September 2019

Introduction: Mediating Catholicisms: Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity

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Recommended Citation

Hoenes del Pinal, Eric; Loustau, Marc Roscoe; and Norget, Kristin (2019) "Introduction: Mediating Catholicisms: Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1060

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol3/iss2/2>

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MEDIATING CATHOLICISMS

Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity

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Introduction: Mediating Catholicisms: Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity

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One million visitors stream through the massive “Hall of the Americas” at the Vatican’s 1925 Pontifical Missionary Exhibition, one of the 20th century’s largest exhibitions of objects extracted in the course of the Catholic Church’s missionary work; the Brotherhood of the Señor de los Milagros (Lord of the Miracles) heaves an image of the saint onto their shoulders and carries it past huge crowds and massive government edifices in the Peruvian capital of Lima; although sixteen million Guatemalans listen to FM broadcasts every day, diocesan officials in the rural municipality of Cobán struggle to reach local Catholics with a new Q’eqchi’-Maya radio station; and finally as Romania’s new Hungarian-language branch of the World Family of Radio Maria begins broadcasting, founding officials weave together evangelism with an ongoing campaign to win political recognition of minority rights. The articles in this Special Issue, “Mediating Catholicisms: Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity,” embed a critical ethnographic, historical, and social scientific gaze in these vivid examples. They thus demonstrate not only the distinctively Catholic talent for and creative fascination with mass media, but also more fundamentally how mediation processes powerfully intertwine Catholicism’s sacramental imaginary of real presence with multiple forms of national identity and secular power. Drawing on research in Peru, Guatemala, Canadian First Nations communities, and Romania, the articles in this Special Issue present variations on a core theme in the growing body of literature on religious mediation. A basic premise of this “media turn” holds that, in Mathew Engelke’s words, “religion is...mediation—a set of practices and ideas that cannot be understood without the middle grounds that substantiate them.”¹ The articles in this Special Issue, therefore, each chip away at the walls that have slowly been built up by intellectual invocations of concepts like Catholicism’s interactions with “new” and “old” media technologies; the result is a broadened view onto into a broader field of analytical intention. As Norget and Zires Roldán state, the authors in the Special Issue come together to sound the claim that, “Attention to the interaction or enmeshment of different scales and material, mobile forms and corps of mediation...enriches our understanding of contemporary Catholicism, and the material

1 Mathew Engelke, “Religion and the media turn: A review essay,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no.2 (2010): 371.

forms and ‘multiple political, embodied, aesthetic and economic registers’ through which it is mediated across time and space.”²

The articles recognize the valuable trajectory in research that continues to produce insight into Catholicism’s variously confrontational, reciprocal, and contested relationships with media technologies.³ But insights circulating in literature on religious mediation lead Hoenes del Pinal, Norget and Zires Roldán, Loustau, and Bell to note the limitations of the implicitly positivistic, cause-and-effect or before-after framework that informs the questions about how media transform religious practice or how religions have shaped various media fields. The authors are inspired by the ways that anthropologists like Birgit Meyer have worked to develop a rich and dimensioned study of mediation and religious experience to generate insights such as that voltage and charge, as well as invisible wave-like pulsation, are synonymous with Charismatic/Pentecostal experience of the holy spirit in large group worship service driven by electronically amplified sermons and music. The congregation’s gas-powered generator, Meyer argues, not only generates electricity but religious experience too: “Loudness—to such an extent that participants’ bodies vibrate from the excess of sound—and also pastors’ use of microphones in rhythmic sayings induce a certain trance-like atmosphere that conveys a sense of an extraordinary encounter with a divine force that is experienced to be present, and that can be reached by opening up and stretching out one’s arms.”⁴ To paraphrase Engelke, the authors take Catholicism and its core experiential features—including and especially the real presence of divinity in the consecrated host—to be a form of mediation, constituting Catholicism as a religious form through which views and experiences of the world are shaped, substantiated, and made accessible to people in a range of social and cultural settings. Not only is Catholicism *in* the

2 Norget and Zires Roldán, this issue, 96.

3 Robert A. White, S.J., “The Media, Culture, and Religion Perspective: Discovering a Theory and Methodology for Studying Media and Religion,” *Communication Research Trends* 26, no. 1 (2007): 1-21. Jeffrey Mahan, “Relating Media, Religion, and Culture” in *Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-20. Robert A. White, S.J., “Major Issues in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture,” in *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity* (New York: Ashgate, 2004), 197-217.

4 Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and immediacy: sensational forms, semiotic ideologies and the question of the medium,” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19, no. 1 (2011): 23-4.

media (as seen, for example, in the constant international media presence of the Pope); Catholicism is itself a medium, a ‘living infrastructure’, as Napolitano terms it, of institutional bureaucracy and organizational forms, people, objects, technologies, liturgical events, saints, and affect.”⁵

In addition to the Special Issue’s theoretical and empirical innovations, the articles also represent the fruit of a cross-disciplinary collaborative initiative, “Mediating Catholicisms,” convened by Norget, Hoenes del Pinal, and Loustau, which, prior to being featured in the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, has already generated a fruitful cross-disciplinary conversation has been existed as panel presentations at the 2016 American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual convention and 2017 American Academy of Religion (AAR) meetings, and most recently as a stand-alone symposium with the same title in 2019 funded by the American Academy of Religion, Social Sciences Research Council of Canada, and the Catholics & Cultures initiative at College of the Holy Cross. Although “Mediating Catholicisms” embraces a variety of implements and methods to create new stages, platforms, and gathering infrastructures for the critical study of religious mediation, some participants share an overlapping concern with the *Journal of Global Catholicism*’s mission is to shift scholars’ perspective on the commonplace epistemological boundaries that sustain the authoritative and taken-for-granted centeredness of the historically dominant North Atlantic academic institutional culture. In this spirit, the “Mediating Catholicisms” project convened in September 2019 an additional twelve scholars traveled from Chad, Japan, Geneva, the United States, and Canada for a symposium and intensive working group conversation that expanded and diversified this conversation about practices of mediation, recognizing that Catholicism’s ontology is distinctively rooted in mediations of real presence that assume and take for granted circulations between a Roman center and multiple peripheries as well as cross-fertilizations between multiply conjoined peripheries.

5 Valentina Napolitano, “The Sacred Heart and the Religious in Movement.” *Material Religion* 13, no. 2 (2017): 237–239. DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2017.1302128](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1302128).

MEDIATION BEYOND THE UNIVERSAL

Readers of this Special Issue will immediately discern several similarities and points of contact among the articles. Loustau and Hoenes del Pinal both study new Catholic radio initiatives that, to greater or lesser degrees, partake in the recent global upswing of Catholic interest in evangelism as a response to the growth of evangelical and Charismatic/Pentecostal movements in areas where Catholicism once held unquestioned numerical and cultural dominance. Bell and Norget and Zires Roldán highlight the phenomenon of Catholic mass culture. Bell introduces the Pontifical Missionary Exhibition by situating this event as a Catholic contribution to the immensely popular system of world fairs and exhibitions that were part and parcel of the constitution of colonial empire; Norget and Zires Roldán compellingly argue that the Señor de los Milagros procession draws on the same sense of being part of a mass social gathering that centers on subjective experience of overwhelming sensuous spectacle. From this angle, the articles in this Special Issue are inspired by many of the highly performative events that have provided an evocative setting for pathbreaking studies of religious mediation, events like new Christian mega-churches' arena-style worship concerts and renewal and piety movements' more-or-less dramatic efforts at evangelistic outreach in established and emerging global urban milieus.⁶ Many key public political performances of our day require us to better understand not only how religion manifests itself through media technology and processes of mediation and mediatization, but also how mediatic forms affect us, in awe-inspiring, seemingly metaphysical ways through multifaceted modes of communication and aesthetic forms.⁷ Bell and Norget and Zires Roldán, for instance, extend this line of thought by noting that these events may be used by lay people as opportunities to critique the Catholic Church's tendency to work in concert with state and political authorities. Other points of contact

6 See, for instance, Birgit Meyer's writings on sensational forms and religious mediation in Birgit Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 741-763. Ibrahim Abraham, "Sincere Performance in Pentecostal Megachurch Music," *Religions* 9, no. 6. (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9060192>. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

7 Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds. *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Engelke, "Religion and the media turn."

between these articles are subtler but equally revealing. Bell and Hoenes del Pinal's articles reveal the pragmatics and poetics of establishing a sense of indigeneity and autonomy. Loustau and Norget and Zires Roldán's contributions open a window onto Catholics' efforts to establish and question notions of a "legitimate family." Together the four pieces underscore how Catholic in four different contexts attempt to imagine their religious communities.

While it is clear that mediation processes cut across religious traditions, much of the current research examining the impact of mass media technologies on people's religious lives has focused on Protestant Christianity and Islam.⁸ Yet in the authors' research sites in North, Central, and South America and Eastern Europe, Catholics have taken the lead expanding the use of and modes of experimentation with various media technologies. In these diverse social contexts, not only is the institutional Catholic Church quickly expanding its use of the Internet and social media platforms as a way of affirming its presence in the world, but an array of global Catholic media networks (for e.g., World Family of Radio Maria, Global Catholic/Eternal Word Television Network [EWTN], Vatican Radio) represent efforts to rework and retool the various relationships between subjective religious experience and global transformations. Loustau's article, for instance, sketches out the history of one major institutional trajectory of a new effort to evangelize and renew the faith of lapsed Catholics—the global multimedia network called the World Family of Radio Maria that now has local chapters broadcasting in over sixty countries. More broadly, with the exception of scholars of Charismatic Catholicism, Catholicism's mediations have been a neglected field of research in anthropology and religious studies, leading to an impoverished awareness of other key social and institutional processes toward which the authors point with a variety of conceptual signposts and key terms: sovereignty, colonialism, race, and hierarchy (Bell and Norget and Zires Roldán); mission, indigeneity, devotional labor (Hoenes del Pinal); prayer,

8 See, for instance, Simon Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the gospel of prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*. Brian Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey: Discourse, Companionship, and the Mass Mediation of Islamic Practice," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2008): 118-153, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2008.00005>.

family, and nation (Loustau).⁹ The articles enhance and intensify the conversation that the *Journal of Global Catholicism* has hosted about the possible and potential trajectories opened up by the loosely ordered pairing of “Catholicism” and “culture,” putting these globalizing and broadly framed notions into a tense constellational arrangement by means of the terms just mentioned. In this way, the articles in this Special Issue at times directly challenge and subvert homogenizing views of Catholicism and theoretical assumptions that take Catholicism to be a monolithic, static world religion and institution.

By examining an exhibition of often violently extracted art objects and a Catholic parish’s experiment with indigenous language radio broadcasting, for instance, these articles recast and critically represent emerging processes of Catholic mediation of indigeneity as well as other historical and social objects and experiences like post-colonial ecclesiastical infrastructures, ritual and artistic creations, autonomous indigenous groups, and individual and collective subjectivities. Mediation is synonymous with Catholicism’s sacral reality even though, as Gloria Bell’s article vividly demonstrates, Catholic sacrality is not immune to either creative acts of indigenous cultural perpetuation or devastating post-colonial critiques of Catholicism’s geopolitical center in Rome. “Passamaquoddy adopted rather than assimilated Catholic practices,” Bell notes, and her critical scholarly gaze transforms an object exhibited in the Vatican’s colonial exposition—a carved wooden cross—into a revelatory mediation that discloses the violence of settler colonialism and the “transitions and hardships that the Passamaquoddy peoples went through.”¹⁰

The notion of indigeneity itself, Bell and Hoenes del Pinal note in their studies of the Church’s past and present missionary activity, is unpredictably tethered to mediations of real divine presence as the foundational experience of Catholic sacral reality. At Hoenes del Pinal’s Guatemalan fieldsite, the Catholic archdiocese has created an intentionally and explicitly indigenous-language parish serving

9 Thomas Csordas, *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). Maria José A. de Abreu, “Worldings: the aesthetics of authority among Catholic Charismatics in Brazil,” *Culture and Religion* (2015) 2: 175-92, DOI: [10.1080/14755610.2015.1058529](https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2015.1058529).

10 Bell, this issue, 30.

Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics. Paradoxically, this ecclesiastical infrastructure has raised just as many questions as it has answered about, in Hoenes del Pinal's words, "the extent to which their culture and communities can continue to exist in their present form."¹¹ The Catholic Church's own sense of its declining role as both bedrock and generative source of national identity is both an augmentation and feedback effect of this broadly anxious self-consciousness. Indigenous language radio broadcasts hold out hope, Hoenes del Pinal writes, that membership in a simultaneously indigenous and Catholic community "can offer a modicum of relief from the insecurities and indignities of life in post-war Guatemala."¹² Post-colonial theorizations of indigeneity, Bell notes, have drawn attention to the political stakes of cultural perpetuation by linking continuity to the potent yet ambiguous notion of autonomy. The question of how to balance these two values—autonomy and cultural perpetuation—is also central to efforts by members of this Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic parish to found a new radio station, a project that driven by desires to meaningfully serve the local population, but which also feeds into crosscutting anxieties about the indigenous Catholics' ability to create a semi-autonomous community within the larger ecclesiastical unit of the Diocese.

The authors also highlight an important but analytically neglected political and juridical resonance of Catholicism's mediations. Inspired partly by Birgit Meyer's insistence that any phenomenological, subject-centered account of religious mediation must acknowledge these mediations' marginal or central positioning vis-à-vis religious traditions' authorized modes of encountering divine presence, Norget and Zires Roldán as well as Bell frame these authorizing processes within post-colonial interactions between Catholic ecclesiastical institutions and the nation-state. The public refraction of the Señor de los Milagros procession in urban Lima, Norget and Zires Roldán write, is a multiform but hardly cacophonous series of theo-political stagings of "miraculous force and presence" through which Church and state "assert their social vision and authority."¹³ In her article, Gloria Bell notes that the mediations that bind the spatial terms of Catholic metropole and indigenous

11 Hoenes del Pinal, this issue, 60.

12 Hoenes del Pinal, this issue, 60.

13 Norget and Zires Roldán, this issue, 97.

mission field are inextricably interwoven with violence against indigenous bodies, extractive exploitation of resources, and cultural devastation. “The Passamaquoddy peoples,” Bell writes, “went through...removal from their lands and attempts by missionaries and the federal government of Canada and the United States to force their assimilation into settler society.”¹⁴ Bell’s interpretation of a Passamaquoddy artist’s carving of Jesus on the cross, which appeared in the 1937 exhibition and remains in the Vatican’s collection, is set within a clear post-colonial framework and spares no evocative detail in capturing the way colonial suffering mediates multiple political and spatial domains. Jesus’s suffering binds heaven and earth, yes, and the figure’s tangible gaunt bones and unstinting grief presents God’s immersion in this directly to the viewer. Bell’s analysis calls to mind the much more famous shroud of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which features an iconic image of the saint as a brown-skinned Madonna. The Passamaquoddy artist uses a stylized beaver belt and crosshatched loincloth design to evoke, “the carving traditions of figurines and effigies used in medicine bundles and other sacred practices of Algonquin peoples of the Northeast.”¹⁵ The figure’s ovular facial features constitute this Jesus as an Indigenous savior, Bell writes, and might also remind readers that indigenous bodies were subject to racist violence in and through the enduring support Catholic missionaries gave to phenotypical hierarchies and notions of blood and bodily purity.

Familiarity is an existentially and politically primary, yet not guaranteed, concern for Catholic devotees in articles by Norget and Zires Roldán and Loustau, whose studies of saints’ devotions show vividly how Catholicism works through intimacy and publicity simultaneously to mediate the face-to-face, eye-to-eye encounters with saints and divine beings that historians of Catholicism have called “real presence.”¹⁶ Norget and Zires Roldán use notions like legitimacy and theo-politics to take up an alternative stance on one of Latin America’s most compelling large-scale devotional celebrations, the annual procession of a statue of the Señor de los

14 Bell, this issue, 30.

15 Bell, this issue, 29.

16 Robert Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Milagros in urban Lima, Peru.¹⁷ Each year on October 18th and 19th, the statue is taken out of the Church of the Nazarenas on the shoulders of members of the Brotherhood of the Señor de los Milagros de las Nazarenas, the lay Catholic organization charged with executing the procession and, in Norget and Zires Roldán's assessment, the event's central collective actor. Members of the Brotherhood carry the statue forming a devotional trail that winds its way through Lima's colonial center, past the massive and monumental infrastructures and armatures that emblemize Peruvian national identity and political, republican aura: the Catholic Cathedral, seat of the Archdiocese of Lima, as well as government offices, congressional edifices, and juridical palaces. Prominent social and political actors in Lima's spectacular annual procession and celebration engage in "miracle talk," which for Norget and Zires Roldán is a repetitive and conventionalized form of legitimizing discourse that demonstrates legitimacy's status as an uncertain, emergent, and socially contingent ritual end. Norget and Zires Roldán direct scholars' gaze to the celebration's active centers of ecclesiastical and juridical power, like Lima's Catholic Archbishop who uses the public space of the celebration of the Señor de los Milagros to enfold a notion of the "Catholic family" within a baroque, circuitous, and labyrinthine cultural brushwork, all to the end of enshrining the heterosexual family as the basic building block of a locally and nationally rooted Peruvian way of life.

Loustau's evocation of Catholic familiarity begins with a scene from his fieldwork in an ethnic Hungarian and Catholic enclave in Romania. Celebratory and festival-style performances are also a central feature of Catholicism in Romania's Ciuc Valley, and Loustau recalls riding home with a busload of revelers from an annual carnival-type festival that takes place in winter before the forty-day period of fasting and repentance of Lent. He witnesses a messy family conflict that, in the midst of this densely public and performative Catholic celebration, breaks out into the open and onto the side of the road beside a stalled bus. Authoritative portrayals of leisure-style devotional family harmony construes this conflict as a source of shame for the family, and Loustau takes this experience as a pivot point to shift to his account of women's prayer requests to the Virgin Mary published and circulated on

17 See also Valentina Napolitano, *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

the web site of Romania's Hungarian-language branch of the global World Family of Radio Maria media network. For Catholics, family is a privileged medium for divine presence, but such intimate mediations are hardly innocent, removed from structures of power, domination, and violence. Norget and Zires Roldán and Loustau's articles show how Catholic ideals of family shape the processes by which everyday devotees grapple with authoritative social formations within which Catholicism mediates divine presence.

Hoenes del Pinal's article invites readers to follow him in tracing the oft-overlooked but no less socially consequential ties that bind radio to everyday social processes, like a Catholic sodality's effort to promote parishioner involvement in public rituals during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week). The *Hermanidad de San Felipe* is one of many groups responsible for sponsoring a procession around a local city for this annual high holiday, and Hoenes del Pinal examines the group's radio broadcasts calling on people to help with the procession. The medium of radio itself offers no way to confirm whether anyone is listening; its messages are one-way broadcasts. "Without a co-present audience and with no means of getting immediate feedback," Hoenes del Pinal writes, "all that was left at the end of the *Hermanidad's* broadcast was the hope that someone, somewhere would heed their call."¹⁸ While some social uses of radio mitigate this inherent problematic, others, like organizing the annual procession, situate it at the center of social process, and even go so far as to make the potential of communicative failure synonymous with the festival itself and with the Parish of San Felipe as an ecclesiastical identity. By using ethnographic research to situate radio in a broader ecology of communication technologies in Guatemala, including cellular phones whose interactive properties set an authoritative standard in the field of media practice, Hoenes del Pinal shows that the built-in insecurities of radio are not only problems but also potentialities that entail the creation of a particular ritual sociality defined by mutual obligation and exchange: "The radio program's content thus mediated this community of religious practice across space and time," Hoenes del Pinal writes, "positioning them as co-participants in a future activity."¹⁹

¹⁸ Hoenes del Pinal, this issue, 54.

¹⁹ Hoenes del Pinal, this issue, 53-54.

We hope that this Special Issue as the first publication to emerge from the larger discussion about Catholicism and media that the conveners have been holding will be a significant step in fomenting an extended conversation between anthropologists, religious studies scholars, theologians, and historians around Catholics' distinctive understandings and practices of mediation. We are thankful to the editors and publishers of the *Journal of Global Catholicism* for providing a venue to publish our research and push ahead this conversation about mediation and Catholicism, and look forward to seeing how scholar from a wide range of disciplines will take up and push forward this interdisciplinary research project.

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