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Catholics & Cultures as an Act of Improvisation: A Response

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CATHOLICS & CULTURES

Scholarship for the Pedagogy of Global Catholicism

ARTICLES

- Mathew N. Schmalz / Introducing Catholics & Cultures: Ethnography, Encyclopedia, Cyborg
- Mara Brecht / A Widened Angle of View: Teaching Theology and Racial Embodiment
- Laura Elder / Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change
- Anita Houck / Ritual among the Scilohtac: Global Catholicism, the Nacirema, and Interfaith Studies
- Marc Roscoe Loustau / Teaching Sexuality on the Catholics & Cultures Website: A Refreshing Turn toward the Longue Durée
- Hillary Kaell / The Value of Online Resources: Reflections on Teaching an Introduction to Global Christianity
- Stephanie M. Wong / Catholics & Cultures: A Panoramic View in Search of Greater Understanding
- Thomas M. Landy / Catholics & Cultures as an Act of Improvisation: A Response



THOMAS M. LANDY

Catholics & Cultures as an Act of Improvisation: A Response



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I'm extraordinarily grateful for the opportunity to engage in a sustained way—at the *Journal of Global Catholicism* 2019 scholars' workshop in Chicago, and through the essays from some of those participants published in this volume—in conversation about the work of Catholics & Cultures. The *Journal of Global Catholicism* and the Catholics & Cultures website are linked as elements of a common initiative but serve different functions. This issue of the Journal is a reminder of how each can help the other fill its respective role. The public nature of the Catholics & Cultures website and the ongoing engagement I try to have with people from the places I write about ensures that the website continuously benefits from feedback, but the opportunity to engage scholars about the work in a sustained discussion is an invaluable privilege.¹ I'm grateful to Mathew Schmalz for conceiving and organizing this opportunity, and to all who contributed to it.

Perhaps the best place to begin my response is where Mathew Schmalz's introductory article ends, with an argument that the potential of Catholics & Cultures “will be most meaningfully realized not around the seminar tables of elite academic conferences but amidst the desks—and computer monitors—of ordinary classrooms.” I take this in no way to disparage our great Chicago discussions, but to call attention back to the original and enduring intention of the Catholics & Cultures initiative. As befits the purpose of this Journal issue², my response will try to address both pedagogical and scholarly implications.

Catholics & Cultures is, in significant part, a response to my own experience in the classroom designing and teaching an undergraduate course on contemporary global Catholicism. That experience laid bare how large the gaps in scholarly literature are, and how far short the Western academy has fallen at trying to understand Catholics on their own terms in their manifold contexts. Certainly there were an array of contextual theologies to turn to, but as a sociologist my interests were much more ethnographic, and deliberately not normative. In social-scientific

1 Though I conceived and have long been the primary author for Catholics & Cultures research, I'm [by no means the only one](#). In this essay, I won't try to speak for other authors, but can speak about the broad direction and priorities that I've set for those authors.

2 Mathew N. Schmalz, “Introducing Catholics & Cultures: Ethnography, Encyclopedia, Cyborg,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 4.

literature, I could draw on works that painted a broad-brush picture of the demographic shifts in the Church today but told us nothing about the lives and practices behind the statistics. I could also turn to a large number of historical studies of global Catholicism. The much smaller number of studies I found on contemporary global Catholicism, insightful as they were, were often written primarily for other scholar-specialists, presuming a great deal of contextual background that made them challenging to teach in a survey course. Some works purporting to be about contemporary global Catholicism proved mostly to be historical, falling flat when it came to the contemporary story. Few put lay Catholics in the center of the story, as agents helping to shape their own ways of being. I wanted resources that would help students understand and imagine a broader context, without simply projecting their own experiences about Catholicism into new spaces, to thus enable them to engage specialized scholarly work more fully. As a scholar committed to the study of lived religion, I wanted students to be able to understand the beliefs and practices of Catholics in any context on those Catholics' terms, not only mine or the American academy's.

As Director of the [McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture](#) at the College of the Holy Cross, I was extraordinarily fortunate to have significant institutional support to launch an initiative that could address these concerns. I was also able to imagine it differently because of the unparalleled opportunity that the World Wide Web offered to rethink what the project could be and how to deliver it. I was fortunate to be able to rely on the talents of Danielle Kane to design a visually compelling site.³

My initial research travels shifted my thinking about the web from opportunity to ethical imperative, as I grew more determined that the benefits of the research should not only flow one way, from the rest of the world to American students, but should be as accessible as possible in the places written about on the site. On those trips, I learned how often the Western-published books that I turned to were inaccessible, because of cost, in the very countries they were written about. My

3 Thanks are due as well to [Troy Thompson](#) of Daedal Creations, who is responsible for the architecture of the site, and to numerous colleagues in Information Technology Services at the College of the Holy Cross.

audience needed to be not only American students, but a wider world.

Writing for multiple audiences is a challenging task. Evidence of competing tugs to serve more than one audience accounts for some of the concerns raised in the articles in this issue of the Journal. Our authors were asked, appropriately, to think about how it serves their particular student audiences. Trying to write for both American college students and a global audience has raised questions about what one can assume readers need as background and about how to provide the sort of material that serves a classroom audience without scaring away readers who might be put off by scholarly digression and preoccupations. In 2020, just about one-third of the 256,000 visitors to the Catholics & Cultures website were from the United States. Fewer than 18% of the additional 333,000 YouTube views came from the U.S. Nearly half of the website views came from the 150 countries usually counted as “developing” or “under-developed.”⁴ The multiplicity of audiences is a challenge to keep in mind as we think about what the site can be.

RECOGNIZING DESCRIPTIONS OF VOICE AND CHALLENGES

As an outsider to most of the cultures I’ve written about—especially important where I know that a people’s experience has been diminished by outside writers—and because I want to foreground people’s understandings of their own cultural world, I often share the articles with some of people I write about before they are published. I want to be sure that they recognize themselves in the accounts I give of them. The articles in this volume by Mathew Schmalz and Marc Loustau, who have the longest experience with the initiative, pass a similar test. It’s easy to recognize my goals in them. Like ethnographers whose work is enriched by more time spent with their subjects, their success might be due to the number of collaborations we have had. I see in each of their articles a more sophisticated articulation and extrapolation than I would have used, advancing the work in ways I hadn’t fully considered.

4 Though all such counts are contested, I relied on the list OECD member countries (<https://www.oecd.org/about/document/list-oecd-member-countries.htm>, accessed January 29, 2021) to make the point. Data are derived from Google Analytics, accessed January 29, 2021. YouTube views, though to a smaller number of countries were even more skewed outside the US and OECD realm.

One way that both help clarify my own self-understanding is their comments about methodologically avoiding “simple binary opposition” as Schmalz puts it.⁵ From the beginning I was concerned to write and to organize the site in a way that made it clear that U.S. Catholicism had no reason to claim any normative role as a basis for comparison. The decision to not simply write for an American audience necessitated and reinforced the rejection of comparative binaries. Though I had never named it as such, the comparative “triangulation” method that Loustau cites aptly names the strategy behind this work.⁶ That triangulation, insofar as it can continue to develop, can help address a concern that I share with Anita Houck: not wanting students to “other” or exoticize the people they encounter on the site, nor to look at difference in such a way that lets them “erase too much.”⁷ The goal is to lead them to see parallels, but not conclude that “we’re all the same.”

As Loustau intuits, I determined from the beginning not to impose an American sex-and-gender-centered culture wars worldview on it, but rather to find out where my interlocutors took me.⁸ Nonetheless, the *longue-durée* perspective is undoubtedly an authorial voice that I bring to the work, given my own education, much as I’ve wanted to think that I put my subjects’ voice and interpretations front-and-center. Some of the most interesting navigational challenges I encountered in fieldwork entailed separating worldviews on sex and gender, given that the people I learned from onsite often compared themselves to what they knew about American society, given who they were engaging.

Stephanie Wong and Mara Brecht help capture the logic behind the structure of the Catholics by Country section of Catholics & Cultures site.⁹ Whatever the

5 Mathew N. Schmalz, “Introducing Catholics & Cultures,” 5.

6 Marc Roscoe Loustau, “Teaching Sexuality on the Catholics & Cultures Website: A Refreshing Turn toward the *Longue Durée*,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 78, 76, 77, citing Michael M. J. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 5-7.

7 Anita Houck, “Ritual among the Scilohtac: Global Catholicism, the Nacirema, and Interfaith Studies,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 47.

8 Loustau, “Teaching Sexuality on the Catholics & Cultures Website,” 67.

9 Stephanie M. Wong, “Catholics & Cultures: A Panoramic View in Search of Greater Understanding,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 97; Mara Brecht, “A Widened Angle of View: Teaching Theology and Racial Embodiment,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 22-28.



challenges of organizing under the banners of nation states not least from my perspective because cultural and national boundaries do not neatly overlap, one of the primary ways of accessing the site is through an [alphabetical list of countries](#), without reference to typology or categorization, or even a breakdown by continent.¹⁰ Though the site could thus be accused of ignoring power differentials surely at work in the global Church, I prefer to think that it confounds the ways that readers may be accustomed to think of Catholicism in terms of centers and peripheries, “real” ways of being Catholic, and adaptations that are somehow less authentic.

In the same way that “sex and gender” is not a distinct category on the website, but a theme interwoven throughout, so too race is not treated as a specific analytical category. Even categories like “African,” “Asian,” “Latin,” or “European” Catholicism are avoided. The site is dedicated to exploring local cultural identities rather than aggregate ones; more interested in understanding, say, the particularities of Igbo Catholicism than using it to stand in for a broad category of “African” Catholicism. I am interested in understanding how racial identities impact beliefs and practice. But I’ve more often hoped that by not replicating and reifying them, it can help to “break the hold white racialization has” on so many Catholics’ imaginations, something that Anita Houck’s pedagogies using the site show is possible and intriguing to students.¹¹

Kaell’s point that we have to help students see that “Catholics do have many rituals, but these do not make them incapable of ‘rational’ thinking” certainly describes one of the purposes of the site.¹² Every encounter that I’ve had so far with ordinary Catholics about miracles, including those in what we might describe as more “enchanted” cultural contexts, is with people whose mindset also turned to science-based solutions where possible. The people who talk about miracles to me always go to hospitals as they are able. Attention to rituals is one way that we can

10 For other critiques of using the nation state as a primary lens, see Laura Elder, “Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 33.

11 Brecht, “A Widened Angle of View,” 28; Houck, “Ritual among the Scilohtac,” 51-54.

12 Hillary Kaell, “The Value of Online Resources: Reflections on Teaching an Introduction to Global Christianity,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 88.

help students think of Catholicism as more than doctrine, as they should.¹³

Kaell's comment also raises another issue, about the challenge of writing about ritual. I have yet to write up an entry for Lourdes, for several reasons, but encountered a specific challenge that stays with me: On a visit there, I befriended some young men who had driven overnight from a northern Italian Catholic drug rehabilitation center where they were hoping to change their lives. They fit no one's stereotype of Lourdes pilgrims, which may be what drew me to them. Yet they were completely enchanted by the experience, eager for help and intercession in their lives. A little while after they returned from the sacred baths, I asked one of them what it was like. "È freddo" he replied. And that was it. "It was cold." I asked a little more about it, and got some details about the process, but very little, in words, though their expression made clear that it was moving to them. Later, a French pilgrim answered the same question, "C'est froid." You can guess what a Spaniard told me. Whether in a ritual bath at Lourdes, or when talking to people who pray by dancing at La Tirana, I encounter particular difficulty at times over the need to turn powerful experiences into explanations that can be articulated in words. No doubt this is not an original observation, but it is nonetheless very real to me.

The videos on the site, as Kaell acknowledges, certainly favor liturgical and more spectacular, seasonal ritual events over quotidian forms of religiosity in daily life. Clearly, daily, quiet, interior expressions of Catholic life are more difficult to record and to explain, but no less important for the study of lived religion. The web loves spectacle, and spectacles have drawn attention to the site. For American (and likely Canadian) students, such spectacle also points to an aspect of life that is largely missing from their experiences of Catholicism, which often other than through Mass attendance, limits religious practice to the interior and private realms. As Houck notes, citing Yadlapati, students too often "consider anything they identify as ritual to be less than spiritual."¹⁴ Even if more private experiences have yet to

13 Brecht, "A Widened Angle of View," 23.

14 Madhuri M. Yadlapati, "Dharma and Moksha, Works and Faith: Comparatively Engaging the Tension between Ethics and Spirituality," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid. B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 188 as cited in Houck, "Ritual among the Scilohtac," 48.





be adequately visualized on the site, the expression of so many public forms of religiosity gives American students another context to compare to and to question.

One surprise that emerged from our conference and these articles is the request that the site include more on Catholicism in the United States, to help students to see through their own culture and of course to understand America's own pluralism.¹⁵ Given that there are so many enormous vacuums to fill in our understanding of Catholic life in the rest of the globe, this has never seemed a priority. Writing about them can, I see, help students to understand how the Catholicism they know is context-driven, perhaps putting to rest the assumption that leads to labeling other people's practice, but not one's own, as "syncretic."

Until we add more info about American Catholicism to the site, there is still an opportunity to use the examples from other cultures as a source for getting American students to interrogate their own cultures and cultural assumptions: teachers can use it to encourage students to question the normativity and limits of their own culture. If students find it so strange that teens would devote themselves to dancing for the Virgin at La Tirana, ask them what about their own culture gives

Emotion overtakes pilgrims dancing for the Virgin in La Tirana, Chile, for reasons they often can't articulate.

Photo by Thomas M. Landy/
catholicsandcultures.org.

15 Houck, "Ritual among the Scilohtac," 55; and Elder, "Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change," 35.

them the attitudes that they presume are “natural” for all teens. Rather than ask why northern Chilean teens are passionate about dancing, ask why their culture tells them not to do it, rather than let them think that they make such decisions naturally or freely.

NAVIGATING SCHOLARLY EXPECTATIONS

As I approached the Chicago workshop and this essay volume, a lot of my own reflection has been focused on the ways that the website conforms to, or chooses to set aside, conventional scholarly expectations. How do the site’s entries—written with more than one audience in mind—conform to the standard expectations of scholars, particularly when it comes to invoking theory and developing cross-cultural categorizational themes? *Catholics & Cultures* intends to bring scholarly rigor but also, not least because of its short-form pieces, disappoints them.

Schmalz aptly takes up one of those conventions, reflection on my own place in the ethnography, identifying best why I adopt the stance that I do, which is to largely remove myself as an explicit character from the text.¹⁶ My embodiment as a 6’4” pale White man makes the need to reflect constantly on such questions blatantly obvious. I literally stand out. That’s true whether at La Tirana, where I was much taller than almost any other of 200,000 people and where height, like skin-color, was referenced as a sign of the socioeconomic status of the dancers, or at Fr. Mbaka’s massive all night prayer service, where I stood out so much among the tens of thousands in the Nigerian crowd that my presence was never not apparent, and often commented on, even by Fr. Mbaka from the stage. I was also welcomed in an exceptional way, which also gave me insight into the power of hospitality, belonging and community that night.

Inescapable as those challenges are on the ground, as a writer my goal is still to center attention on the lives of lay people. I’m increasingly cognizant how difficult scholars find this—whether distracted by a need to focus on their own selves as actors in the discourse, on elites as they impact the lives of lay people, or on the primacy of academic theory. Each of those tasks is important, but it is hard to do

¹⁶ Schmalz, “Introducing *Catholics & Cultures*,” 5.



them simultaneously, or in short-form pieces.

Ordinary readers are seldom interested in long discourses on the ethnographer's gaze, even if those questions are never absent from my own writing. And internet readers' attention span is known to be shorter. Readers give up more quickly if an article doesn't seem to be written for their needs. Focus on the ethnographer's gaze signals quickly that this is an article for anthropologists, not for ordinary readers. On the web, I don't have the luxury of burying the lede. My choice has been to signal that I am aware of the challenge my role plays but to not spend time unpacking each instance. I'd hope, in fact, that conversation about that could be a topic for conversation in the classroom. One of the reasons that interlocutors often seem willing to spend time with me is precisely because they respond favorably to the idea the site could be a good way to help others throughout the world understand their own way of practicing and believing. Their participation is inevitably an act of sharing and performing.

Laura Elder suggests a way that the site could be expanded, or improved, from her perspective, by focusing attention by means of "reorganization and increased attention on the dynamics of cultural change," a priority in anthropology today.¹⁷

¹⁷ Elder, "Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change," 31.

Conspicuous in the crowd, the author was invited on stage during Fr. Mbaka's all night prayer service in Nigeria. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

Certainly it is possible to refocus on transnational networks, or processes of change. Global Catholic stories, however, have long been skewed to focus on transnational movements and actors, neglecting local particularities and local actors as shapers of their own lives. The Catholic Church may be, after all, the transnational, global institution par excellence. It seems to me that the work of identifying the many vernaculars that are often lost in those transnational and temporal discourses is the most important contribution *Catholics & Cultures* can make. The evidence is clear that many of these vernaculars have been, if not lost, rendered invisible beyond the local areas where they are rooted. Given that they still take the site's readers—including scholars—by surprise, it seems that there is still a great deal of work to be done first on the vernacular front.

The emphasis on temporal change that Elder suggests is one possible route (also explored to a limited degree in each entry), but again, this is actually a well-trod route, even if Elder wants to do it in new ways. We are all well-accustomed to thinking about religious change over time. Stories about temporal change in Catholicism are legion. Comparative studies are few.

I'm conscious, too, that the site will disappoint readers who believe that scholarly discourse equals critical discourse. Ordinary people seldom see themselves in the critical light that critical scholars might want, and the site is dedicated primarily to explaining how lay Catholics in different contexts see and understand their religious worlds. The site offers examples that could well be thought about critically in scholarship and the classroom, but an important first step to learning is understanding and representing fairly.

Nowhere do I feel more acutely the sense of having disappointed scholarly expectations than in the relationship between my own work on the site, and theory. I was drawn into the sociology of religion as a field because of an interest in theory, which led me to choose Peter Berger as a mentor. In graduate school, it was hammered home that data without theory isn't sociology.

At the same time, like Berger and others, I have had to come to grips with the failure of grand theorizing, which has made me much more cautious about the-



ory. There are lots of theoretical perspectives to disappoint—variously held dear by anthropologists, religious studies scholars, theologians, and sociologists, often esteemed in part as markers of disciplinary boundaries and identity.

Catholics & Cultures is certainly vulnerable to the charge that it is undertheorized, or under-interpreted.¹⁸ Yet I also bump up against the realization that a fundamental problem with theorization is that it is quick to make conclusions about the world based on very partial information. Secularization theory proved radically flawed because it universalized an experience centered largely in Europe, and projected it onto the rest of the world. Catholics & Cultures is a chance to build theory from the ground up, moving it to the background, allowing it to be bolstered by the opportunity for it to be formulated with a greater range of human experience in mind. Interpreting what a ritual or practice represents may need, for now, to entail ascription in small and localized ways.

For all these challenges, the site certainly stands out because it opens up new experiences and ways of being seldom before accessible to users. In that way, it is a first step, indeed an improvisational step.

CATEGORIZATION: PRACTICES & VALUES, THEMES AND VARIATION

Clearly, as a number of papers here have argued, thematic categorization, and drawing threads across themes, is a valued exercise and still a challenging one. Currently thematization is most fully addressed in a large section of the site titled “Practices & Values,” a section that Kaell says she turns to most often, but that other papers ask for more from.¹⁹ I concur that the classificatory scaffolding is “rather conventional” but continue to struggle with how best to classify in ways useful for both academic and non-academic audiences.²⁰ Some of the challenge lies in how viewers come to the site, through Google searches that don’t likely seek out information using the frames and concepts that scholars might like. Scholars may be interested

18 Wong, “Catholics & Cultures,” 100.

19 Schmalz, “Introducing Catholics & Cultures,” 5-7; Wong, “Catholics & Cultures” 95-99; Kaell, “The Value of Online Resources,” 89.

20 Schmalz, “Introducing Catholics & Cultures,” 5.

in themes like embodiment, but it doesn't seem as though too many others search for "embodiment and Catholicism." Other ways to search, say, for indigenous folk practices risk marginalizing those practices as somehow less Catholic.²¹

We surely have to think about how to find tagging and categorization tools that are useful in tracing themes across cultures in comparative fashion. The sort of motif-tracing Schmalz suggests could have a place as a distinct scholarly tool under "Educator Resources," with thematic links more suitable to academic than popular readers.²² Whether or how to trace any "routes" that link these remains a more difficult, vexing question, perhaps work for a different project.²³ Some of the earliest-posted articles could also be revisited to build in links to later-posted ones, which tend, for obvious reasons, to have more links. Certainly on the Catholics & Cultures site, categorizing needs to be a flexible, improvisational task, something that tagging may be suitable for.

IMPROVISATION IN ACTION: GROWING A FIELD, AND TEACHING WHAT WE'RE NOT TRAINED TO TEACH

Mara Brecht's essay addresses important ways that Catholics & Cultures could be useful in the many theology classes "that are not designed to be courses in global Catholicism."²⁴ In fact, the great majority of courses in theology and religious studies are not designed as courses in global Catholicism, but more and more faculty seem to recognize the need to broaden the lens to include it. Hillary Kaell identifies the challenge: teaching global Catholicism entails teaching about contexts that we probably don't know much—or enough—about. When engaging Catholics & Cultures material, faculty are often learning at the same time as their students, as she does.²⁵

Obviously we should teach out of expertise. But for anyone who peruses the site enough, it also ought to become clear how much even we experts don't know. I've

21 Wong, "Catholics & Cultures," 99.

22 Schmalz, "Introducing Catholics & Cultures," 7.

23 Schmalz, "Introducing Catholics & Cultures," 7; Elder, "Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change," 30-36.

24 Brecht, "A Widened Angle of View," 24.

25 Kaell, "The Value of Online Resources," 85.



regularly spoken to prominent scholars of Catholicism who are completely startled to learn of the very existence of some huge feast or regionally typical ritual featured on the site. Teachers need in-depth studies and theories to make sense of the pluralism, but these are few. Moreover, I regard it as problematic to rely on theories developed without reference to so much of Catholic lived experience. The broad work that *Catholics & Cultures* fosters is, as I see it, an inherently improvisational enterprise. We want to teach about it, but we have to learn something about it as we go along.

In fall 2020, having realized that my wings were clipped and that much of the research that I wanted to do would have to be on hold, I took the opportunity to return to the classroom to a newly designed Ethnography of Global Catholicism class, a late curricular entry that turned out to be a relatively small, Zoom-based seminar. The course was designed to have students do their own ethnographic research using the tools available in COVID-19 time. Happy as I was with the course, the one real longing that I noticed in course evaluations seemed to jibe with Stephanie Wong's request that I more thoroughly synthesize the *Catholics & Cultures* materials that I taught from.²⁶ Students were looking to me to heavily interpret and thematize, while I wanted to show them ethnographic examples from the site and ask them to grapple with them, to help them imagine their own ethnographies without turning their work into a search for examples that confirm pre-existing theories or categories.

That late-developed course itself was an act of improvisation, a sort of workshop in the art and practice of ethnography. In the end, I got them, mostly successfully, to live with the variety and multiplicity that they saw, and to improvise with me.

Improvisation remains at the heart of the website, too. The articles in this Journal issue reveal what a challenge that poses, but also remind me to own up to the improvisational nature of the work. The methodological triangulation that we discussed earlier is an act of improvisation, an additive process increasingly possible as I encounter the range of possibilities that I might not have imagined. So too is

26 The course also used scholarly books and examples, but I interpreted their request to refer to the website.

theorization. The challenge is how much to posit interim, smaller scale theorization, when I would still like to see many of the 30 countries further fleshed out, and more than 175 countries are left to be written about. Certainly those countries will yield more than just variation on already-known themes. Theory will have to be built from the ground up, provisionally, incrementally, improvisationally.

What will faculty do when they encounter forms of Catholic life that don't fit their own categorizations and prior theoretical and pedagogical goals? I've been surprised, judging by what I can find out about website traffic using Google analytics, that some articles about what I take to be the most original, even unique aspects of Catholic life (the dances at La Tirana are one example) have not had the traction the way others have, despite being promoted on our main page. I suspect that it's because they don't clearly reflect the stories that people want to tell, or know how to tell, or want told to them. This is true for both popular readers and in the classroom. The question, "What do we do with this information?" does hang over stories like that, and thus the whole project. Do things like this, even if they draw huge participation, simply remain as "exceptions" and "outliers," thereby marginalizing the people for whom they are central?

I believe that in addition to what we can teach students out of the accumulated knowledge that we inherit from our disciplines, some of the best teaching happens when we are pushed to improvise, to think in public with our students. Many of these essays provide great examples of that work, and it will take more of that thinking in public to teach global Catholicism and to improve the site and grow the field.

I understand Catholics & Cultures not only as a tool and a resource. I also think of it as an invitation to do that work together, to have others join in interpreting and categorizing what the site brings to light.

Though I agree with Schmalz, as I quoted in the outset of this article, that the primary value of the site may be in the classroom, I haven't given up on the notion that the project can change what happens in elite academic circles, though I don't have a particular agenda for how that should happen. Elite conversations ought



to be open to change upon encountering new data. I am convinced that to the degree the site calls attention to important elements of Catholic life that are heretofore ignored, Theology and Religious Studies should change by exposure to the experiences brought to light. And I don't expect that what's left to find are merely variations on already known themes.

The field has a long way to grow. This issue of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, like the Chicago conference, is a welcome step in that direction.

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