many other *testimonios* and is a significant dimension of Hispanic theology, also connected to the development of the "preferential option for the poor" in Latin American liberation theology.<sup>5</sup> God's accompaniment does not always result in a miraculous resolution to the person's problem, but it does empower that person to face the circumstances with peace and courage.

### ***Testimonios* in Mainline Protestant Churches**

Growing up in small Baptist congregations in South Florida, I encountered *testimonios* as a part of almost every worship service. Some occurred spontaneously in services and prayer meetings, where people would raise their hands and ask if they could share. Others were regular parts of the worship service, prayer service, or Bible study meeting at homes and church meetings. New Year's Watch services commonly had half an hour to an hour dedicated to sharing *testimonios* with those gathered. As a child, some of the testimonies fascinated me, as the person sharing would speak of miraculous events and divine encounters that substantiated the shared faith of those gathered. Others, often those *testimonios* coming from the "regulars" who shared their experiences over and over again, were merely boring and unendurable for an edgy young child or defiant teenager. Yet, as a theologian, I have rediscovered them and been fascinated by them.

In constructing my study of *testimonios* in mainline Protestant churches in the United States, I grant from the onset that my expertise is not in the social sciences nor that my intent is to gather and analyze the *testimonios* in a socio-scientific manner. My concerns are primarily theological. Thus, while I attempted to have a broad representation and to maintain accurate and consistent information, I do not claim that the material was necessarily gathered and examined through the rigorous lenses of socio-scientific methods.

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<sup>5</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta develops a theology of divine accompaniment through suffering and oppression for Hispanic theology, drawing on Latin American liberation theologies and the notion of the preferential option for the poor. *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1995), see specially chapter seven.

*Testimonios* are very private and emotional experiences for many people, who feel more comfortable sharing within the safety of their congregation, than under academic scrutiny. This made it difficult in some cases for me to gain access to congregations or to overcome the reservations of the people in the congregation about sharing in a potentially more public forum than their immediate congregation. In addition, there is a certain level of distrust of academics and outsiders in some areas and communities, making it more difficult in some circumstances to gain the people's trust. At times, this reluctance was surprising. For instance, in Miami, the pastor of a church where *testimonios* were frequent refused to allow me to visit his congregation, although he initially was quite open to it. This was particularly surprising since that particular pastor had known me since I was a child and had invited me to preach at several of the churches where he had served as pastor! His concern was that I was going to profit from his congregation's insights by writing about it and that I might violate the trust of his congregation. While surprising coming from him, the concerns themselves were not surprising given some of the mistrust of academics that exists in our communities.

Another surprising instance was while visiting the church in which I grew up and where I was ordained. The pastor, who grew up with me in that congregation, was surprised at how reticent the people were about sharing that morning, when there are usually numerous *testimonios* at almost every service. He felt the people might have been shy about being taped; yet most of the congregation consisted of the same friends with whom I attended church as a child and their families. Nevertheless, a group of older people from that congregation had openly shared several *testimonios* with me during a small prayer meeting at the pastor's house.

In some instances, the difficulties were more logistical in nature. Trying to identify churches that had *testimonios* in their services required prior contact from me. In making these calls, I found numerous difficulties. In some cases, the churches never returned calls. In other instances, the pastor or church staff person with whom I spoke did not fully understand the nature of my research. Even locating Hispanic churches in a particular community proved challenging. In some instances, it required looking through phone books in advanced of my visit and contacting churches that appeared to be Hispanic in name. This was often a tedious and fruitless process, since the majority of these churches did not return my calls or did not want to participate. In one instance, when we called the local denominational offices of a mainline denomination, the staff person assisting us did not know of any Hispanic churches from their

denomination in that area, adding that she thought that all Hispanics in that area were Catholic. This surprised my assistant and me since it was clearly incorrect, given my knowledge of the area and my later visits to other congregations in the same community. Timing also proved difficult in some occasions, having missed their prayer meeting or their monthly *testimonio* share time during my visit. Most of the churches where I was successful in obtaining access were those that knew me or to which I was referred to by someone who knew the pastor.

Research consisted of travel to several areas of the country where Hispanic communities were prevalent and where the possibility for obtaining permission from pastors to document *testimonios* in their congregation was likely. These areas consisted of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, Miami, Chicago, the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, Boston, Houston, and San Antonio. During those visits, I visited churches and spoke to pastors, laypersons, and leaders of denominations that included Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodists, Nazarene, and Lutherans. In total, I visited 27 churches, attended 20 services, and collected a rough total of 76 *testimonios*, 57 of them given during the course of a church service.<sup>6</sup>

Primarily, I focused on mainline Hispanic Protestant churches for two reasons. First, while testimonies are common in Pentecostal congregations that are Anglo, they are not common in mainline congregations. Thus, for a Hispanic mainline congregation to be using a practice that their tradition or Anglo counterparts do not always share indicate that something unique is happening in those Hispanic congregations. Second, while other groups do engage in the practice of offering testimonies, such as African American congregations, I wanted to focus on the role they played in the Hispanic religious community.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, I recognize that there are certain forms of *testimonios* that occur in Catholic congregations, specially in charismatic groups and in some base communities in Latin America. Even beyond those instances, other forms of testimonios have been in practice in Hispanic and Spanish congregations for centuries: the *retablas*. These pictorial and written messages that adorn many churches and shrines provide various accounts of miraculous healing and answered

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<sup>6</sup> The numbers are rough, primarily due to the nature of the *testimonios*. In some cases, persons gave more than one *testimonio* during their sharing, while in other cases, it was difficult to distinguish one testimony from another one due to the tape or due to the person going back and forth in their sharing.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Dorothy Bass' article on "Testimonies" in *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Dorothy Bass, ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

prayers.<sup>8</sup> They differ from the *testimonios* in that they are not regular accounts offered as part of the liturgy, but do serve as tangible reminders of God's answered prayers to those present in the church. In a sense, this may very well be indicative of the distinction between Protestant and Catholic forms of popular religion –Protestant forms being more word oriented while Catholic forms take on more aesthetic concrete forms.

### **A Testament to God's presence in our midst**

Virginia's *testimonio*, along with that of countless others in Hispanic churches across the nation, serve as a testament to God's abiding presence in our midst to countless people in these congregations. As such, it is essential that we explore forms and types of *testimonios* that occur in our churches, as well as their significance and theological import. In a sense, these testimonies shared in our congregations are one of the most significant forms of grassroots theologizing and should be considered a significant source for serious theological reflection and a form of popular religion –that is, a religion that comes from the people.<sup>9</sup>

According to the majority of the people interviewed, *testimonios* serve a four-fold purpose within the church. First, they are used to evangelize others. By sharing how God transforms and acts in the world, others might be moved or encouraged to convert to Christianity. Second, *testimonios* serve in a didactic function by teaching younger believers about the faith and God's active presence in the life of the church. These testimonies usually include exhortations toward perseverance, explanations regarding God's love, trustworthiness, and goodness, as well as intimations on divine providence and on how God acts in the world. Third, *testimonios* serve to encourage other believers in their faith by showing how God has assisted others through their times of struggle and difficulty. Finally, *testimonios* serve to glorify God by proclaiming and attesting to God's continual work in our midst.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the particular function that the *testimonio* serves in the congregation, the

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<sup>8</sup> An example of this is the church dedicated to *El Niño de Ochoa* (The Christ Child) in Spain, where the walls are lined with testaments to the healings and miracles performed for people who had prayed there.

<sup>9</sup> Goizueta, drawing from Orlando Espín, Sixto Garcia, and Luis Maldonado, argues that popular religion comes from the "grassroots" lived-faith of the people and have been part of the faith since at least the post-Apostolic period. *Caminemos con Jesús*, pp. 20-25. See also Sixto García and Orlando Espín, "Lilies of the Field": A Hispanic Theology of Providence and Human Responsibility," in *Proceeding of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 44 (1989) and Luis Maldonado, *Génesis del Catolicismo Popular* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> These four functions of *testimonios* are those understood by the people I interviewed. I will argue later that there is a fifth element to these *testimonios* that function to empower the people.

people interviewed believe that they provide “tangible” evidence to other believers of God’s concrete presence and work in the life of the church. As such, most of the people in these congregations see their *testimonios* as providing a sense of continuity between the present workings of God and the accounts found in the Bible. In addition, most of them also believe that the *testimonios* are rooted in the Scriptures. Upon asking them where the practice of sharing *testimonios* began, the majority of them immediately said that the practice was biblical in origin. As one person pointed out to me in the interview, the Bible itself is a written record of the *testimonios* of the people of that time. This particular take on *testimonios* ties the practice of testimonies to the people’s understanding of the Bible and underscores their belief in the connection between *testimonios* and God’s word, further substantiating the argument that *testimonios* are “word” based expressions of popular religion in Protestant Hispanic congregations.

Most recently, the practice of *testimonios* in Protestantism can be traced to the Wesleyan tradition and the Holiness movement. In the early cell meetings of Methodism, testimonies were a regular part of the meeting.<sup>11</sup> These testimonies attested to the participant’s growth in the faith and their experiences with God’s grace. The level of discourse and theological insight that occurred in those meetings did not escape the notice of John Wesley, who attests to the significance of testimonies in congregations in his writings.<sup>12</sup> These practices continued beyond Wesley’s death, often being essential parts of revivals and serving to generate enthusiasm in the congregations where they took place.<sup>13</sup> Frank Baker’s outline on conducting a love-feast service, includes an opportunity for sharing “testimony to the goodness of God, and to the redeeming power of the Gospel, and for prayer extempore” as part of the liturgy.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the practice is less common in mainline churches, including Methodist churches, within English speaking congregations, while still generally preserved in Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, maintaining their roots in the holiness movement. Yet, testimonies are still a fairly regular part of many Hispanic Protestant churches, even within the mainline traditions, primarily within Methodist, Baptist, and Nazarene congregations, and to a slightly

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, see Frank Baker, *Methodism and the Love-Feast* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), pp. 25-31, where Baker dedicates a chapter to the testimony meeting. These testimony meetings, connected to the love-feasts, were central to the meetings and provides some accounts of testimonies that had been recorded in journals and papers.

<sup>12</sup> According to Baker, even entries in John Wesley’s *Journal* expressed in surprise how illiterate persons spoke in a manner that “scholars need not be ashamed off.” *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-31.

lesser extent within Presbyterian congregations. This distinction between the prevalence of testimonies in Latino/a congregations as opposed to Anglo congregations is particularly evident in the cases where the same pastor serves Hispanic and Anglo congregations. Even on occasions where the pastor attempts to introduce testimonies into Anglo congregations, it has yielded little results. But within Hispanic congregations, the opposite tends to occur, often forcing the pastor to set limits on the amount of time accorded to *testimonios* in their worship services to prevent them from overshadowing the rest of the liturgy, including the sermon.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that similar experiences do not occur within non-Hispanic churches.

The sharing of testimonies do occur in congregations of other races and cultures. Even in mainline Anglo churches there are occasions where testimonies are given, usually during the time devoted to prayer requests and thanksgivings. Yet, most of these testimonies in Anglo congregations are brief, infrequent, and particularly speak of healings, transformations, or blessings, unlike many of the Hispanic congregations, where testimonies are lengthy and theologically involved. While *testimonios* are central to many Hispanic congregations, they seem to be more the exception in most mainline Anglo congregations.

To a lesser extent, the practice of *testimonios* also seems to be more prevalent in churches whose membership consists primarily of people in lower socio-economic bracket. This would correlate with the practice of testimonies encountered in early Methodism, which appealed in large extent to the poor at that time. Yet, while I suspect economy plays a role in the prevalence of *testimonios* in Latino/a churches today, I believe that the culture and the extent of marginalization experienced by the people play an even greater role. Economic need is not the sole component in congregations that regularly share *testimonios*, but social and cultural marginalization often is. For instance, in most congregations the women tend to give more testimonies than the men, regardless of their socio-economic status. This may be attributed to several factors. While it may be indicative of a larger number of women attending services, it also allows them a venue for expressing themselves in the context of the service, something that at times is not accessible to them in some more conservative congregations. In addition, the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> One of the pastors interviewed indicated that he was pastor of a charge that included both a Hispanic and an Anglo congregation. He tried to include testimonies in both services, but while the Anglo service seldom had any testimonies and he felt like he was trying to drag them out of them, in the Hispanic congregation the opposite was true. Eventually he cancelled the Anglo time for testimonies and put a time limit upon the Hispanic congregation so that the testimonies would not dominate the service.



elderly and others who may feel a sense of powerlessness in their lives tend to also participate more frequently, gaining empowerment. Nevertheless, in both instances of marginalization and economic oppression, the *testimonio* seems to provide hope and empowerment to the people in these congregations by attesting to God's goodness, power, and solidarity with the people.

In terms of cultural functions, the prevalence of *testimonios* in Hispanic congregations indicates a certain level of resonance with the culture. In part, this may be due to the narrative nature of Hispanic culture, where story telling is central to the culture, as well as to socialization, teaching, and remembering the culture. In turn, the narrative nature of *testimonios* can be of great value in the appropriation of symbols and in the development of liberation theologies.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Anglo and Germanic cultures tend to be less narrative in their orientation, appealing to other communication styles and logical types of discourse. Regardless of the cultural styles of communication, the notions of religious transcendence and immanence are also a significant distinction among the cultures. In Hispanic cultures, there is an underlying sense of sacramentality that not only values, but is also nourished by an understanding of God as immanent and accessible. In contrast, Anglo and Germanic cultures preserve a strong sense of God transcendence and otherness. This makes Hispanic culture more likely to seek God's presence in the everyday present world reality, where Germanic and Anglo cultures might be more drawn to understanding of God's realm as otherworldly.<sup>17</sup> In either case, *testimonios* provide accounts that resonate with the Hispanic culture's sacramental emphasis.

### **Forms and Types of *Testimonios***

In *A Variety of Religious Experiences*, William James identifies several forms of religious experiences, including conversion, saintliness, and mysticism. While these forms taken by religious experiences are useful and do occur in the accounts of *testimonios* observed, they are not sufficient to characterize them. Even James acknowledges the particularity of human beings

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<sup>16</sup> Goizueta argues for the value of narrative as a means for a community to identify and generate their symbols, while locating them within their community's history, as well as their significance for political and liberative theology, an argument he develops from Metz. *Caminemos con Jesús*, pp. 27-28, footnote 26. See also Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury/Crossroad, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> In my book, *Jesus is my Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), I make several references to this distinction and provide several illustrations. See particularly, pp. 15-16; 37-38; 48-49; 100-101.

and their ability to experience and articulate their faith.<sup>18</sup> Hence, given that the types of experiences we might encounter in *testimonios* are different simply because of the culture and the particularities of the people, a more comprehensive typology seems in order.

In my examination of the practice of *testimonios*, I make a distinction between the form and the type of *testimonios* we encounter. When I refer to the form, I am referring to the style that the practice takes within the church, that is, how it is done. On the other hand, when I refer to the type, I am referring to the typology of their content. I developed this typology based on the content of the *testimonio* itself and on the type of experience articulated in the testimony of the person. While this typology might be expanded further, specially if we acknowledge the subtle differences that occur in each *testimonio* due to the uniqueness of each person's experience, for our purposes, it serves to characterize the different types of experiences shared within a basic framework.

Even defining what constitutes a *testimonio* can be difficult at times. According to a pastor in the Boston area, it was difficult for him at first to determine what I meant by *testimonios*, since, according to him, they can take different forms. Primarily, he understood *testimonio* to mean the witness that is given publicly by a person's life and acts. While this may include sharing in the congregation and with other groups, it also involves the manner in which the person lives and acts. Yet, within that broad rubric of what a *testimonio* means, he identified several forms taken by *testimonios* as part of the liturgy and life of the church.

The most common form taken in the practice of giving a *testimonio* takes place within the context of the liturgy of the church in a formal setting like a worship service or in an informal setting such as a home Bible study. Generally, the pastor will ask if there is anyone who has a *testimonio* to share with the congregation, often along with a call for prayer requests. At the pastor's invitation, a lay member of the congregation will stand and share their testimony with the congregation. Often, some sort of acknowledgement from the congregation follows the *testimonio* and occasionally some interpretation or affirmation on the part of the pastor. On some occasions, lay members of the congregation request from the pastor, either before the service or during the service itself, some time to share their *testimonio*.

A second form of *testimonio* occurs outside the formal setting of the church in individual conversation or in a small non-liturgical gathering of church members. In these instances, people

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<sup>18</sup> James, *Variety of Religious Experiences*, p. 487.

share their stories informally with others. Generally, *testimonios* shared in a liturgical setting reflect an event that has transpired recently in the person's life. However, when people share their *testimonio* informally with others, it is often the retelling of a significant event in that person's life, such as Virginia's *testimonio*, which had transpired several years before her meeting with me.

In this sense, a *testimonio* is not limited to the act of sharing as a liturgical practice. That is, a *testimonio* is not something a person does; it is something a person has—it is an integral part of that person's life. Thus, a person does not only give a *testimonio*. They also have one.<sup>19</sup> The person's *testimonio* becomes a valued possession, shared with others as an important expression of their faith. In a sense, *testimonios* become part of a congregation's treasury of faith. In explaining my research to people in a congregation, they often told me of someone else's *testimonio*, or let me know of someone in the congregation with whom I should talk cause they had a good or beautiful *testimonio*.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it was clear that the laity and clergy alike remembered the *testimonios* shared in a congregation, indicating their continuing value and role in the congregation—a role that goes beyond the moment of sharing.

Most *testimonios* also fall within several categories or types in regard to their content.<sup>21</sup> First, many people often have a *testimonio* regarding their conversion experience. In these types of *testimonios*, a person often contrasts their previous life to their life in Christ, emphasizing their transformation.<sup>22</sup> These transformations could be gradual in nature as a person leaves behind old patterns of behavior and replaces them with new religious tendencies, while others

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<sup>19</sup> In Spanish, a person would either say that they want to “give” (dar) a testimony or that they “have” (tengo) a testimony that they want to share.

<sup>20</sup> In Spanish, they would say, that the person “tiene un testimonio muy lindo,” literally meaning, that they had a very pretty or beautiful testimony. These *testimonios* are often memorable ones that touch the congregation and become testaments of God's work in their midst.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Barbour, in his book, *Religion and Science*, revised and expanded edition (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), offers a typology of religious experiences. This typology include Numinous Experiences of the Holy, mystical experiences of unity, transformative experiences of reorientation, courage in facing suffering and death, moral experience of obligation, and awe in response to the order and creativity of the world. While these are useful to categorize some of the experiences to which testimonies might be given, they are more general. Yet, even though they did inform my own typology, specially in terms of using numinous and transformative experiences as categories, mine are more accurate in reflecting the nature of the *testimonios*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>22</sup> Accounts of transformations related to a person's faith are mentioned also by William James in *The Variety of Religious Experiences*, pp. 193-196, 281-283.

are instantaneous transformations, immediately noticeable by all.<sup>23</sup>

During my research, several of these stories of conversion were shared either with me or at services I attended, some expressing dramatic conversions from crime, alcohol, and drug addiction to almost instantaneous sobriety.<sup>24</sup> Others were less dramatic, yet compelling in explaining the person's transformation as coming from their newly acquired faith. These stories often serve as a centerpiece in the process of evangelization with prospective converts, showing the intended converts the effectiveness of the change that can also transpire in their life upon conversion. In evangelistic events, they are included as part of the service, while at other times they are shared informally with others during evangelistic visits with these people or during one-to-one evangelism.

A second type of *testimonios* provides accounts of healing. In most cases, these are miraculous healings of life threatening diseases such as cancers, tumors, and heart diseases. Generally, in these accounts the disease is completely irradiated without a trace after a prayer or series of prayers, often confounding the doctors as to the cause of the cure. One such *testimony* was shared at a home prayer meeting in Miami, where doctors diagnose a person, rushed to the hospital, as having appendicitis and other complications after conducting test. He is scheduled for emergency surgery, but after the prayers of his church and family, he is healed, revealing no problems when further test are done right before the surgery. In another case, a woman in California shares the saga of a friend who is diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, but after prayers from the church, she goes into full remission, surprising the doctors. For many of these people, the healings are not always expected, as if their prayers would magically bring forth a cure. Rather, they are affirmations of God's graciousness, as well as of God's power over disease. These *testimonios* become symbols of hope, affirming the power of life over death that resides in God.

The healings are primarily a sign of God's activity in their life. They are symbolic of

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<sup>23</sup> James also cites two types of conversions that affect the transformations experienced by the subject, developed by Dr. Starbuck in his work on the psychology of religion. These two types are the volitional and the self-surrender, the latter being the one eliciting more dramatic changes and the former more gradual changes. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-208. Some of the differences in these types of conversions might be simply related to the person's level of religious involvement before their conversion.

<sup>24</sup> A pastor in Chicago shared his conversion experience as a quick transformation from a life of crime and addiction to sobriety through the prayers of a minister at a retreat center to which he had fled. Others shared other similar conversions in the study. Interestingly enough, a similar type of experience is detailed by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 201.

God's ability to bring forth wholeness, not just spiritually, but physically as well. As in Scripture, the people see healings as affirmations of the holistic nature of salvation, which is more than salvation from sin, but also a restoration of the fullness of humanity –which may include their healing. Yet, even when a healing is merely temporary or when the person's life is not spared, *testimonies* still occur. For instance, one Miami congregation shared the story of a young woman dying of brain cancer. In her last days, she is temporarily healed of the blindness afflicting her to see her family before dying. Her peace and courage are more a sign of her faith, celebrated by the testimony, than the healing itself, which is still seen as a sign of God's goodness and presence in the young woman's life, even when her life is not spared.

A third type of *testimonio* involves a miraculous deliverance from a difficult situation or from imminent harm. In some cases, deliverance occurs from an immediate threat such as a fire or a reckless driver. In others, it is a deliverance from power structures and circumstances, such as immigration (a common motif in some communities), deportation, and unemployment. Such stories, while less dramatic, offer hope and attest to the congregation that they can prevail when confronted with insurmountable forces that oppress and marginalize them.

A family in Miami, during an evening worship service, shared one dramatic example of a *testimonio* of deliverance. While the husband, who is the one giving the *testimonio*, is at work, his wife awakes in the middle of the night to find the house filled with smoke and their living room engulfed in flames. His wife and their two children are trapped inside. His wife is disoriented, overcome with smoke, and unable to find the phone in the smoke and darkness. Yet, as she prays, she is able to put her hand down upon the phone immediately, enabling her to call for help. Still disoriented, she miraculously finds the window, which has burglar bars on it, something common in many houses in the area, yet deadly in a fire. She finds the release butterfly-nut for the burglar bars, a nut that has been bolted down tight by her husband with pliers months earlier, as he attests, to prevent robbers from gaining easy access. Yet, the mother effortlessly unfastens the bolt and the latch, enabling her to remove the bars.

One of her children has been in bed with her, yet she had left the other one asleep in front of the television in the living room sofa, where the fire is now raging. While she gets the first child out the window, intending to go find the other one, the little boy suddenly appears by her side. Meanwhile, a neighbor several houses down inexplicably wakes from a sound sleep, thinking he has heard something outside. He goes outside, sees the smoke and runs to the house,

arriving in time to assist as the mother is trying to get the children out through the window.

While this string of coincidences is extraordinary in itself, the most amazing details emerge as the man continues to share. The fire department investigators are baffled. The fire started in a faulty lamp behind the sofa where the child was sleeping, yet, while the entire room is gutted, with temperatures reaching hundreds of degrees and filling the room with deadly smoke, the child survives. The couch itself is only slightly singed. When the child is asked how he got through the flames from the sofa to his mother's room, the five-year old exclaims that a man dressed in glowing white led him out. When asked again who this man was, the child says, "Jesus." At that point, the pastor asks the child how he got out, and he repeats "Jesus led me out."

It may be impossible to determine whether the child in this instance is presenting his own understanding of the events from his young theological framework or projecting his parents' interpretation. But, it is clear that all present at the meeting understand that those events are a miraculous deliverance. For them, it is a testament to God's concrete and actual presence in their lives, delivering them from danger and offering them protection. In these particular events, there is an active hermeneutics that cultivates an understanding of God as leading people out of harm and protecting them. Yet, it is not by preventing the fire, but by seeing them safely from it. The family still has to contend with the loss of their home and possessions to the fire. Nevertheless, their lives are spared. Thus, God's work, in the framework of this *testimonio*, is not necessarily that of keeping us from harmful circumstances and troubles, but for seeing us through them. Such an interpretation presents a deep theological insight that transcends a facile understanding of God as deliverer and serves as a powerful didactic tool for the congregation's understanding of how God operates in their midst. Maybe, the testimony implies, God does not prevent problems from befalling them, but God will see them safely through them.

There are also strong allusions the Old Testament accounts of the deliverance of Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace (Daniel 3: 8-27), further establishing the connection between *testimonios* and the Bible, which most of the people interviewed believe exists. In making this connection, actually expressed at the meeting, the congregation identifies God's work in their life as being as real as God's work in Biblical accounts. Hence, they establish continuity between the words of the Bible and their lives, associating their circumstances with the testament to God's work in our midst. In their

understanding, they are living the same experience and in the same relationship with God as the people in biblical times.

Yet, *testimonios* of deliverance are not always as dramatic and spectacular. In some cases it might have been a simple premonition to avoid a certain place or event in which tragedy later occurs. Others describe being in trouble with immigration, facing deportation or eviction and suddenly being delivered by a favorable judgment or a generous stranger's benevolence. Nevertheless, they still present the same type of didactic value as the more dramatic types of testimonies of deliverance, assuring the faithful that God acts in their midst today, not always by helping them to circumvent tragic and trying circumstances, but by seeing them through them.

Directly related to this type of *testimonios* of deliverance we find a fourth type of *testimonio* involving divine providence in meeting a need, with the most common motifs being those of finding work, receiving needed provisions such as food and medicine, and finding housing. The distinction between these types of *testimonios* and those of deliverance is that while the latter speak to deliverance from an impending harm or tragedy, the former speaks to the filling of a need. Generally, these *testimonios* are not always dramatic, but do involve premonitions and unexpected generosity. Often, these *testimonios* involve the person's interpretation of an event after they have transpired, investing the circumstances and events with meaning. Thus, understanding God as working through people and circumstances to bring about an answer to prayer. In terms of the theological doctrine of providence, it is often an expression of *concursum*, God's working through people and events to bring forth the desired outcome.<sup>25</sup>

In some cases, the person giving the *testimonio* is not the recipient, but the agent of the actions. Such is the case of a man who late one night feels an urge to get a glass of milk. Discovering he is out of milk, he decides to drive to the store, something uncharacteristic of him. While at the store, he decides to buy some bread, sandwich meat, milk and a few other incidentals. On the way home, he takes a short cut and stops in front of a dilapidated house in a neighborhood he seldom frequents, feeling a strange urge to go to that house with his groceries. He feels stupid, but goes and knocks on the door, against his better judgment. A baby cries in the background as a disheveled woman opens the door. He awkwardly explains to the woman his

strange sense that he needed to give the groceries to her. The woman asks him if he is an angel, for she had ran out of money and groceries, and had just prayed for some milk to feed the baby.

Naturally, less dramatic versions do occur. They might involve finding a job just as someone is about to be evicted, as one family did. Similarly, it could be as simple as an inner city teenager, wanting to go to a winter church retreat, but being twenty-four dollars short of the registration fee for the camp. His family, although understanding, are also financially unable to assist him and too proud to seek help from the church. After praying, the young man receives an envelope in the mail, a late Christmas card from a distant relative, unaware of the young man's plight, with \$25 in cash --a present from an aunt and uncle. During the retreat, the same young man receives a calling to the ministry and decides to pursue a ministerial career. Thus, divine providence intercedes to bring forth the desire result, even if the agents of providence are mere mortals and unaware of their work.

Whether dramatic or not, the *testimonios* of divine providence serve a didactic function in the congregations and impart a certain degree of theological wisdom. They not only serve as reminders of God's providence to the members of the congregation, they also reveal the importance of following divine guidance in helping others and encouraging charity. Theologically, they also present a complex understanding of divine providence as being more than miraculous acts of God. In these *testimonios* the importance of human agency in fulfilling God's purpose in the world becomes evident to the congregation. They also affirm the notion of God working in and through believers to bring forth God's work on earth, an idea presented in Philippians 2:13 and in 2 Corinthians 6:1-10.<sup>26</sup> We find this idea of God as working, not through the suspension of the natural laws, but through human agency in other complex theological and philosophical system.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, these types of testimonies are not expressing simple, pre-critical beliefs in God as some form of instant panacea for all problems, but a more

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Morse provides a good explanation of *concursum* in terms of divine providence in which God and human agency conjoin. *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 216-220. When I speak here of divine providence in terms of *concursum*, I understand it in a fashion similar to Morse, that is, that God's will does not necessarily abrogate the creature's will, but works jointly with it.

<sup>26</sup> While the passage in 2 Corinthians begins with "by working together with him" it may appear that it relates to Christian behavior and not simply providence. Yet, the examples cited by Paul seem to indicate the type of encouragement and workings of God that *testimonios* tend to support, indicating that in living the Christian life there is no promise of circumventing hardships, but an assurance of overcoming them.



complex theological understanding of God encapsulated in their grass-root experiences.

Even more, these forms of *testimonios* also present a sophisticated understanding of the miraculous as requiring a certain level of interpretive insight. Since these manifestations of God's work are not dramatic suspensions of natural laws, they often take a certain level of discernment to identify, encouraging a hermeneutical engagement that interprets the events as indeed being the workings of God and not mere coincidences. In addition, they serve a further didactic function of exhorting the faithful to be attentive to God's work, since it may not be easily discernable and could be missed.

The fifth type of *testimonio* involves divine intercession in the conversion or transformation of someone else for which the person has been praying. Generally, it is a close relative or friend of the person, who after much prayer converts to Christianity or stops a particular damaging behavior. In one of the churches, a woman, having prayed for years for her husband's salvation, shares her testimony. That morning the husband had told her, out of the blue, he had decided it was about time he went to church with her. Others share at times similar experiences about their children, relatives, and neighbors suddenly and inexplicably changing after a lengthy time of prayers for them.

Like many of the *testimonios* expressed regarding divine providence, these *testimonios* are seldom dramatic, attesting to an answered prayer through a transformation in a person. Yet, the absence of drama belies a key didactic function encouraging prayers for unbelievers and perseverance in seeking their conversion. In Scripture, we find this in the exhortations of the Apostle Paul to husbands and wives in 1 Corinthians, 7:12-16, a passage that the *testimonios* of these types help affirm. In addition, similar accounts are noted in the tradition of the church, including Augustine's mother, who prayed for his conversion for four decades.

A sixth type, related to divine intercession, is that of revealed wisdom or enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> This particular type relates to the former in that it consists of an inner transformation or awareness on the part of the person sharing the *testimonio*, which he or she interprets as divinely inspired. Often, it involves a realization triggered by a particular event or an acceptance of a particular circumstance. Such transformations require a certain level of theological interpretation

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<sup>27</sup> This notion is particularly prevalent in Alfred North Whitehead's writing and in process theologies. See for instance, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition (New York: Free Press, 1978), pp. 342-43, where Whitehead speaks of God as working by luring creatures toward the desire outcome.

on the part of the person sharing, bringing forth a connection between their sense of enlightenment and divine activity. Naturally, there is an immediate danger to this form of *testimonio* that some might notice. The danger lies in that the person may tend to indicate that their awareness, coming from God, is applicable to others. Yet, this seldom happens. While the person might assert a revelation, awareness, or discernment to God's work in their life, they do not make direct claims of its relevance to others. On the contrary, the person sharing might actually be led to accept the desires of others as God's work or to find peace in a situation that was previously unsettling. However, there is a sense of empowerment acquired by recognizing God's work in their life and the inner transformation occurring within them. One might even correlate this transformation to the passage we find in Philippians 1:6 regarding God's ongoing work in people's lives to bring forth changes in accordance to divine will.

A seventh type of *testimonio* is that of divine accompaniment during difficult periods, such as was the case with Virginia.<sup>29</sup> In these cases, there is generally a sense of divine presence comforting the person in a time of need, often mediated through some mysterious stranger who may or may not offer a few brief words of comfort before leaving. In some cases, the mysterious stranger does not utter a sound nor responds to questions, as was the case with a pastor in Los Angeles who tries to hold a conversation with a shadowy figure who mysteriously appears as he walk through some deserted and potentially dangerous streets at night. The man accompanies the pastor until he safely enters a coffee shop, where the stranger suddenly vanishes when the pastor turns around to order a cup of coffee. At other times, the presence is not physical, but nevertheless strongly felt by the person sharing the *testimonio*, who believes someone was there with them at that time.

The final types of *testimonios* consists of more direct encounters with the divine through near death experiences, mystical visions, and numinous experiences with the Holy or even the demonic, such as described by Otto's description of the terrible yet fascinating mystery of encounters with the divine. In these cases the person shares a vision or an encounter that transcends the normal realm of experience. While James' provides a category for the mystical in

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<sup>28</sup> James shares some of these types of stories as they relate to conversion. *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, pp. 217-220.

his varieties of religious experiences, I believe that this category can be expanded to include near death experiences and numinous experiences that do not necessarily fit into the rubric of the mystical, specially as James defines it.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the nature of these encounters, there is typically a transformation that occurs as a direct result of the experience, and often a renewed sense of faith or direction.

After a worship service in California, a man shared with me an experience that can only be defined in terms of the nouminous. Although he confessed he had never shared this with anyone before for fear of what they might think, he expresses a willingness to share it with me. He is a tall, burly, strong, and proud man in his late thirties, yet as he begins speaking, his words come out with difficulty, his body trembles as he retells the story, and tears begin to well up in his eyes. He begins by telling me of his family life, where witchcraft, according to him was often practice, and where they will casually mention the demon's name (*el nombre del demonio*). These events in his youth, he associates with an involvement with the satanic, although somewhat slight. All of this changes dramatically one afternoon. As he is walking the fence line looking for strays in a farm where he works, he sees a fire burning near a small hill and goes to investigate. When he comes to the fire, he is suddenly surrounded by flames and hears moans and cries around him. A voice, in a language he does not comprehend, speaks three times, addressing him as it zooms by him from above (*como un zumbido*). He is terrified and prays for deliverance and suddenly the fires vanish. This experience, which he has difficulty identifying, but believes it is a glimpse of hell given to him by God, leads to his conversion.

Upon hearing this story, one is immediately taken by the similarities between his story and the story of Moses in Genesis. Like Moses, he sees a fire while working in the fields and goes to investigate. Yet, his experience, unlike that of Moses, evokes a sense of the presence of evil, but also the workings of God in the experience. Thus, through his fear of the evil and

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<sup>29</sup> Although testimonies speak of different forms of accompaniment in difficulties, sometimes mediated by a sense of presence while at others by an actual person, they always provide a sense of peace and safety during the experience. James speaks of this sense of tranquility, referring to the calming effect of knowing that, "no matter what one's difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one's life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust..." Ibid., p. 285.

damnation encountered by him, the experience becomes redeeming for him. It is also theologically significant that his experience speaks of an encounter with the divine, even when the divine occurs within what he interprets as a hellish vision. Typical of many of these encounters are a sense of awe, an immediate transformation, and an experience of something that is beyond the typical realms of human experience and the natural world. One can place Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush or Isaiah's vision of the throne of God as characteristic of these experiences. Yet, while rare, some *testimonios* speak of such experiences in which the person encounters the divine in a concrete and physical manner that transcends the parameters of ordinary human experience.

Near death experiences and mystical experiences are more common themes. In most cases, near death experiences are typical of the characteristics that commonly apply to such experiences. Yet, some *testimonios* speak of negative experiences. Such as one person who spoke of being taken to judgment by angels cloaked in black with death grips upon his arms, yet released at the last moment by someone he believes to be Jesus, who orders the angels to release the person because it is not yet their time.<sup>31</sup> Another woman in a church near Fairfax, Virginia shared another near death experience testimony that bears note. While most near death experiences speak of the light, familiar faces welcoming them, and an overwhelming sense of peace, this particular testimony spoke in more detail of her perceptions of this world. She speaks of wandering through the streets of this world, streets that seemed to be veiled in shadows, gray and dingy, filled with people walking aimlessly, almost as zombies. This world of shadows, which she identifies as the one we inhabit, she contrasts with the greater reality of the afterlife that she is entering, a world filled with light, colors, and joy. Then to her regret, she discovers she must go back, but feels compelled to share her experience.

While most of these experiences transcend the ordinary, they attest to a larger understanding of reality than what we experience ordinarily through our senses. These *testimonios* at times edify and encourage other members of the congregation to recognize the

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<sup>30</sup> James defines mystical states as containing four characteristics, which include ineffability, noetic qualities, transience, and passivity. While one might argue that all four occur in near death experiences and nouminous experiences, it can be argued that there is a marked distinction. Particularly, the level of passivity and the noetic quality is not always identical in all of these states. In other cases, while there might be a sense of ineffability, there are others where descriptions are quite vivid, even though the person might lack a framework for interpreting the experience in terms of the ordinary. Ultimately, I also believe the distinction lies in the different nature of how one comes to the experience. *Ibid.*, pp. 379-382.

<sup>31</sup> Someone from a church in Miami shared such an experienced with me.

reality of a greater existence, and at times, provide glimpses into aspects of a reality beyond ours inhabited by God and demonic powers. Because they defy many of the standard categories available to the people, they find it more difficult to theologize about these experiences.

However, this does not mean that there is not a certain level of theologizing that occurs. For instance, the man who encounters the divine-demonic understands in that experience the presence of both the divine and the demonic. While theologians and phenomenologist, such as Tillich and Otto, have attempted to express this relationship in nouminous experiences, this simple worker easily understood the nature of his experience as including the presence of both. The woman in the near death experience also speaks of different levels of reality, with a descriptive account that almost parallels Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Symposium*. Yet, in her account she does not minimize the value of this world nor creates a hierarchy that subsumes one to the other, but rather, she expresses a laments of the world's inability to recognize the beauty of the divine.

Mystical experiences also play a role in these testimonies, bringing a sense of union with God. Often, they provide more noetic qualities and more elaborate levels of theological interpretations. Yet, in my category of mystical experiences I also include visions and prophetic states that speak to the needs of the congregation and to circumstances of individuals. Generally, most of these people speak of seeing the vision, like a dream, although they are also aware that they are awake. In some cases, these visions might involve a beatific vision of God, or more commonly of Jesus, who shows them or tells them something of significance to them. In this sense, they help mediate God's will and knowledge of God to the congregation. While this may at times take gnostic qualities, the testimonies that fall under this category do not seem to contradict biblical premises, but rather, they tend to elucidate them or to make God's will relevant to a specific situation within the congregation.

My typology of *testimonios* is in no sense exhaustive, nor does it imply that all *testimonios* must necessarily fit into one of the above mentioned categories. It is conceivable that there might be testimonies that did not occur during my research that express other dimensions of the person's faith and theologizing. In addition, in some testimonies the categories overlapped or included elements of more than one of the categories listed. For instance, some testimonies of accompaniment may also involve deliverance, as in the case of the pastor who is accompanied by the mysterious stranger through a dangerous neighborhood.

Acquired wisdom in some instances lead to the person becoming an agent of divine providence and a nouminous experience may lead to a conversion, as was the case with the man surrounded by fire in his hellish encounter with the divine and the demonic. Hence, like all typologies and categories, these are only meant to serve as general rubrics for groupings and characteristic traces found in the *testimonios* collected. Yet, I believe they can be useful in identifying the variety of experiences described in the *testimonios*.

### **The Value of *Testimonios***

At first, one might be tempted to dismiss the practice of *testimonios* as an archaic expression of religious fervor or expressions of a pre-critical worldview where miraculous events happen. One might even argue that they serve as a psychological mechanism for coping with adverse circumstances or that they are delusional fabrications of an active imagination. Yet, it is dangerous to summarily dismiss *testimonios* as being psychological phenomena or archaic expressions of religious beliefs. While it may be true that some of these dynamics might be present in the practice of *testimonios*, their important didactic function and theological significance should not be ignored, nor should their affect on the person's life and theology.<sup>32</sup>

When William James developed his series of lectures that were later to become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he too imagined the dangers of his approach to popular expressions of religion. First, James, well versed in the psychology of religion acknowledges the possibility that religious experiences might be psychopathic phenomena. At the same time, he also opens the possibility that some psychological conditions might make someone more receptive to the divine.<sup>33</sup> James also anticipates that his writings on the matter of religious experiences, particularly, his use of popular and personal experience, would be taken as an illegitimate academic exercise.<sup>34</sup> However, rather than ceding to the pressures of rationalism, James presents an argument to counter the easy dismissal of these religious experiences.

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<sup>32</sup> James, in *The Variety of Religious Experience*, writes: "prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof –be that spirit 'God' or 'Law' –is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world," p. 485. Although James does not accept popular Christianity or scholastic theism, he is nevertheless convinced that belief and faith do have an affect upon the world, p. 521. He also maintains, based on his commutative experience and education that there is a world from which we derive meaning beyond the world of our consciousness which at times overlaps with this one, bringing forth changes in us and our world, p. 519.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 523.

First, James' interpretation of the nature of religion brings to question the primacy given, in the academic circles of his day, to philosophical concepts for understanding religion, something that we still encounter today. Thus, he writes the following regarding intellectual thought and religious experience:

“What religion reports, you must remember, always purports to be a fact of experience: The divine is actually present, religion says, and between it and ourselves relations of give and take are actual. If definite perceptions of fact like this cannot stand upon their own feet, surely abstract reasoning cannot give them the support they are in need of. Conceptual processes can class facts, define them, interpret them; but they do not produce them, nor can they reproduce their individuality....In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverance of direct religious experiences is absolutely hopeless.”<sup>35</sup>

The power of James' argument holds true today to some extent. If the religious experiences in themselves are not sufficient to stand on their own, how can one assume that conceptual and philosophical developments of religion can fare better? The cycle of religious thought begins with the religious experiences that lead persons to interpret and articulate those experiences. By positing that rationalization, interpretation, and philosophical insights are secondary to the experience itself, James provides a space for religious experiences within the study of theology and religion, subverting the primacy we give to philosophical articulations and naturalistic-scientific worldviews. In other words, critical, rational, theoretical, and philosophical expressions of religion, particularly expressions of religion as abstract absolutes, are not “purer” and more refined than the concrete religious experiences of individuals. On the contrary, advanced theological cognitive expression of religion are secondary, built upon concrete religious experiences and the early articulations and interpretations of those experiences.

Second, James correctly asserts that, ordinarily, most people interpolate divine miracles into the field of nature without considering it contradictory.<sup>36</sup> He then goes on to argue that this common sense understanding of the relationship of the divine and the ordinary provides a deeper understanding of God than the speculative rationalizations of metaphysics, particularly because they have a more direct affect on faith, behavior, and in shaping our world.<sup>37</sup> James even proposes that dogmatic theology should be replaced by religious studies, maintaining that

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 454-455.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 518.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 518-519.

ratiocination is an ineffective path to God.<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that James sees no value in philosophical and theological thought. On the contrary, he proposes that metaphysics and deduction give way to criticism and induction, effectively transforming theology into the scientific study of religion.<sup>39</sup>

As we enter into a new millennium, the same tensions between our understanding of religious experiences as the basis of our faith and intellectual conceptualizations of such experiences still exist. Generally, we in academia tend to be somewhat dismissive of religious experiences such as those we encounter in *testimonios*. In part, this is due to our worldviews. In the last couple of centuries, the prevalent tendency in theological circles is that to gain legitimacy as a discipline, theology must accept scientific and philosophical worldviews as being more accurate descriptions of reality than religious worldviews. Yet, one cannot help to wonder if in excising the supernatural, the miraculous, and the divine from our world in favor of a more rationalistic, naturalistic, and materialistic explanation we have not done a disservice to theology and religion.

While both science and philosophy offer a great wealth of information that is of great value to theological reflection, we must be careful to restrain from losing sight of our faith's root in religious experience. There are several reasons why we must thread a careful path in exploring the nature of religious experiences within our present context. First, we must be careful not to ignore the critical value of philosophy and scientific study in examining religious experience. To advocate an uncritical acceptance of all types of religious experiences is not only dangerous, but also irresponsible. Historically, the church has always applied a certain set of criteria in determining the value and authenticity of religious experience. While this criteria has varied from tradition to tradition and throughout the ages, it acknowledges that religious experiences must be critically examined. Without such an examination, the faith itself can become distorted by accepting the validity of false, destructive, or purely psychopathic experiences.

On the other hand, to dismiss every form of religious experience that goes counter to ordinary experience or a naturalistic interpretation of the world is also irresponsible and goes counters to the premises of scientific methodologies that seek the careful examination of all

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 455.



realms of experience and data. Ultimately, in examining religious experiences, the question is not whether we should apply any criteria, for clearly we must. The question is what sort of criteria should we apply and to what extent should we apply it.

Second, in determining how to examine religious experience, we must be aware of how our worldviews color our interpretations. Our worldviews regarding science, specially within the more technologically advanced societies of the Northern hemisphere, usually come from a simplistic understanding of science that tends to be reductionistic, static, and mechanistic. Yet, science itself is never purely objective nor does it rely on unadulterated and uninterpreted facts.<sup>40</sup> Even more, with the development of the new physics, the deterministic nature of scientific theory is not held with absolute certainty.<sup>41</sup> The development of quantum mechanics opened the door to a less mechanical view of the universe, a view that may allow room, at least theoretically, for a complex of experiences that go beyond the bounds of the ordinary expectations in nature. This makes the laws of nature less rigid than one might imagine, allowing for some flexibility. Nevertheless, while the rigidity of a mechanistic and deterministic science is not necessarily the norm today in advanced scientific research, many interpreters of religion still adhere to such views of both science and nature, relegating religious belief and experiences to the realms of the mythological or imaginary. Thus, there is a certain level of bias already present in many cases in the way someone might interpret religious experiences. At the same time, the fluidity allowed in advanced scientific thought should not be taken uncritically as a guaranty for the validation of religious experiences through science. One must be careful to restrain from either trying to find a space for religious experiences in the gaps encountered in scientific knowledge or denying the value of scientific inquiry into these experiences.

Third, because of the inherent biases we always bring to any interpretation, when we examine religious experiences, such as those related in the *testimonios*, it is essential that we remain aware of our subjective and interpretative tendencies. Whether we look at them theologically, scientifically, or philosophically, we inevitably bring our own paradigms, presuppositions, and biases to bear upon our interpretation and examination of these events. This does not mean that we should try to attain a level of objectivity that inevitably will escape us, but that we attempt to acknowledge and understand our own predisposition toward belief and

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<sup>40</sup> See Holmes Rolston, *Science and Religion* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 3; 20-22 regarding the interpretation of facts and the subjective elements of science.

unbelief, as well as our biases and levels of interaction with the subject. By acknowledging our own hermeneutical framework, we place our interpretation within a broader context that helps other to understand our conclusions. For instance, James' understanding of religion and his background predisposes him to see value in religious experiences, because he already assumes that there is more than the immediate world of our everyday experience.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, although I tend to reserve judgment as to the divine nature of the experiences attested to in the *testimonios*, I am inclined to believe that the majority of these people have had an experience that they believe to be of divine origin. In addition, due to my theological inclinations and personal faith, I am also predisposed to favor their interpretation of these experiences as religious in nature.

Finally, we must not ignore the value and importance of these religious experiences, regardless of their origin, in constructing our religious worldview and our behavior.<sup>43</sup> Religion is built upon religious experiences, not upon metaphysical or philosophical speculations regarding the nature of God and religion. As James writes in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*:

“What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-affects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conservation with the unseen divine, of which I have shown you so many instances, renewing themselves in *saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men.”<sup>44</sup>

Put succinctly, religion is not at its root the product of theology or philosophy, but the result of those people who believe that they have encountered the divine. Our theological and philosophical speculations are merely secondary attempts at articulating, refining, and interpreting the events that transpire in the lives of those people. While theology and philosophy help us to articulate and critically examine these experiences, we must not succumb to the tendency to dismiss religious experiences because they do not readily fit into our philosophical and theological presuppositions and worldviews. Nor should we force our experiences to conform to the expectations of our predetermined theological paradigms. Instead, we should

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-52.

<sup>42</sup> James, *Variety of Religious Experience*, p. 519.

<sup>43</sup> James provides a passionate account of how theological abstract philosophical speculations regarding divine attributes have little impact upon religion and upon our lives. Rather, he argues that it is that which affects people's lives and how they live it that is of true value and that moral attributes are more significant to our practical life than God's metaphysical attributes. Hence, it is the theological praxis that matters above theological theory. Ibid., pp. 439-448.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 447.

build upon these experiences, trying to understand their value and contribution to our faith and to our theological insights.

*Testimonios*, the people's accounts of their particular religious experiences in Hispanic churches are invaluable sources for theological reflection within the church. Not only do they serve a didactic purpose in the congregation, but they also give us a glimpse into the complex theological depths and insights that can occur in the people's interpretations of these experiences. In articulating their experiences, people place them within a continuum that expands beyond their tradition to include that of those people who inhabit the stories found in our scriptures. Inherent in their accounts are deep insights into the nature of God and God's activity in the world. In addition, *testimonios* have a tangible affect upon the congregation, encouraging changes in their behavior and disposition, as well as affirming and even transforming their faith.

This does not mean that churches accept *testimonios* uncritically. Pastors and congregations apply different informal criteria to these accounts. Obviously, congregations do question accounts that are counter to the core beliefs of the congregation or to the Scriptures in general. This does not mean that changes do not occur to the way people interpret the Bible and their faith, but when the accounts present a radical discontinuity with the legacy of their faith and understanding of the Scriptures, the accounts fall under greater scrutiny. Ultimately, *testimonios* must conform to the faithful intuition of the people within the congregation at some level.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, the way the person lives also affects how the congregation understands the person's experience. After all, *testimonios* are not just accounts of an event; *testimonios* are also how the person lives. Hence, *testimonios* must have an impact on the life of the person or on the congregation. They are not mere theory. They involve praxis and bring forth transformation. And ultimately, for Hispanic theologians, they can be a significant source of theological insights into religion, faith, and praxis as expressed by the people.

Thus, in formulating criteria for examining *testimonios* one must take into account several things. First, one must look at the level of continuity between the *testimonio* and the Scriptures. If the Scriptures are indeed a record of other experiences with the divine similar to that being articulated in the *testimonios* that is formative and informative of our faith, then one

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<sup>45</sup> Orlando Espín develops the concept of the *sensus fidelium*, the faithful intuition of the people, guided by the Holy Spirit and encountered in the experiential level of each congregation through which the Christian people can sense if something is true or false in light of the Gospel. *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. by Alan Figueroa Deck, S.J. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), pp. 63-67.

must conceivably expect a certain level of continuity with the Scriptures. This does not mean that *testimonios* need to mirror a particular interpretation of the Scriptures or that they must correspond directly to them. After all, one must acknowledge differences in context and in the nature of the experiences, as well as acknowledging that our interpretations of the Scripture are not necessarily accurate.

Second, one must also look at the role that the *testimonio* plays in the congregation. Does it serve a didactic purpose? Does it empower the congregation or the speaker? Is it liberative? Does it evoke a transformation or a change in behavior? The value of the *testimonio* cannot be limited to its cognitive content, it must also be examined in light of its pragmatic value and its praxis. Finally, a *testimonio* must also conform to the faithful intuition of the people, that is, the sense of continuity between the *testimonio* and the faithful understanding of the Gospel's message by the people. Ultimately, underlying these criteria is a tacit understanding that theology is not the sole property of the professional theologian or philosopher, but that it is primarily, at its origin a function of the church and its members as they wrestle with their faith experience.

### ***Testimonios* as Forms of Popular Religion**

While each type of *testimonio* offers unique facets of the faith experience that merit individual theological reflection as a form of popular religion, it is impossible in the scope of this paper to address each unique form and type of *testimonio*. Hence, I will try to offer some general remarks regarding the theological function of the *testimonio* in Hispanic Protestant congregations and their role as a form of popular religion.

Hispanic theologies engage in an active dialogue with their respective community as part of their theological reflection. One of the principal loci of theological reflection for these theologies is popular religion, particularly within the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Within this context, the term “popular religion” does not refer to a religious practice that is “popular” by being fashionable or appealing to the vast majority of people. Rather, it is a direct translation of the Spanish *religiosidad popular*; a term that refers to a grassroots religious practice or expression that originates from the people. These expressions of faith are usually

concrete rituals and symbols that involve innovative communal practices, often rooted in the indigenous cultures of the people.<sup>47</sup> Hispanic theologians argue that these expressions of popular religion allow the people to stand in solidarity against hierarchical, ecclesiological, and socioeconomic forms of oppression. By engaging in grass-root practices that go counter to the institutional expressions of religion, they are a form of resistance against institutionalized oppression. This does not mean that they are anti-institutional or counter-institutional, since most of the people who participate and encourage these expressions do so within the church.<sup>48</sup> Rather, it means an opposition to abusive and oppressive structures in the dominant culture and society that also manifest themselves within the structures of the church in opposition to the people's faithful intuition of the intent of the Gospel.

In many cases, popular religion takes certain forms of cultural expressions that are not simply limited to accepted Christian practices and often incorporate both Christian symbols and elements of native religious traditions and culture. These expressions of popular religion find many venues of expressions within the rich symbolism and rituals of the Roman Catholic communities to which most Hispanics belong. Within these communities, indigenous traditions, music, rituals, and other types of cultural expressions combine with Christian symbols to create innovative religious practices.<sup>49</sup> Roberto Goizueta defines popular religious symbols as “an object, image, or action that reveals, mediates, and makes present what may be called the ineffable, the holy, the sacred, or the supernatural.”<sup>50</sup> He also includes narratives within the realm of popular religion.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in terms of this broad definition, *testimonios* do qualify as an expression of popular religion.

Hispanic Protestant denominations, which often define themselves over and against Catholicism, reject many of the syncretistic and innovative practices of popular religion,

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<sup>46</sup> Orlando Espín, “Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the Sensus Fidelium” and Sixto García, “Sources and Loci of Hispanic Theology” in *Frontiers in Hispanic Theology in the United States*, pp., 62-87 and pp. 90-91.

<sup>47</sup> Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo provides a good definition of popular religion in his introduction to *Discovering Latino Religion: A Comprehensive Social Science Bibliography* (New York: Bildner Center Publications, 1995), pp. 28-29.

<sup>48</sup> Goizueta warns us against placing popular religion in opposition to “official” or “institutional” religion, *Caminemos con Jesús*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> I develop some of my understanding of how popular religion occurs in Protestant Hispanic congregations in “Guideposts Along the Journey: Mapping North American Hispanic Theology,” in *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity within Mainline Traditions*, ed. by David Maldonado (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp. 132-134.

<sup>50</sup> Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, p. 27, footnote 26.

including many of the aesthetic and ritualistic practices. Because of their iconoclastic tendencies, Hispanic Protestants view these practices as being idolatrous and superstitious in nature. Nevertheless, if popular religion does serve as an expression of resistance and empowerment for Hispanics, we must assume that these expressions are not merely limited to Catholicism. While Catholic expressions tend to involve aesthetic and liturgical forms, as well as religious syncretism and cultural expressions, Protestant expressions must take other forms that still result in the same level of liberative praxis within these congregations.<sup>52</sup> The strong emphasis upon the word and the iconoclastic tendencies of Protestant congregations do limit the types of popular religion found within Protestant Hispanic congregations. Thus, Protestant Hispanic theologians face a significant challenge: If one of the primary loci of reflection for American Hispanic theology is popular religion, what kinds of popular religions, if any, appear within Hispanic Protestantism?

I propose that there are forms of popular religion that occur within Hispanic Protestant congregations, forms that are primarily narrative in nature, such as *testimonios*. By definition, popular religion takes the form of innovative and concrete expressions in a community's living faith in ways that empower the people without the control of clerics and religious institutions.<sup>53</sup> If we define popular religion in this broad sense, also including Goizueta's definition of these expressions mentioned above, then *testimonios* qualify as a form of popular religion within Hispanic Protestant congregations and as a form of liberative praxis. Instead of the aesthetic-liturgical forms of popular religion found in many Catholic congregations, Hispanic Protestant popular religion are primarily narrative, verbal (both written and spoken), or "word" centered. The legacy of Protestant congregations elevates the "word," both in Scripture and preaching, above other sacramental expressions. Thus, it should not surprise us that most Protestant expressions of popular religion would manifest themselves not through aesthetics, images, and rituals, as in the Catholic tradition, but through the spoken and written word. Instead of coming primarily from indigenous religions and through cultural icons, most of the expressions in mainline Protestant churches come from verbal and written sources that resonate with their

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> Roberto Goizueta refers to these aesthetic practices as a form of liberative praxis in "Rediscovering Praxis," *We are a People: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 63-64.

<sup>53</sup> Stevens-Arroyo, *Discovering Latino Religion*, pp. 28-29.

culture and experience.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the shared Catholic legacy of all Hispanics retains a sacramental view of religion and a strong sense of divine immanence. Thus, the Bible retains a sacramental aura in these groups, mediating to them concrete aspects of God's experience. In addition, instead of images of the Virgin on the walls, Hispanic Protestant place scriptural passages, and popular religious expression take the forms of *coritos* and *testimonios*.<sup>55</sup>

These verbal and word centered expressions of popular religion do not negate their cultural significance and relevance. Many of these practices exist within Hispanic Protestant churches simply because they resonate with elements of the culture and often occur in opposition and differentiation from the dominant culture's expressions of religion within their own denomination. In many cases, congregations that adamantly differentiate themselves from Pentecostal and charismatic groups nevertheless import and retain the practices of *testimonios* and *coritos* within their services, practices that are more common in charismatic congregations. They do so because these elements resonate with certain elements of their culture that affirm life and celebrate God's concrete presence within their lives. At the same time, these practices also serve as a form of resistance to the rigid structures of the larger denomination to which they belong, empowering them as they resist the powers that threaten their identity, community, and everyday existence.

Entering into the liturgy and symbols of the church, these spoken and written words become concrete vehicles for the empowerment of the people and the community. For instance, *testimonios* empower both the speaker and the congregation's faith and praxis by providing examples of God's concrete presence within the life of the church and of the individual believer. Thus, *testimonios* empower the people in two ways. First, by providing persistent expressions of the peoples' faith in God's continual, concrete, and actual activity in the life of members of the community of faith, encouraging these individuals to persevere in their faith and in their struggle. This, in turn, provides encouragement and hope for members of their community and church to continue in their own struggle for survival in spite of overwhelming oppressive structures.

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<sup>54</sup> Naturally, the lines between Protestant and Catholic forms of popular religion are not necessarily rigid and inflexible. Some Protestant churches still retain images of the Virgin and some Catholic congregations offer opportunities for *testimonios*. However, the preponderance of popular expressions within each denomination do take the forms that are common within each.

Second, they empower the laity to become interpreters of the faith, both by applying their own theological perceptions to present circumstances in their lives and by empowering them to share these interpretations with the rest of the community of faith within the context of worship. In many services, the lay person will stand in the middle of the service and state that they will like to share a *testimonio*, effectively interrupting the flow of the liturgy in cases where there might not be an allotted space for sharing their *testimonio*. Women in the congregation who might not be given an opportunity to express their views or theological insights in a public forum are able to bring them to the congregation through their *testimonios*. Effectively, anyone in the congregation can take on the responsibility of teaching or theologizing in a public forum through the *testimonio*.

Ultimately, *testimonios* are also a rich source of theological insights within Protestant Hispanic congregations and, given their level of empowerment and liberative praxis, they can be one of the most valuable expressions of popular religion within mainline Hispanic Protestantism. In examining *testimonios* within these churches, it is clear that they are indeed popular expression of the faith of the people within Hispanic Protestant churches. *Testimonios* are an expression of what Orlando Espín calls the faith-full intuition of the people (*sensus fidelium*) regarding God's continuous workings in their lives, as the people examine events in their lives and their religious experiences in light of their faith and their continuity with the message of the Gospel. They are also an expression of their own sense of empowerment and an assertion of God's solidarity with them and their struggle for survival in a hostile and often alien world.

The *testimonio* affirms for the congregation God's presence in their life and God's solidarity with them in their present struggle (*en la lucha*). At times, *testimonios* speak of God's working in through extraordinary means, saving and delivering them, encouraging the people in their continuing struggle. At other times, *testimonios* speak of transformation and accompaniment, even at times when the outcomes do not prevent people from making sacrifices and encountering suffering. But, in spite of it, God's presence in solidarity with their struggle is sufficient to encourage that their suffering and struggle is not in vain, but part of a greater reality and struggle, as they attempt to follow God's leading. In many cases, *testimonios* parallel some of the religious experiences documented by William James, yet, they also go far beyond them,

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<sup>55</sup> Edwin Aponte's article, "Coritos as Active Symbols in Latino Protestant Popular Religion," in the *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 2/3 (February 1995), pp. 62-65 develops an argument that *coritos*, the popular choruses



both in the forms they take and in their typology.

In many cases, *testimonios* are not always dramatic accounts of God's power, but merely a tacit understanding on the part of the people that God is present in the everyday struggle of life. This presence, at times manifested extraordinarily and at times in the ordinary struggles that are part of our lives, what Hispanic feminist and *mujerista* theologians refers to as *lo cotidiano*, the daily life sustaining activity in which we engage and where we too can encounter God.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the *testimonio* is a way for the people to theologize and reflect upon their faith, as they attempt to identify how God is actively present in their life, in solidarity with their struggles, and empowering them to overcome difficult situations in spite of insurmountable odds.<sup>57</sup>

*Testimonios* are the concrete verbal expressions and testament to the hopes, praxis, and faith of the people, actualized through what they believe to be God's activity in their lives and communities.

In conclusion, *testimonios*, along with other expressions of religious experiences and of the people's faith, are an essential *locus theologicus* that cannot be ignored. Theology cannot be limited to second and third level reflections and theories. Theology must engage the people's experiences, expressions, and understanding of their faith. The widening divide between the church and the academy needs to be bridged, and *testimonios* are one among many potential vehicles for bridging this divide and articulating a theology of faith.

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often song in Protestant congregations, are a form of popular religion.

<sup>56</sup> María Pilar Aquino states that *lo cotidiano*, a category of analysis developed by feminist critical theory, has "always been a part of Latino/a cultures as a way of designating the whole of doing and thinking of our people in their daily and recurring routine." See her article entitled "Theological Method in U.S. Latino/a Theology," *From the Hearts of our People: Latino Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. by Orlando Espin and Miguel Díaz (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1999), pp.38-39. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, also uses this category in *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. .

<sup>57</sup> I also make some references to the role of *testimonios* in empowering congregations in my book, *Jesus is my Uncle*, p. 21.