



FINAL VERSION



Devotions, promises and miracles: How religious beliefs and practices support poor people's agency in Latin American

Ana Lourdes Suárez ^a and Juan Martín López Fianza ^b


^aSocial Science Department Catholic University of Argentina, CONICET, Buenos Aires, Argentina; ^bSocial Science Department Catholic University of Argentina, Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT

The article addresses Latin American poor people's religious beliefs and practices, analysing particularly three of them: devotion, promise, and miracle. We argue that these three religious features are related to people's agency and can have impact on personal and community wellbeing. The data that support the analysis come from a case study in Buenos Aires based on two sources: 1. A questionnaire applied to a representative sample of Buenos Aires slum inhabitants. 2. In-depth interviews of women living in poor settlements. The theoretical discussions link the concept of popular religiosity as it is being addressed in Latin America, with approaches that ~~stress on~~ agency. The main argument is that the bodily, emotional, and relational aspects of religion, framed within a cosmological and holistic cultural matrix, shape poor people's agency with positive outcomes.

KEYWORDS Poverty; agency; South America; popular religiosity; religious practices

Introduction

Since the secularisation theory, which in its most radical formulation by enlightened intellectuals, argued that religion would gradually disappear from the public sphere, different insights are proving helpful to highlight religion's social impact. This article examines the role religion plays in fostering agency and capability expansion among poor people. The main questions are as follows: Does religion enlarge poor people's horizons opening up possibilities and strength for agency? How does it do it? The article plores religious features – beliefs, practices and rituals – that are 'positively' impacting on poor people's lives and communities.

Our focus is on Latin American poor people's expressions of faith, resumed in the concept of popular religiosity. These expressions are diverse and displayed in plenty of rituals, devotions, beliefs, narratives and so on. Religion – or rather what refers to the sacred – is thus part of poor people's lives and their matrix of meanings and practices.

CONTACT Ana Lourdes Suárez  analourdessuarez@gmail.com

© 2022 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

The first part of the paper engages in a theoretical discussion linking the concept of popular religiosity as it is being addressed in Latin American social and religious studies perspectives, with both the capability approach and cultural-anthropological understandings. The purpose is to construct an understanding of agency grounded in Latin American popular religiosity. The second part of the paper addresses poor people's religious beliefs and practices in Buenos Aires, analysing particularly three practices and beliefs: devotion, promise and miracle. We argue that these practices are related to believer's agency and can impact both on personal and community wellbeing. In the third and main part of this writing, we illustrate our arguments with two women's life histories. These narratives seek to understand how religion is lived and experienced by believers; they help to highlight the role of religious beliefs and practices in creating an emotional and embodied connection to the transcendent that fosters agency and expands capabilities.¹ The main argument of the article is that religion plays a large role in shaping poor Latin American Christian's agency by helping support their religious and holistic cultural matrix from which they feed a positive spirituality that has social impact. This spiritually and emotionally framed agency, while not usually impacting on overcoming poverty, it does help to cope with it.

The data that support the analysis come from two sources. The main one: in-depth interviews applied in 2011–12 to women living in poor Greater Buenos Aires settlements. These interviews at the ethnographic approach of this case study² enabled us to delve into the poor women's daily expressions of faith, their devotions and promises, and in their 'miracles' storytelling. The interviews support the phenomenological analysis that we make about the underlying spirituality and agency fed by such practices. We highlight the empirical relationships between the religious/spiritual experiences of these women and their support for agency, capability expansion, and community wellbeing. The second source consists of data provided by a questionnaire applied in 2014 to a representative sample of 400 inhabitants of Buenos Aires slums. Its purpose was to address their religious beliefs, practices, devotions, affiliation, as well as their confidence in religious institutions and leaders. We recourse to these statistical data to underline the incidence that certain practices and beliefs have among poor people from Latin American Christian traditions.

Latin American popular religiosity and agency

Different perspectives on religious studies show that religion entails more than the mere belief in God or in transcendence. Religion is a space to which many people resort to understand the world and their place in it. People turn to religion to find deeper meanings to their lives, their worries, their sorrows, and joys (Bradley 2009). In religion, among other issues, they

find those answers that neither science nor technology is able to provide; they find meaning to injustice, and moral basis on which to judge their own and others acts. The religious dimension is crucial in the development of spiritual and moral beliefs, resulting in social relationships that affect people's lives.

The importance of religion lies from a philosophical/ethical perspective, summing up the above paragraph its linkage to the right every person has to find meaning to his/her life and in living the life he/she has reasons to value (Sen 1999). This argument puts religion on line with Clifford Geertz's seminal argument, understood as meaning-articulating systems that feed people's actions (Geertz 1973). Religious traditions, thus can be conceived as vivid forces that deeply influence people's construction of meanings about the world in moral, social and intellectual terms, and therefore as invaluable support for people's hopes and wishes (Deneulin and Bano 2009). These religious traditions, which are as dynamic and heterogeneous as cultural traditions, are somehow agency givers since they impact on people's ability to act on what they value and have reason to value (Sen 1999).

Latin America's popular religiosity, we argue, following Asad (1993) insights, can be approached as both a discursive and an embodied tradition that creates religious practices in specific places at specific times. This approach prevents taking Geertz's definition proposed above, as a universalist or transhistorical one, nor as a cultural system working on its own terms without taking power into account, as Asad (1993) has rightly argued. The concept of Latin American popular religiosity, as culture-maker, integrated into specific historical processes, is used in Latin America both from academic and pastoral-theological approaches. It is broadly understood as poor people's manifestations of ways of being, of living, and of expressing a connection with the sacred (Martin 2009).

Entering the terrain of Latin American popular religiosity from an anthropological perspective allows broadening the above understanding of religion. It highlights relational bodily and emotional issues. Its theoretical understanding is constructed at the intersection of two approaches, developed mostly by Latin American scholars, which go beyond a merely belief-based and/or a meaning-making understanding of religion. The first approach stresses the type and degree of the bond with religion as a socially established and instituted space: beliefs, dogma, practices and institutional rituals (De la Torre and Martin 2016). The approach is conceptually summarised in the *in-between* metaphor, that is, between the institutionalised religion and the individualised spirituality (De la Torre 2012).

The second approach can be summarised by Parker (2015) understanding of *a different logic*. He defines this approach as 'an alternative to the illustrated rationality and to the kind of rationalised faith which is its byproduct' (Parker 2015, 192). A different logic 'which is not antilogic or a primitive state of the

capacity of reasoning – and in this sense it is not prelogical – but represents the use of reason under another system, much more empirical and symbolic at the same time; more dialectical and with more wisdom than Cartesian and positivist’ (Parker 2015, 370). This concept highlights the positive creativity of poor people’s culture. It refers to a *different logic* in cultural and symbolic terms which becomes clear in meaning structuring and religious practices in the Latin-American cultural matrix. The fundamental attributes of this logic, as Semán (2001) has pointed out, are three. It is cosmological: it presupposes that ‘the sacred’ is found in a continuous ‘beyond’ everyday experience. Second, it is holistic: a continuum of experiences belonging to categories that modernity usually presents as separate. Third, it is relational: it emphasises the character of being part of totalities. These three features define, jointly, a conception of the world that informs the perception of body, of social bonds, and of ‘the sacred’. They account ~~as well~~ for an approach to religion ~~existing~~ as a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving people of all ages as well as the many sacred figures they hold dear (Orsi 2004), an account that goes beyond understanding religion as a medium of making meanings.

Latin American popular religiosity, understood at the junction of the two approaches presented above, enables to better understand the poor’s pursuit of recognition, identity and transformation. Hence, from our perspective, it is an expression of the range of meanings, identities, and relationships of people, which transfers to their ‘agency’, desires and hopes. The many expressions of popular religiosity (rituals, devotions, beliefs, etc.) prove that structures that ignore what liberal-modern approaches consider pre-modern do not understand its vital and transforming power.

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes change and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being (Mahmood 2005, 14). Latin American popular religiosity relates to specific ways of being, enabling and shaping agency through channels that impact on social transformation. The two women’s narratives we will present later in this writing account for this grounded understanding of agency. They illustrate, following Burke (2012) classification, both empowerment and instrumental agency approaches. The particular way in which these women relate to Christian religious doctrine and practices makes them feel empowered in their everyday lives, helping them cope with the hardships of poverty. Their way of being religious women has non-religious outcomes positively impacting the social life of their communities.

Before we dig further into the two narratives, next section presents some statistical data that highlights the relevance of practices and beliefs embedded in Latin American popular religiosity. Statistics are presented with theoretical discussion on each of the religious issues presented so as to understand how they work in specific sociohistorical contexts.

Approaching Buenos Aires poor people religious characteristics

This section assesses some poor people believers' expressions of faith. Our data source, as already stated, comes from a questionnaire applied to the poorest of Buenos Aires inhabitants: those living in slums. They represent around 10% of Buenos Aires inhabitants. We describe their religious beliefs, affiliation and practices, assessing widely widespread religious practices in marginal settlements: making a 'promise' to a religious figure. We link that practice to three expressions of religious faith: 1. Expressing devotion to religious figures, 2. Making a promise to a religious figure, and 3. Having a miracle experience. We argue that these expressions of popular religiosity are related to agency.

Devotions, promises and miracles

Religious devotions result from believer's sense of esteem and admiration towards sacred figures/beings. They imply an emotional bond that becomes explicit through practices and rituals. Promises are an expression of these practices; therefore, they can be approached as forms that maintain alive devotions to transcendent figures.

The promise, as an expression of the bond with a figure/being-object of devotion, is a vow made together with a request directed to God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary or a saint. This religious practice, very common in the catholic tradition, entails asking for a favour to a saint or virgin in return for a personal sacrifice. Most of these promises are intimate and celebrated privately. A person could, for instance, go on a pilgrimage, pray a *novena*³ or some Rosaries as part of her promise. Sometimes, people make important sacrifices, such as knee-walking in a sanctuary until they reach the saint or virgin to whom the promise was made. This practice implies that people are bound to an obligation, reciprocity and a debt. According to Marcel Mauss' understanding (Mauss 1990), it is framed in the logic of *gift and counter-gift*, benefits and compensation, responsibilities and differential religious obligations.

Miracles refer to the belief that supernatural forces have worked towards a positive outcome. The outcome associated with a miracle is assumed as framed in a non-rational or scientific explanation.

What are poor people's devotions? Are they related to the practice of making a promise? How widespread is this practice? What are their main characteristics? Do people believe in miracles? How does this belief impact their lives? Some data help to approach an answer.

Aggregate data...

Our recent study, focused on beliefs, devotions and religious practices of slums dwellers in the City of Buenos Aires, shows the incidence of the religious practices previously discussed. The research reveals that people express their faith and maintain it alive through devotions and a variety of religious practices displayed in different places and regularity (Suárez 2015).

As in the rest of the city, the great majority of Buenos Aires slum residents are Christians mostly identified with Catholicism (76.4%). However, Christian diversity is higher among poor people. While only around 3% of Buenos Aires population recognises itself as Evangelical; in the slums, the percentage rises to about 12.3%. The great majority of these Evangelicals are Pentecostals affiliated to very small and marginal churches located inside the slums. In lower proportions, there are Adventists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. There is also a very low recognised affiliation to Afro-Brazilian. Finally, those with no religious adscription have an incidence of 7.5%. Only 5% claim not to believe in God.

The survey also inquired about the boundaries between religious groups. One interesting finding relates to 'porosity' between adscriptions, with many residents attending rituals and events of different denominations, e.g. venerating the Virgin Mary while belonging to a Pentecostal Church. This porosity and mutual relationship between different religious identities is high compared with other social sectors of the city, indicating that religious world is dynamic, particularly among poor people. Religious affiliation boundaries are permeable among most believers. In fact, 16% of the population in slums, according to our survey, has attended in the last year, celebrations, rituals or talks of a different religion than theirs. This group is made up mostly of Catholic members (65.6%) – usually attending evangelical events.

Both, Pentecostals and Catholic affiliates express their faith through several practices that are either individual or collective, private or public, under institutional inspiration or not. Mass or worship attendance is one among many other religious practices, such as: praying at home (an individual and private practice), participating in a pilgrim that takes place in the streets of the neighbourhood (a collective and public practice); praying alone or with others in an unofficial sanctuary informally built in a public space; participating in the many rituals that take place in private or public spaces in honour of the dead; and so on.

Devotions to religious figures are widely widespread. In fact, 82% of slum inhabitants acknowledged being devotees of a saint, the Virgin Mary under one of her many advocacies or of Jesus Christ. Half of the people who reported having devotions mentioned the Virgin, and often they did so under some Virgin's advocacy.⁴ The Virgin symbolises protection, affection and unconditionality – virtues highly mentioned by respondents. Devotions to 'saints' are directed towards figures either officially recognised by the Church or not. These devotions are all framed within a belief emotionally expressed.⁵

Among the religious practices studied, making a promise (40%) and having a shrine at home (55%) are the ones with the highest occurrence; they are closely linked to the devotions mentioned above. Almost half of the respondents said to have made a promise to the Virgin, saint or Christ to whom they are devotees, implying confidence, commitment and engagement. Most of the religious figures/beings object of those 'promises' are part of their home shrines. In some of them, we might also find a dead relative photo, or a picture of Pope Francis – born in Buenos Aires. Some offerings, turned into objects or little paintings (*ex-votes*), are displayed to commemorate the miracle they believe to have witnessed. What impact has the presence of a shrine in people's religious practices? As it has not been asked in the questionnaire it is beyond our understanding. It is likely that it enables them to link together their world, their home, and the 'sacred'. They may be conceived as what Martin (2009) labels as 'practices of sacralisation': the many ways of constructing the sacred, of inscribing people, places and moments in a differentiated texture of the inhabited world.

Miracle receptiveness. A way to the holistic and cosmological matrix

According to modern and rational thinking, miracles are understood as exceptional⁶ and unexplained disruptions. However, for many people, they are part of their worlds. This understanding leads to two opposite positions: accepting it as if it was real, or to reject it. The exceptionality and lack of explanation of this disruption raises questions about its agent, meaning, efficiency and truth of what is understood to be a miracle. Within the modernity paradigm, these issues find no answer.

Our survey indicates that 84% of the respondents said they believe in miracles, regardless of their religious affiliation; two-third of them claim to have witnessed a miracle, and are ready to narrate it. They did so through one of the open questions of the questionnaire. Two types of miracles stand out: those related to health and those that involved safety in a life-threatening situation. Some narrative referred to extraordinary or inexplicable facts, for instance, being part of religious experiences such as visions. However, it is not the extraordinary that most abounds in their answers, but the reference to everyday experiences that are perceived

under the lens of a miracle: being in good health, having a job, a healthy birth, or an unexpected benefit. Some narratives also referred to personal accomplishments, assessing that only with the divine help they were able to reach their goals. These narratives, in sort, highlight that the sacred is part of their reality.

The widespread belief in miracles, not just as plausible 'dogma' but as a transcendence force in people's lives, and as part of their vital experience, is a path understanding the holistic and cosmological dimensions present in the poor people's matrix of meaning. The cosmological experience that impacted on poor people's lives implies that the sacred is understood by them as part of reality; hence, the difference between the transcendent and immanent, between the natural and the supernatural, becomes less clear. In this context, divine forces are always there to act. Miracles are not extraordinary events; they can occur in everyday life. The belief of having been benefitted by a miracle leads to an attitude of gratitude. The holistic experience leads to conceive an intrinsic link and a deep continuity between the physical, the moral and the spiritual spheres. It leads to act, therefore, from an approach that highlights totality and wholeness, rather than fragmentation (Semán 2001, 45–74). Feeling gratitude feeds the gift and counter-gift dynamic, leading thus to agency.

Connected with the cosmological dimension, this holism surpasses the individual and it is inserted in a broader context in which the sacred sphere is integrated in such a way that 'figures/beings' or events of that sphere are believed to impact on welfare or suffering. Therefore, good (through miracle) and evil forces alike can enter people's lives. The evil force results from people's behaviour. Thus, an illness or an unfortunate event may well be consequence of a misconduct, the jealousy of others, curses received, or the 'anger' of a spiritual force towards an unfulfilled promise.⁸

From a cosmologic and a holistic understanding, a promise to a figure of devotion expresses the density of a framework in which the transcendence and the immanence merge in an order in which human actions guide the course of energy. The belief in supernatural forces operating in everyday life, their mediation through personal effort crystallised in the practice of the promise, relates beliefs directly with emotions. Pain, surprise, admiration, gratitude, etc. they are all emotions intertwined in these processes. Emotions from which is woven a spirituality fed in prescriptions and beliefs taught by religious institutions, but that go far beyond them. Emotions that shape a way of being in the world and views that feed agency through a positive way of connecting to others. It provides a sense of wellbeing and happiness.

Narratives of poor women's devotions, promises and miracles

Why and how are religious beliefs and practices related with agency? Why can we link the religious practice of making a promise, and of experiencing a miracle with agency and community wellbeing? To address these questions, we need to understand how people's life is influenced by their beliefs, rituals and practices.

This section focuses on ~~poor women's~~ life narratives with whom we met within the framework of a research project concluded in 2014.⁹ The leading question of the project was how these women gave meaning to different situations they had experienced throughout their lives, as well as the turning points in them. For this article, we have chosen two of these women – Delia and Marta – who live in a poor Buenos Aires neighbourhood, and we have analysed parts of their narratives. The life trajectories of these two middle-aged women reveal class and gender disadvantages that many women living in poor settlements suffer. Dropouts, illnesses, loss, physical and symbolic violence, disappointment and exclusion present in Marta and Delia's lives reproduce the profile of thousands of women who struggle daily for both, their own, and their families' survival. They go through the diverse situations of their lives by giving them meaning, and through rituals and practices that motorise their daily lives and give them reasons to hope. We first briefly introduce their life trajectories. Then, we focus on those aspects of their narratives that refer to the promise, linked to devotions, and to the experience of miracle. We stress on the type of agency strengthened by these religious practices.

Introducing Delia and Marta

Delia was born in 1957 in a rural area in a northern state of Argentina. She is the fourth of 10 children. When her mother and elder sisters moved to Buenos Aires to work in domestic service, the youngest child was 6 months old. In her childhood, she endured domestic burdens, her mother's migration, and a father she had to take care of. She left school at the age of 10 to look after her siblings and her father. She was brought up to be submissive: 'Women do not have voice'. She migrated to Buenos Aires at 14 to work as a domestic worker and had no legal documentation until she was 18. At the time of the interview, her husband had died, she had one daughter, had completed secondary school and catechist formation. She was working in women's health centre founded by Catholic nuns. Her life had been marked by cancer believed to be terminal, from which she has since recovered.

Marta was born in 1963 in the state of Buenos Aires, the youngest of nine children. Her mother died when she was nine. As a child, she suffered work, neglect, violence and exclusion. She never went to school, and

defines herself as illiterate. She often went hungry and was undernourished, as a result of which she became anaemic. Her father, a drunkard, was very violent with the children: 'We have many scars', she says. She has worked in domestic service and waste collection, had nine children, and never legally married. Her common-law husband spent 11 years in jail, and she has been in charge of four additional children abandoned by his previous partner. By the time of the interview, three of her children were drug addicts and one had committed suicide, which affected her terribly. At present, she is the coordinator of a soup kitchen. In her kitchen, she receives young people at risk of drug addiction, and organises special activities for them. She is the pillar of the community formed around the soup kitchen.

Promise, devotion and miracle in Delia's narrative

One of the turning points in Delia's life was overcoming cancer. She told us

Fifteen years ago, when my daughter was about to turn fifteen years old, I was having a nap and I started having fever, fever, fever and one breast started growing. It was an awesome thing [...] I went to the doctor. He said that we had to remove it for biopsy, and I said 'if you want you can remove the tumour for the biopsy but without going under surgery. No one will touch me and I will live as long as I have to live' [...] The day we were celebrating my daughter's 15 years birthday I entered the Church of San Miguel. I found myself fairly facing Jesus (*The Lord of Mailin*) and I told him that if he would let me celebrate my daughter's birthday, he could take me [...] And that if he would leave me alive, I would pray the *novena* every year (Delia 2011).

Her story is framed within the language of promises and miracles. Through her devotion to the Mailin Lord (*el Señor de los Milagros de Mailín*), she expresses her bond to Jesus' figure: 'I told Our Lord of Mailin that if he would let me celebrate my daughter's birthday ...' to whom she directs the promise: 'If he would leave me alive, I would pray the *novena* every year'. Later on in the interview, she describes how she overcomes her illness framing her narrative through the language of miracles: 'I am sure it was a miracle ... I was supposed to die ... I know it was a miracle ...'. Since then she keeps doing the *novena* at her home since that was part of her promise. She does it with prayer-dancing (*reza-bailes*) together with other people who are also devotees of *el Señor de Mailin*. She is certain that she healed thanks to a miracle, thus her gratitude goes beyond the joyful fulfilment of her promise, which consists of a journey from Santiago del Estero -her state of birth- to Buenos Aires and it enables her to generate a bond with the big city.¹⁰ Delia takes part in this popular celebration. She brings all her neighbours together at home to pray a *novena*, the *reza-baile* and attends Mass,

strengthening the bonds and the sense of belonging. She is a member of 'Mailin' missionaries. Whilst the experience of her devotion changes, Delia undergoes a transformation in her worldview, in the way she experiences the sacred, in her spirituality and in her rituals.

It is worth highlighting, the particular way in which devotions, promises, rituals, and miracles are connected in this story. Delia's promise turns to a religious figure: the Lord of Mailin's Miracles (*El Señor de los Milagros de Mailín*) that is familiar in her context of socialisation – Santiago del Estero. This figure, which stands with her throughout her life, assures her safety and a sense of belonging. Besides, this figure connects her with the sacred, the **transcendence**. At a critical point in her life, she resorts to him, she makes a promise **strengthening** even more **the bond**; she expects him to be the miracle mediator. Faced **with** the certainty that her figure of devotion fulfilled its part of the 'pact', she does not hesitate to meet hers. The *novena* she annually prays in fulfilment of the promise, takes place in the context of a ritual that not only allows her to preserve the link but also recreates it through paths where popular religiosity is still evident, **finding** renewed ways of expression (as her stories about *de reza-bailes* revealed).

Delia believes that she healed due to a miracle. She conceives it as an extraordinary event – as she pointed out several times during the interview-. She holds an attitude of gratitude, which is framed within a view in which miracles are ordinary experiences. Thus, these kinds of experiences are a proof of her cosmological matrix of meaning articulation. In her words ...

Every day you have a miracle that you may not be aware of. And if you analyse it, things happen for a reason, and I constantly say that Jesus is always with me. It is a very deep experience [...] very deep, in fact miracles, because one sometimes does not pay attention to it, but they are always there. The fact that I healed my cancer, I get health checks every year, that's something big, it is a miracle, how can I not believe, how can I not have faith (Delia 2011).

Delia's strong conviction leads her to seek peace in her life, to give priority to bonds, relationships, and gatherings. It also explains her social commitment; she helps at a community centre in her neighbourhood in which various services are offered: teaching, support to women who suffered home violence, psychological support, etc. It resumes her vital experience, her life path and her idea that miracles are part of our daily lives; life itself is a 'miracle' that should be greeted with gratitude.

Promise, devotion and miracle in Marta's narrative

In Marta's narrative, the religious practice of making a promise appears after her son's death. Therefore, the miracle in this case, was unable to mend the situation, meaning that its positive force was absent. The figure of her devotion is the Virgin of Lujan, with whom she builds bonds and becomes the main figure in her ~~worldwide~~. Let us take a look at her story ...

A person without faith cannot succeed, is unable to move forward, without faith ... I can tell you that because I have recently lost a little of my faith. I suffered a misfortune and for me there was no God, the Virgin, nothing ... I said no ... when a son is taken from you, how can you have faith? ... I was angry with the Virgin of Lujan. I was absolutely angry at her, because my son was a pilgrim boy and She left him alone. He was about to accomplished ten years of pilgrimage. I got mad at Her [...] Due to my despair I stayed away from God and from the Virgin [...] I left and when I got home, you know what I found? The image of the Virgin that I had broken at home when I was told that my son was dead. Until today I have the Virgin's chalk mark. But afterwards, I went to Lujan, I needed to apologise ... they were offering Mass and I went to Mass and I cried so much for the Virgin to forgive me, forgive me and to relieve my pain ... I said no, I'm not going to get angry with the Mother because she is relieving my pain. I'll go on knees to apologise. And I did so. Within two months, after Jona's death, I went on my knees to call for help and it seems that today I'm relieved (Marta 2012).

Marta told us she made a promise to the Virgin, a pledge of forgiveness: going to the Basilica of Lujan for eight consecutive Sundays.

I have fulfilled my promise [...] And you know, I spent all that night crying ... the bloody tears ... it is as if they are gone. I feel relieved, relieved at everything that happened. I invoke myself to God and to the Virgin of Lujan, it makes me feel good. Whenever I'm feeling low, I say no, and I recommend myself to the Virgin, and to God for help. They help me move forwards [...] She took my son so that he would not suffer any longer; because my son was an addict, such an addict that he stole things to me. He was 22 years [...] The Virgin took him with her for a reason. I know he is with God and with the Virgin, and that he is in peace now. I know that the Virgin is the one who gives me the strength to keep fighting, so that there won't be another Jonathan, not another little person around that won't be able to read, they have to study, ... (Marta 2012).

Marta ~~gets~~ angry at the Virgin after her son's 'meaningless' death. She thinks she was ~~strayed~~: her son died despite his annual pilgrimages to Lujan. Right after his death, when she violently throws the statue of the Virgin of Lujan that she had in her home ~~shrink~~, she is expressing her anger at the Virgin. In other words, she ~~takes away~~ the ~~shrink~~ sacred from her home. Marta does not only break a bond but also ~~long~~ support in her life. Therefore, she feels that a new promise needs to be made to rebuild the bond with the Virgin. It requires a special effort: going eight consecutive Sundays to the Basilica of Lujan, and to enter the Church on her knees – therefore with bodily pain. It is

a sacrifice that she is ready to make. It enables her to give a meaning to her suffering: *'Why did She take him from me?'* Marta on her own finds some of the answers about her son's death: 'for him not to suffer any more', 'I know he is with God and the Virgin, and that he has found peace now'. She engages her 'bloody tears', she recognises she is relieved and she knows where it comes from: God and the Virgin of Lujan. After this experience, she is confident that the Virgin is giving her the strength for her current task, so that no more young people are destroyed by drugs just like her son: *'the Virgin is the one who will give me the strength to keep fighting, so that there is not another Jona, and if I can help any mother who is suffering I'll do it'*. Hence, Marta gives a new meaning to one of the most dramatic events in her life through her faith, and turns it into a mandate, by helping in a soup kitchen and working together with young people. Her faith, her devotion, and promise has given her agency. An agency that has social impact through her work in the kitchen soup and with young people.

Marta's daughters and sons after Jonathan's death also find relief in the religious practice of making a promise. She expresses it in these terms

They promised their dead brother that they would go – to Lujan-. They went. They came back safe and sound. They entered on their knees to the Church ... they touched the Virgin and my daughter told me, 'Mum, I touched the Virgin on her hand ... It was as if I were touching Jona's hand (Marta 2012)

In this case, the promise was made to a dead relative, thus it is imbued with sorrow. Through sacrifice and mediation; touching the Virgin and reaching her on their knees, they feel relieved and feel their brother's presence. A presence that is radical physical absence, but within holistic and cosmological openness, it can stay in a balanced absence-presence stage.

To conclude this section, these two narratives help to go deeper into the understanding of the linkage between religious experience framed within pillars of Latin America popular religiosity – devotion, promise, and perception of miracle – and agency. The belief of having witnessed a miracle derives in a sense of admiration, surprise and astonishment – very clear in the women's stories presented above. The belief and the experience of a miracle implies a deep emotion that 'expands' and connects 'vividly' with transcendence injecting a positive worldview. This event takes the subject to the spiritual experience that goes beyond religion (nonetheless, it is supported and fed in a religious language and symbology).

Devotion to a religious figure is a manifestation of the emotional and experiential phase of a belief. It establishes a link with a 'figure' that involves the subject entirely, and it often includes the religious practice of the promise in which the linkage is shaped in a circular dynamic of devotion-confidence-obligation-gratitude, by which an emotional space is shaped. Space that culminates with the opening to the 'miracle'; that is, in what the subject

understands as manifestations of the transcendence in his/her favour. A paradoxical relation, with a highly emotional meaning, which is expressed in the many rituals of the socio-cultural ~~context~~ repertoire. By this way, the awareness and experience of human ~~vulnerability~~ – evident in all human beings, but with peculiar edges among the poor people – connect through beliefs and rituals of popular religiosity with experiences of spiritual nature ~~that~~, even though they have connecting intersections with the religiously institutionalised, open to wider connections with the transcendent, the cosmos and among people. It promotes positive attitudes, behaviour, and actions. It shapes commitment and solidarity.

The religious practice of promise and the belief that ‘the good’ can operate through the link involved turns the believer into an ‘agent’ of ~~his~~ own interior life, and of this spirituality. The belief in having received a miracle ~~de~~ (therefore ‘the good’) ¹¹ has a positive dynamic. It turns ~~him~~ into an agent that expands, through ~~his~~ experience, the holistic and cosmological keys of his/her spirituality, and ~~of~~ his/her cultural matrix that, even in the context of legitimised modern and post-modern beliefs, keeps on operating. This agency also impacts also community wellbeing. Both Delia and Marta – the women interviewed – are involved in their communities working in institutions that support vulnerable women (Delia) and in a soup kitchen (Marta). Both of them find strength and feed their commitment on their faith. On an emotionally lived faith ~~in which~~ devotion, promises and belief in miracles play a crucial role.

Concluding remarks

Latin American popular religiosity from an anthropological perspective emphasises relational, bodily and emotional issues, sustaining approaches that go beyond a merely belief-based and/or a meaning-making understanding of religion. We argued in the first part of this ~~writing~~ that from our perspective, popular religiosity expresses meanings, identities ~~and~~ relationships, which transfer to people’s agency, desires and hopes. The conclusions of the second and third sections highlighted how certain beliefs and rituals very common among ~~Latin American~~ poor Christians, can be understood as expressions of a vivid religion that shapes a way of being ~~and~~ doing, in which there are genuinely vital and transformative seeds for believers’ lives.

Popular religiosity, at least in Latin American where we can find evidence for our statements, plays a large role in shaping agency by supporting poor’s people cosmologic and holistic cultural matrix from which they ~~feed~~ ‘hope’ and a positive way of facing their lives, as the life histories of Delia and Marta have shown. The bodily, emotional, and relational ways in which religion is lived among poor people, the inner spiritual life they strengthen, support a ‘positive’ way of facing life. It may also have a positive social impact

by supporting commitment through social solidarity. We are not arguing that the commitment/agency supported by religious/spiritual experiences of poor people impacts in overcoming poverty. We argue that it helps coping with poverty by framing a personal commitment that has social impact. More research needs to be done to support these findings beyond Latin American Christian traditions.

Massive processions in honour of a popular saint, rituals in remembrance of dead people, veneration of 'non-officially recognised' religious figures, popular adoration to the Virgin Mary, and so on, can all be understood as pursuits of recognition, identity and transformation. Many 'popular' religious manifestations have become spaces of 'resistance' in Latin American cities. From this perspective, we can affirm from our study that when a Church is open to popular religiosity manifestations (which is increasingly the case in some places of Latin America in recent decades), poor's agency through religious expressions works better. This support may help shape the vital and transforming power that the poor themselves have to be authors of their lives, and to positively impact their communities.

Notes

1. The idea of 'capability', introduced by Amartya Sen, was to 'open up a line of thinking' about which information was relevant when one tried to answer the question of how one's life was going. Incomes and resources are important but they are not the only relevant consideration, it is important to also to look at whether people are able to function well as human beings, like being in good health, participating in the life of the community, being well nourished, making decisions about one's life, travelling, speaking with others, etc.
The interviews were framed within an ethnographic case study. Besides interviewing women, we participated in many of their activities, visited their homes, and met their families. Our fieldwork presupposed a 'contract of knowledge' therefore it intended to be interactive, reflexive, and politically informed (Wright 2000).
2. A *novena* (from Latin: novem, 'nine') is an ancient tradition of devotional praying in Christianity. It is a form of worship consisting of special prayers or services on nine successive days. They are usually directed towards a saint or to the Virgin Mary under one of her names. Examples are the *novena* to the Virgin de Lujan, to the Virgin del Rosario, to Santa Rita, to San Francis, etc.
3. The two Virgins most mentioned are Luján (patron saint of Argentina) and Caacupé (from Paraguay's culture). In third place the virgins of Copacabana and Urkupiña (from Bolivia's culture).
4. Among the officially recognised saints, *San Cayetano*, one symbolically related to obtaining job and stability, is the one most mentioned. Among the non-officially recognised saints, *Gauchito Gil* and *San Expedito* are those most frequently mentioned, especially by Catholics. They symbolise courage and strength.

5. The Catholic Church is one of the institutions that give credence to the possibility of the miracle. In its dogmatism and desire for control, accepts it as an exceptional phenomenon, whose veracity is at discretion of the institution itself. The process of beatification and sanctification of people are an example. According to its own rules, only if the hierarchy of the institution – through a Committee formed for this purpose – can reliably confirm two miracles attributed to who is postulated for beatification, the proclamation process can follow its course.
6. Our questionnaire asked through closed items if they believed in miracles, and if so, if they had witness one. If the answers were both positive, through an open question they were requested to briefly narrate the miracle they said to have witness.
7. See Lopez Fidanza (in Suárez 2015). The survey conducted in 2014 to address the religious presence in Buenos Aires slums shows information about beliefs in the working of evil forces, and in the possible negative consequences of not complying a promise. The incidence is high (50%), however it is less than the belief in miracles.
8. The interviews have been analysed with different purposes, and supported different publications; among them: Suárez and Zengarini (2014), Suárez & Zengarini, (2015).
9. The Lord of Mailin festivity (*fiesta al Señor de Mailín*) is not only part of Santiago del Estero's culture – its homeland-, but having been brought by migrants it is also celebrated in different locations of Greater Buenos Aires.
10. The same reasoning applies in relation to how 'evil' forces operate. Rituals that invoke it (Satanic ritual, black magic, etc ...) can give a clue. It exceeds the frames of this work to enter into this discussion. We personally tend to believe that the powers of good and evil operate in 'positive' or 'negative' form depending – in part- on ethical decisions taken by people. The discussion for this issue should be elsewhere, not in this article. For what is presented in this article we based the analysis on the narratives of women and on a phenomenological approach to their spiritual experience.
11. Religion nurtures 'good' values as well those that may shape 'negative' behaviours. For example, values of humility, obedience and resignation, particularly for women.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the ICALE [0112].

ORCID

Ana Lourdes Suárez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4401-8152>

Juan Martín López Fidanza  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1188-3681>

References

- Asad, T. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion. Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Bradley, T. 2009. "Physical Religious Spaces in the Lives of Rajasthani Village Women: Ethnographic Study and Practice of Religion in Development." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 10: 43–62. doi:10.1080/14649880802675135.
- Burke, K. 2012. "Women's Agency in Gender Traditional Religions. A Review of Four Approaches." *Sociology Compass* 6: 122–133. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00439.x.
- De la Torre, R. 2012. "La religiosidad popular como "entre-medio" entre la religión institucional y la espiritualidad individualizada [Popular Religiosity as "In-Between" Institutional Religion and Individualized Spirituality]." *Civitas* 12 (3): 506–521.
- De la Torre, R., and E. Martin. 2016. "Religious Studies in Latin America." *Annual Review of Sociology* 42: 473–492. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074427.
- Deneulin, S., and M. Bano. 2009. *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*. London: Zed Books.
- Geertz, C. 1973. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *The Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Geertz, 87–125. New York: Basic Books.
- Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Martin, E. 2009. "From Popular Religion to Practices of Sacralization: Approaches for a Conceptual Discussion." *Social Compass* 56 (2): 273–285. doi:10.1177/0037768609103362.
- Mauss, M. 1990. *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Routledge.
- Orsi, R. 2004. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Parker, C. 2015. *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Semán, P. 2001. "Cosmológica, Holista y Relacional: Una Corriente de la Religiosidad Popular Contemporánea [Cosmological, Holistic and Relational: A Stream of Contemporary Popular Religiosity]." *Ciências Sociais e Religião* 3 (3): 45–74. doi:10.22456/1982-2650.2169.
- Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Suárez, A. L., and G. Zengarini. 2014. "Barrios precarios: Gracias a que caminamos con ellas. Prácticas de mujeres en barrios marginales desde una mística de ojos abiertos [Slums: Because We Walk with Them. Practices of Women in Marginal Neighborhoods from a Mystique with Open Eyes]." In *Ciudad vivida. Prácticas de espiritualidad en Buenos Aires*, edited by V. Azcuy, 73–115. Buenos Aires: Guadalupe.
- Suárez, A. L. 2015. *Creer en las villas. Devociones y prácticas religiosas en barrios precarios de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* [Believing in the Slums. Devotions and Religious Practices in Precarious Neighborhoods of the City of Buenos Aires]. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Suárez, A. L., and G. Zengarini. 2015. "A Mysticism of Open Eyes. Catholic Women's Voices from a Marginal Neighborhood of Buenos Aires." In *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table, the Catholic Women Speak Network*, edited by the Catholic Women Speak Network. 137–140. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Wright, P. 2000. "Postmodern Ontology, Anthropology, and Religion." *Culture and Religion* 1 (1): 85–94. doi:10.1080/01438300008567141.