

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ERICK BERRELLEZA, S.J. is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Boston University. His research interests lie primarily in the sociology of religion and urban sociology. His current work focuses on lived religion and place. The Boisi Center is excited to welcome Berrelleza as a visiting scholar during the next academic year, 2019-2020. The following conversation centers on research Berrelleza conducted on parish reconfiguration in Charlestown, MA, where he probed the lived religion of Latinos responding to a newly-merged bilingual Mass. It has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

ELLIOT: Can you begin by talking about the academic subfield of “everyday religion,” and how it helps us understand the intersection of religious institutions with other areas of life? Can you distinguish it from other approaches?

BERRELLEZA: There is still some debate about this in the field. My own advisor, Nancy Ammerman, is the theorist that I follow here. She introduces it by saying that “everyday religion” or “lived religion” follows the individual, but institutions matter, as well, and shouldn’t be excluded. In the beginning the pendulum swung too far in the other direction, where following the individual meant you weren’t studying official religion. But if the units of interest are the individuals, then the practices they engage at their religious institutions are also worth paying attention to. It is not so much what the belief is or what the official practice is, but trying to follow them. Some of their religious practices will continue to be in official institutions. It is a matter of how you approach the field, rather than what you exclude from inquiry.

The original idea was that we missed a lot of “religion” when we were only looking at what the official Church was saying. In theology, people would speak of the big “Tradition” as opposed to the little traditions of the people – the popular traditions. “Lived religion” or “everyday religion” was an attempt to get to what



matters to people – the everyday, embodied practices that they perform. Those can take place in religious institutions, but they can also take place in very ordinary, mundane places and spaces. Some of the examples that Nancy Ammerman found were sitting at a café after church talking to friends about how the week went – these kinds of check-in moments. That was where people were experiencing the transcendent. But it doesn’t exclude, as previously mentioned, that religious institutions are where those experiences take place, as well.

ELLIOT: In your project, where you studied an urban parish in Charlestown, MA, did you need to make that emphasis on the institution more explicit?

BERRELLEZA: Yes. In my own project, I was looking at how different groups of people from different social classes were approaching everyday religion and interacting in one space. The church was just one of those sites. As we discussed at

the end of my talk, some of those spaces are also outside of the church. For the Latinos in my study, the people also engaged in small group gatherings – home churches, in a way – where they would sing religious songs or read some kind of scripture. Following the individual allows you to capture that. If you just focus on the institutional church, those home gatherings wouldn’t be in the picture.

ELLIOT: Just to continue with that, how do you explain the Latino population attending institutional services less while continuing to gather in the home? How does this relate to theories of secularization?

BERRELLEZA: What I was finding at my own research site is that the lived religion, or the religion of these people, started to become embodied in home practices because the institutional church was no longer offering what they were looking for after they merged the Spanish Mass into a bilingual service. The Mass

was no longer in the language where they could “feel their religion,” as one respondent said. So these home gatherings were spaces where they were more comfortable. They were with people that they called their community. Benedict Anderson talks about who our “imagined communities” are. That home space was a way that they were carving out a religious niche for themselves, where religion could still be in their language. I don’t think it was that it was taking place instead of going to church. Some of them were continuing to go. There were others who stopped going to celebrate Mass and just went to these home gatherings. Both occurrences were going on. This was what my research was pointing to: what the church offers matters, because people interpret it as whether or not they are welcome there to exercise their religious beliefs and practices.

ELLIOT: Talking about the church specifically, how does multiculturalism play in, both as an ideal and as a practice? How is it that the multicultural Mass didn’t have the same effect as the Mass in Spanish? If you could talk more about that, and the motivations of the priests and the others in the church when they decided to merge the Mass.

BERRELLEZA: The way it occurred is kind of fascinating. There was a parish survey that asked what kind of change should be made to the Mass schedule. It was looking at the limited resources – the one priest and the difficulty of trying to have other priests come in and cover these Masses. This was some years after the two Charlestown parishes merged, and the priest was continuing to reflect with his parish council: “What’s something we can do to address this possible future change that is already occurring?” The decision was to send out this survey, and the pastoral council discussed the results of that. It should be no surprise to us that the Latinos were the least represented in those surveys – that their Mass would be the one kind of taken away, because everyone else wants to protect their own Mass. Everyone has interests that they are putting forth in their survey responses.

Multiculturalism is an ideal, but it is also an interest that isn’t played out for each group in the same way. For the people that wanted to be seen as an inclusive, welcoming community, those who were gentrifying the neighborhood, it fit within their frame. If something looks

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more multicultural, they are willing to do it up to a degree. One of the respondents, for instance, said if it included too much Spanish, then it wouldn’t work out, because “I have little kids, and it isn’t really in our interest if the Mass is only in Spanish because we won’t understand what’s going on.”

It is symbolic in a way. It is embracing the symbolic ideal of wanting to be inclusive, and the Latinos were a visible form of that symbol to hold up in their community. It wasn’t in the best interest of the Latinos, though, to celebrate in English or in a bilingual Mass, because they could no longer feel their Mass. That is what that respondent was trying to point to, and why home gatherings gained salience, because in their homes they could still feel or pray in their own language.

I would reflect on it as, “Whose interests are being played out in an institutional church that embraces multiculturalism?” Multiculturalism is hard work. You have to bring people on board as you consider it, because everyone has different interests at play that they are trying to protect. In my research, I think that the Latinos and their interests were not fully brought along when considering it here. That’s the point that I was trying to make.

ELLIOT: How is it that gentrifiers might idealize the “local parish”? How does multiculturalism become messier in practice, and interfere with some of the benefits that the local parish had served for other populations, like Latinos or the poor, now that gentrifiers are making locality a priority?

BERRELLEZA: I do not think the Spanish language itself was part of the inclusivity they wanted to create in terms of how they welcome. That was a decision made in the hierarchical structure of the church by the pastor with the support of his parish council, but it was not inconsistent with the gentrifiers when it was passed along to them, saying, “This is what we are going to do now.” It fit in within the ideals that they were playing out, just as they would want to be inclusive of any other type of person moving into the neighborhood. This parish was representative of that ideal of shared space.

In that sense, the parish fits in with the neighborhood because it starts to gather people from the neighborhood, but they are carving out their own religious niche, in a way, right? They are trying to create and promote their own interests, as I was saying before. They are trying to say, “We’re a multicultural place. We’re a place that other people like us can come and gather, whatever that turns out to be.” It means other young professionals, other people with families. It’s a place where a diverse group of people can come and gather.

ELLIOT: In this way, how is the church a carrier of gentrification, or of modernity?

BERRELLEZA: I think this is where it was kind of unintentional, that this decision that they were making about Mass was very practical. There’s not a lot of Spanish-speaking priests. Sometimes this one parish priest has to travel. So how do you continue to provide for the community at large?

This parish ended up promoting the gentrification ideal in a number of ways. The survey results showed overwhelmingly that people did not want to do away with their own Mass time, right? That’s

no surprise. But the Latinos, who had the smallest population, were going to lose out in that. We should pay attention to what surveys are saying, because even though numerically you might say this is what the survey results show us, it may not show us how the smallest voices or those who are the most marginalized are going to be affected. Here, losing a Spanish language Mass made sense to the parish council and to the vast majority of the people, but it didn't make sense for the Latinos themselves.

For these institutional decisions, while resources are, of course, limited, if something's a priority, we're going to make space and give resources to it. There have to be ways of testing whether our multicultural frame is really able to be held by the entire congregation with all its diverse members. And in this parish, with the three diverse groups, is it a frame that is consistent with each of the groups, or not?

ELLIOT: The method that you chose – using in-depth interviews and ethnography – matters, because within the church you have a survey that gives you one picture while it leaves out this other very important picture. Everyday religion seems important as it uses these methods to reveal something that survey results cannot actually get to in the same way or might overlook.

BERRELLEZA: It gives us a depth of knowledge. I think both are important. Survey research helps us get a bigger picture. But ethnography and in-depth interviewing allows us to gain deeper knowledge about some of the processes that the surveys are pointing out. In some ways, you need both. We relied on surveys for a long time in religion. We counted people numerically according to whether they attended worship services or how frequently they attended. That was the litmus test for whether they believed or not. Or we asked them about their beliefs to see if they were consistent with their denomination's beliefs. But that can only take you so far.

Everyday religion shows us that religion has not vanished, that people are praying in different ways, that some people are



continuing to embody religious practices in more ordinary ways than others. When we defined a practice as located only within a religious congregation, we were missing other kinds of negotiations that were taking place, other ways that people were embodying religious practices or having spiritual experiences through the routine – through what was seemingly mundane. This is what lived religion is trying to say.

ELLIOT: Should there be a distinction between the more communal home services you observed versus individual spiritual practices, like those that appear in *Pew* surveys? Those surveys often talk about meditation, or other practices that can be done in solitude, but that might replace religious practices that otherwise would have taken place in an institution. How do you account for that? How do you balance that question when you're thinking through the role of everyday religion in working with and against a secularization thesis?

BERRELLEZA: In this case with the Latinos, religion is still happening in a communal form, so it is hard to talk about. Even though they have moved into a home, it's not their home, right? They're still gathering at someone else's home. There's still a communal aspect, and some of them, at least, are still going to church, whether it's the one in question for this study or whether it is a parish across the bridge into other communities, like in Everett or Revere. It's not replacing it. In some ways, it was maintaining a link to a past community – that former parish community that closed, or the former Mass community

that was suppressed and merged into this new bilingual service.

Onto the secularization thesis: well, gentrifiers are still worshipping, right? Latinos are still coming to Mass. Lived religion indicates that embodied practices are still happening for them. But if we say that it is different, if we are looking at secularization as changing or privatizing, my research says that this community is still participating in communal forms of prayer. I didn't explore other private types of prayers that they were engaging in, because I was focusing on the interactions of these groups through their religious site, and was pulled out of that to follow them into these home gatherings. But it was really to see how the interactions were shaping and taking place in this newer space, as well.

ELLIOT: One of our undergraduate research fellows, Jorge Mejía, has a question for you. He referenced a *Business Insider* statistic noting that Latinos are one of the fastest-growing U.S. populations. He's wondering, what do you think will be and become of the religious identities of Latinos as that increases? Do you think that the kind of trends that you saw are something we can expect to see reflected in other places?

BERRELLEZA: The context is important – that my research took place in the Northeast and not in the West or in the South, where Latino populations are more abundant and prevalent. In those places, there would be little question over whether they needed a Spanish Mass. But here, where the immigrant population is smaller, the declining numbers seem to say there aren't enough Latinos to celebrate a Mass in their language. It is unique to the Northeast; place matters for the types of interactions that are occurring.

The other process that is shaping it is, of course, the gentrification story: that there is out-movement of some people, that newcomers are entering with their own religious interests and trying to shape what this congregation looks like. But really – and this gets to my broader question – geography matters. Mergers and closing churches are unique to the

Northeast, in a way. On the West Coast, the Catholic Church is opening new churches. The churches are full. The types of gatherings are different, because communities are bigger. I do think that if this kind of merger were to take place in another setting, it would reveal distinct processes.

The numbers of Catholics in the U.S. are propped up a bit because of Latino immigrants. You look at the numbers and where the growth is, it is due to Latin American immigrants and other immigrant groups, and not so much to the traditional Anglo-Catholic population.

ELLIOT: Could you talk more about place, space, and geography – how you think about those in this research project and maybe in the next one? What does it mean when we make a space sacred?

BERRELLEZA: Place and space, the geography, it all matters. It is material that people engage and that shapes and is shaping religious practices. But people also engage geography and mold their religious practices according to what is available. In the context of a religious space, a church that is designed like an auditorium will not allow for the same kind of isolation – the Latinos secluded in the back – that was occurring in the research site at the parish in Charlestown. So a religious space matters in that way.

Religious spaces are also carved out in different ways, as is clear with the home gatherings. Something that is seemingly ordinary – many people have homes – can be carved out and made into a religious space, a religious site.

This is what I'm thinking with my broader project: when congregations are not welcoming of immigrant populations or do not offer services in Spanish, the spaces and sites for religious practice still need to take place somewhere. People aren't going to give them up or abandon them. So, where are the places that people start to pray? What are the new practices that emerge when the given context does not really allow for their traditional religious practices – if their language, for instance, isn't available

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in their given church or denomination? That's one aspect.

Another aspect is geography. The South is going to offer something very different from the Northeast. My next project is down in North Carolina. One of the questions I will look at is how immigration is shaping what practices are possible, because I think the stigma attached to immigrants in the U.S. is affecting who will congregate together and whether established congregations will see it as a necessity to welcome immigrants or not.

Another aspect comes with the question of immigration status, of whether they are documented or not. This is something I experienced when I was in Phoenix, Arizona; if there was a checkpoint on

the way to church, people just wouldn't come. And again, this structure interacts with the idea that people are not going to give up their religion; one way or another, they are going to find ways for its salience to remain and for their practices to still take place. It is not always going to be within the institution – to refer to your secularization point again – but that doesn't mean that religion isn't occurring in some other way.

This is why the individual needs to be the unit of analysis – to follow them into particular groups, and to find the nuance that some of these surveys might miss.

ELLIOT: Thanks, Erick. Do you have anything else you want to add?

BERRELLEZA: I've tried to be very careful not to say what the church should have done in cases like the one in Charlestown. I want to present what occurred at *this* place. Still, my research findings reveal that we must pay attention to whose interests are being played out in religious congregations during times of transition.

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