

**MOVING RELIGION: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND
PRACTICES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN
MIGRANTS ON THEIR WAY TO THE UNITED
STATES**

By

Alejandra Mayer Gonzalez

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social

Anthropology and Sociology

Supervisor: Vlad Naumescu

Abstract

This thesis examines the religious aspects of Central American migration while crossing Mexico having as the main question the role religion plays in the migrant's journey. To provide a significant understanding of this dimension, as a background it was important to explore and understand the historical and cultural-religious differences in both Central America and Mexico by understanding these differences it was also easy to explore the journey. The ground base project took as a main field the city of Tapachula on the Southern border between Mexico and Guatemala a significant transit point, which for decades has represented the entrance to Mexico for many Central American migrants and even for extra-regional migration. The fieldwork was developed mostly in the Belen Diocesan Shelter where evident religious tensions were present, coming mostly from the different religious scenarios of Central America and Mexico. As well, by linking the spaces and the interaction happening in the shelter on the individual level, the present thesis aims to connect with the larger experience of religion as a source of hope, a connection to tradition and home while being as well a point of tensions and negation when differences are present.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this journey. The Central European University as a whole for the life and academic teachings that I've been through in this long journey as well as for the funding I've received to fulfill my studies and the fieldwork necessary for this research project. I would like to thank as well, all the teachers whose knowledge have being helpful in order to build this project. My supervisor Prof Vlad Naumescu for his immense patience and caring.

The people of Tapachula, especially, the staff from the Belen Diocesan Migrant shelter who gave me access and support in other to conduct every single activity I was willing to, and always received me with a smile even when their workload was immense.

Also, I would like to thank all the people who open their private spheres and accepted to participate in the different methodologies implemented in the present research. Migrants whose strength to face every adversity and get on with their families inspired all kinds of good feelings.

Finally, but not least, I would like to thank my family: my parents and husband for their immense love and support in all the projects I decide to undertake.

Table of contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of contents	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Religious transformations in Central America	10
1.1 The catholic primacy	11
1.2 Liberation theology and the Cold War transformation	12
1.3 The protestant presence and diffusion	14
Chapter 2. Religion in the Shelter	18
2.1 The shelter and its mission	18
2.2 Religious clashes and encounters	23
2.3 Devotional rhythms and joined spirituality	27
Chapter 3. Personal devotions and religious practice	30
3.1 Religion and home	30
3.2 Religion and hope in the migrant	32
Conclusions	35
Bibliography or Reference List	37
Appendices	41

Introduction

Migration and religion are topics that have been intersecting constantly throughout history and throughout academic literature (Saunders et al., 2016). The movement of people also involves cultural and religious movements as when relocating all over the world, migrants have brought their beliefs and customs with them and modified them to fit in with their host civilizations. This is the case of Central American migrants going to the United States who while settling take with them their religious beliefs and culture which get syncretized with those present in the United States. The present thesis project, however, is an attempt not to understand the integration process, but the transit, the journey, and its religious dimension. How the religious baggage that the migrant carries is executed, maintain, or modified along the journey and how this religious dimension affects the journey in itself.

Migrant movements from Central America to the United States are an actual phenomenon that has gained prominence in multiple research areas in recent decades. The majority of these displacements take place by land and are caused by a variety of factors, including work, insecurity, and violence, as well as family reunification and, in some cases, migratory traditions. In order to understand those flows, it's highly important to understand the region

Central America is configured by the land compounded by the countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. It has been for many decades a very turbulent region, not only in terms of violence but also regarding natural disasters, political instability, and economic crisis. Despite the conclusion of Central America's violent wars in the early 1990s, emigration continued to rise, fuelled by employment uncertainty, poverty, violence, and, in some cases, political instability. Other economic issues have been added to these, resulting from the consequences of lower crop prices and natural catastrophes in the area,

such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the earthquake in El Salvador in 2001, and Hurricane Stan in 2005 (FAO, 2015) and others.

The previous has sunk the region into great social challenges. Currently, it is presented as a highly densely populated region, reaching a median of 84,04hab/km while the rest of Latin America shows numbers around 31,57 hab/km (FAO, 2015). The majority of the population in the different countries of the region is located in rural areas and the poverty numbers show that more than 50.9% of the population regionally is living under the line of poverty.

Despite its size the region internally has great differences. Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are the countries with the highest poverty levels in contrast with Costa Rica and Panamá which present the best economic and political indicators. Especially the three northern countries, or the Northern Triangle as is also denominated, (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) face the worst circumstances. These factors, combined with other explanations of migratory dynamics, such as the consolidation of migrant communities from these countries in the United States and the strengthening of their transnational networks, have turned migration into a major phenomenon mostly from these countries, not only in the regional level but in the global panorama.

In this decade, migratory flows to the United States have happened in an environment of rising insecurity, making migrants more vulnerable to threats of extortion, assault, rape, kidnapping, and even killing. The increasing violence in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, as well as the tightening of border controls in the southern United States and the Mexican government's continued detention of illegal migrants across the nation, have exacerbated and compounded the issue. In the area, there are few systematized statistics on the volume and characteristics of migrant movements in transit.

Tapachula, Chiapas is the first stop that many migrants make on their journey to the United States. While being, since a long time ago, an important enclave of migration, the city has transformed into a very cosmopolitan one, where many different traditions are encountered and that possesses a radically different demographic constitution than the rest of the country. The city receives not only regional migrants coming from Central America and the Caribbean but also extra-regional migrants from very far latitudes such as Asia or Africa. Due to the constant migration rhythms that have been present in the region for such a long time, the interaction of locals and migrants evolves as a natural process where different minorities are recognized as cornerstones of the history and development of the city. In the Museum of Tapachula, it is possible to observe a whole exhibition about the influence of migration on the region since the XIX century. Even when the groups that the museum recognizes are not necessarily the ones that today have a major presence in the region, the fact of recognizing this process shows the comprehensive historical background and the collective memory of the city. However, in recent times the number of migrants in the city has increased exponentially.

It is important to highlight as well, that every time more migrants decide to stop their journeys to settle in the city, starting small businesses that supply either other migrants or the local population with different goods and services. All around the city center, it is possible to eat all kinds of Central American, Caribbean, and South American dishes in the various restaurants run by nationals of those countries. As well, a major number of sellers and peddlers in markets and streets are people of color that are little by little starting to take the city as a permanent residence. In recent times, as the amount of people staying in the city has increased, the population has also shifted their attitude towards them, starting to feel their economic incomes are at risk, which has as well, increased the conflicts between the locals and the newcomers. Besides that, migrants that are not looking to settle in the city are mostly welcomed by the locals as they represent a strong income for the city's economy

Like many of the border cities in Latin America, Tapachula is not the safest city, nor the calmest city in the country. Insecurity is a latent problem, as 79% of the local population considers the city to be unsafe. Even the city center has been identified as a zone of recurring crimes. Violent and non-violent robbery is constant and human traffic for sexual exploitation is a major risk for migrants (IOM, 2021). Smugglers and organized crime are also present extorting business owners, illegal settlers as well as locals who need to pay the so-called “derecho de piso” (right of floor), a fee that they charge to let them work peacefully.

To avoid security risks and reduce the costs of the journey, migrants might spend a few days in shelters along with the different cities they cross while trying to reach the United States border. In some cases, migrants decide to request the refugee condition in the Mexican Commission of Help to the Refugee (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados COMAR), either to stay in Tapachula, to start a new life in other Mexican cities or as a preliminary stage before starting again the journey to the United States with the hope that the same refugee status can be recognized in there. The refugee process takes around two or three months and after getting it, migrants can work and stay legally in the country for a year. In these cases, the period of allowed accommodation in the shelters is prolonged to the time required for the process to be completed, as the costs of staying in other accommodations would be very high and many migrants cannot assume that expense. Especially migrants coming with their families are likely to choose this option, as they are not able to pay for an accommodation for a big number of people and for such a long time, without the possibility to have a job in Mexico which they are not legally allowed to have.

In order to get refugee status in Mexico, migrants should be able to prove a consistent fear of being prosecuted due to their race, color, religion, nationality, gender, belonging to a certain social group, or having a different political opinion (UNHCR, 2022). As well the refugee status

can be given to a person that has been a victim of persecution, harassment, extortion, or physical or sexual violence by either a criminal group or due to political reasons. In general, the Central American migrants in Tapachula are willing to go through the process of refugee showing the latest. Even when one of the main causes of the regional migration are economic factors, this normally is accompanied by the impossibility to develop professionally in the region because of the high levels of violence and insecurity they live in their home countries.

Depending on the type of migrant (alone migrant, men, female, or families) in Tapachula different shelters can provide accommodation and food. The two most important ones are the shelter “El Buen Pastor” mostly for solo migrants and the shelter “Belén” only for families. Unfortunately, not all the migrants know about this and for some others, the restrictions that the shelters have (no arms, no drugs, etc.) are not very convincing, so they stay in parks or open spaces around the city where in many cases they are victims of many different crimes and forms violence. As well, as the COVID 19 pandemic became a major risk, the number of migrants allowed to stay in the shelters was reduced considerably which left many people unprotected in the streets of the city.

In the case of the present research project, Belen shelter was the main field. The shelter is reserved for families mostly migrating with children under 18 years old and as stated before is under the consignment of the Diocese of Tapachula as pastoral work. The shelter is mostly a safe place where families stay either for a couple of days before retaking their journey, or for a very long period until they get their refugee status. It provides accommodation for a maximum of 3 days for migrants not willing to go through the refugee process. Migrants willing to go through it have as well 3 working days to request an appointment in COMAR. Once the migrants get their appointment they can stay in the shelter for an indefinite time until they get a resolution from the Commission regarding their refugee status.

During this time, the shelter is not only accommodation but the center of their activities, a source of food, contention, and support. the budget that the shelter has is very reduced for the number of people and necessities it covers, as expressed by the coordinator and the authorities, even when in general the shelter is run by volunteers and are very few fixed employees, the budget the shelter required for feeding and hosting all the people who arrive is enormous and even when it has different donations and supporters, the conditions of the shelter are not the best ones in terms of hygiene and amenities. However, one of the major challenges is the intensely hot weather, which the migrants suffer every day with very few cover spaces to provide shadow. Also, the lack of drinking water takes the people to drink water from the faucets (which is not very advisable in Mexico) or buy bottles which is a spend that not everyone can make.

Even when the shelter is mostly a safe place, there are certain tensions. In the first place, economic tensions regarding future endeavors, the cultural ones coming from ethnic and national differences, and the religious ones are going to be the major concern in the present research project. Religion in the shelter plays an important part in the daily life of the migrant. As a Catholic institution, the shelter does not impose any religious conditions on the migrants, however, the ideals of the staff are highly related to evangelization, and conversion, as well as the beatitudes shown by Jesus on the mountain. The priest leading one of the most important parishes of Tapachula stated:

“In the gospel, in the Old Testament, everywhere, we can see how God asked his people to take care of the migrants. The Jews were migrants in Egypt, the people of Israel were migrants, and Jesus was a migrant for some time as well. Me, due to my theological formation cannot pretend to be blind to what is my duty not only as a priest but as a Christian and as a human being”.

According to this idea, certain routines have been implemented to fulfill the spiritual needs of the migrants as well as to remind the staff of the mission that they are accomplishing. In this sense, different images of the Virgin Mary are located in the shelter, images of saints are also displayed accompanied by different quotes, mass is celebrated once a week, everyday prayers are done before the meals, and blessings are sent to the people who prepare them as well as night prayers in some cases. These routines and religious approaches are a major discomfort for many. Some of them who are coming from other religious traditions such as Jehova's Witnesses or Evangelicals, some others even consider this a lack of respect for their own beliefs.

Even when mostly all the migrants staying in the shelter feel very glad to be received in the shelter as they do not pay anything for the accommodation, the two meals a day they receive every day, and they have a safe place to stay with their families, there are some theological discrepancies between the different Christian traditions that mark a huge divergence in the practice which is not necessarily understood by the staff running the shelter and that sometimes causes tensions and a sense of oppression in the shelter. The present thesis project has as the main scope to analyze the religious aspects of migration from the confrontations presented in the previous claim to the silence and interior practices that Central American migrants experience while migrating and specifically when they are in the shelter.

An important point to consider understanding not only the migrant's position but also the staff's positions are the divergences in the Central American religious spectrum. While in Mexico, Catholicism is still the main religion in Mexico with around 72% of the affiliation (Perez-Lozano, 2019) that is not necessarily the case in Central America. In countries like Guatemala Catholicism represents 45% of the population while 42% is Protestant. And oppositely in Honduras, 34% of the population is catholic while 48% are Evangelic protestants. The previous

religious panorama created differences even in some points of the practice of the Catholic religion. All the previous gives a fertile soil for research to provide a better understanding of the religious dimension of migration. To know those differences, talk about them and stimulate the exchange of ideas that construct tolerant spaces for migrants would be probably the main input this thesis project can have to the discipline.

As a woman researcher in the shelter, I would like to express the safety that I felt, in comparison with other visited places. The strict policies of separation, harassment, and respect that they are implementing, as well as the fact that there are mostly families, allows the environment to be more peaceful and safer for women and kids. However, it's undeniable that it had a few challenges. The main challenge was getting access first to the shelter and then to the topic, as starting the conversation over a topic that is mostly kept in silence to avoid confrontation as religion is. Also, keeping a neutral positionality was challenging, being Mexican and considering myself Catholic were elements that represented a certain bias. While the fact of me, being Catholic was not mentioned as a way to open the conversation, and keep the neutrality as a researcher, the fact of being Mexican was undeniable due to my accent. Even when at the beginning they were very curious if why I was in the shelter making religious questions, later my presence was acknowledged and that helped to have many different conversations. Methodologically the participant observation in the field was complemented with interviews and focus groups where the participants were able to interact more with each other around the topic of interest.

The structure comprising this work will be mainly distributed in three chapters. The first one will provide a general understanding of the Central American religious and cultural landscape, the demographic divisions in religious terms, the relationship between migration and religion in the region, and the role of the different religious movements in this panorama. The chapter

is mostly a theoretical and historical overview that would help to understand the current situations in the shelter as the field. As well as the mission and the movements supporting it. The second chapter presents the different points of religious conflicts and encounters among the people of the shelter as well as the internal and external negotiations done to mediate those points of conflict. Also, connections and networks are going to be touched as in the shelter, a product of the daily interaction of the people living there and experiencing the same problems and situations. The third and last chapter is committed to the analysis of personal religiosity and its performance in the shelter. While the previous one was focused on external relations, this chapter will approach the topic of religiosity in the shelter as a source of hope, moral frames, and inner reflection. In this sense, I will try to touch upon the most important parts of the religious insights on the migrant to create a big picture that can provide a better understanding in this area, being a point of contribution to the existing literature.

Chapter 1. Religious transformations in Central America

A remarkably interesting claim that a priest told me in the field, at the beginning of the fieldwork, was that Central American Catholics were not like Mexican Catholics. He was not able to state the concrete differences, so at that moment I thought it was just a personal impression, however, during the fieldwork I realized that there were certain differences. The first one is the way of externalizing religion, while in Mexico certain expressions containing religious connotations are very common, I was not able to find the same in the migrants from the shelter. Also, the fact of having a preferred saint, the huge devotion to the Virgin, the little medals, or the portable images were not common even among Catholics. To understand these differences, it's necessary a broad understanding of the actual Central American religious panorama and how these realities have been constructed throughout history.

Central America in religious terms is an interesting region with great changes occurring in the last decades. Oppositely to Mexico and other places in Latin America, in the different Central American countries, Catholicism is not the major religion anymore, but the population is highly divided among different Protestant faiths and Catholicism. An understanding of the region's historical religious development is crucial for analyzing the migrant background, their vision of religion, their beliefs, and their religious practices and manifestations. The primacy of Catholicism accompanied by the colonizing discourse, the appearance of liberation theology, and the introduction of new Protestant branches can provide interesting data on the characteristics of religion in the region.

1.1 The catholic primacy

Since the arrival of Spaniards to America, all the continent experienced an enormous religious transformation that ended in the formulation of a new form of Christianity full diversity coming from the amalgam of the pre-Colombian traditions and European Catholicism. In Central America, evangelization began in the second decade of the 16th century. Franciscans, Dominicans, and Mercedarians devote themselves to a missionary effort which resulted in a vast array of catechetical centers where not only the most traditional values and teaching of the Catholic church were developed but also, new ways of representation and practice of the Christian values created generating certain syncretism's that are still present in the region.

While distant sylvatic regions maintained their indigenous tradition for a long time, catechization and acculturation were easier by the agglutination of residents in hamlets, towns, and cities. So, by the end of the sixteenth century, the model of the "encomienda" was set, not only as a mode of colonial exploitation but as a tool for evangelization. The "encomiendas", were feudal institutions based on royal grants that gave a colonizer, the right to enjoy the tribute of an indigenous group in exchange for certain obligations, such as returning part of the production to Spain, protecting and taking care of the indigenous population and spreading the Catholic religion. (Gonzalez -Villanueva 1992) With time, the encomiendas, changed slowly its name to "haciendas" as the urban center developed parallelly.

The consolidation of Catholicism in Central America began in the seventeenth century when the major convents, temples, hospitals, universities, and schools were built. The focus of efforts was then on the newly developed population centers and cities that helped to create new sources of evangelization (Gonzalez -Villanueva 1992). Under this frame, the civil institutions were also highly influenced if not completely run by the church. No longer the friar visits the indigenous people at home but works at a hospital or a school. The Spanish colonizing model

created a highly interwoven relationship between the civil, the economic, and the religious institutions in Latin America. That formulation was kept even after the independence of most of the countries. This catechization, enrooted Catholic religion as the main religious tradition in the region for more than 400 years, however, for certain groups, the oppressive scheme of tribute and colonization, was also imprinted in the catholic tradition.

1.2 Liberation theology and the Cold War transformation

In the decades between 1950 and 1960, poverty, economic crises, migration, and the labor exploitation of the peasants in agricultural industries present in the region promoted responsive movements of a social nature in favor of a better living standard. This, in the Cold war context, was fulfilled with Marxist ideas which also had a religious impact. Various social groups also made their demands visible, which, together with the appearance of a more aggressive wave of Marxism, in terms of anticlericalism and relaxation of religious customs and opposition to the government, generated that the Catholic Church was also confronted and that the hegemonic Catholicism in the region had to rethink its position in social construction for the first time. To respond to this, the Liberation Theology movement started.

In Central America, the strong opposition to the presence of the United States that was there since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century has as a result different religious and non-religious movements highly impregnated with Marxist ideology. Guatemala was the enclave to organize the propagation and control of the Catholics, having the Jesuit Mariano Rossell y Arellano as an agent who opposed the government from the pulpit. It is worth mentioning that the fact that Marxism infiltrated the Jesuits is not necessarily related to the knowledge of the intentions that were handled from Russia or completely immersed in the Russia - United States opposition. The Jesuit ideology tried to adhere to the gospel by helping the poorest, which in many cases involved a class confrontation. From a biblical

perspective, Liberation theology can trace its origins to the biblical passage of the liberation of the chosen people from the slavery of the Egyptians, the different demonstrations of Christ towards the oppressed, the sick, the poor or the judge, as well as the beatitudes but soon turn as well in a political argument.

As explained by Dussel (1975) in his book *Theology of Liberation A Panorama of Its Development*, the movement inside the Catholic Church had several periods of development, the first one occurring with the emergence and expansion of “Catholic Action” as an ecclesial "institution, based on fundamentally in the petite bourgeoisie, which "recovered" the political presence of the Church in political society and civil society. Later on, Theology of the New Christianity was formulated. Insofar as the Church reclaimed its position in "political" and "civil society," and the laity can participate in politics as a response to create the Kingdom of Christ in civil society, This leads to the formation of the "falange" group in Chile in 1936, which split from the conservative party's youth and was dubbed "Christian democracy" after World War II and due to Italian influence between 1950 and 1970, with the characteristic of having a strong presence in labor unions, giving rise to the "Christian democracy" movement. The New Christian theology was a militant one rather than an intellectual one. The role of the Christian was to carry out the "apostolate," to be sent on a "mission" in civil society which was described as participation to expand the Kingdom of Christ.

Lastly, the Church managed to institutionalize the renovation efforts, and its presence in the "social doctrine" of the Church opened the way for many to experience commitment toward workers or marginalized groups. “It is at this time that the theological faculties or centers flourish in the universities, such as the Xaveriana in Bogotá (founded in 1937), the Católica in Lima (1942), the Bolivariana in Medellín (1945), the Catholic University in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (1947), Porto Alegre (1950), Campinas and Quito (1956), Buenos Aires and

Córdoba (1960), Valparaíso and Central America in Guatemala (1961) and many others that followed” (Dussel 1975: 74).

1.3 The protestant presence and diffusion

In recent decades, not only the turbulence inside the Catholic religion has impacted Central America, as well, other transformations have been experienced in the region, principally coming from Southern regions of Latin America and also from the United States, Protestant religions, mostly coming from reformation movements, started being present and consolidated in the region. The description and study of changes in religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices have been a distinguishing focus of research in Latin American sociology and anthropology of religion during the last three decades (Cruz-Esquivel 2011). Most of the authors concur in noting a decline in Catholicism, with varying degrees of intensity depending on the country, as well as an increase in evangelical adherents and people labeled "without religion," a term that was non-existent decades before which refers to a population who identify as believers but do not identify with any religious framework, and who do so in the context of a “strong process of individuation of beliefs and religious deinstitutionalization” (Cruz-Esquivel 2011: 5).

Statistically, while 59% of the population in the region identify as Catholic, 84% were reared in a Catholic home, according to a Pew Research Center poll (Cruz Esquivel 2011). In contrast, 29% profess to be Protestant, although only 9% grew up in a Protestant home. As can be seen, religious allegiance shifts, yet these shifts take place within a Christian context, showing a clear decline and a certain conversion rate. However, in certain countries, Catholicism already lost the consolidated majority to give place to either equal religious affiliation or a lower one like the case of Honduras with 48% of the population being Protestant while only 41% is catholic (US. Department of State, 2018) showing a completely new configuration in the region.

The world of Christian symbols and ideas continues to pervade the religious representations and imaginaries of the great majority of men and women in the region—where, admittedly, numerous forms coexist. Latin Americans are overwhelmingly Christian, with 88% claiming to be Christians (Cruz Esquivel 2011: 11). However, within the different Christian traditions, conflict prevails. Factors, such as the Protestant confessions' opposition to the excessive costs associated with traditional festivals, the fight against alcohol consumption, health prevention and care for the sick, the intensity of religious cults, the promotion of indiscriminate participation in them, and the rapid appointment of “pastors” explain the Protestant confessions' initial success (Viqueira, 1998: 232). All of these variables have played an important role in the establishment and growth of evangelical churches in communities, and some of them have been at the root of debates and social problems.

The arrival of Pope Francis to the leadership of the Catholic Church has generated a growing inclination toward liberation theology which has had a significant impact in the region. If not reversing the statistics at least reduced the conversion rates. His disciples have taken a prominent position in the political-religious arena as a result of their theological and practical dedication to the indigenous people which again has helped to maintain the Catholic Church's position regionally.

Due to the proselytizing hard work of protestant groups, particularly Evangelicals, to convert individuals from the communities, the early catholic reaction against protestant infiltration in Central America and Latin America, in general, was violent. “Protestant places of worship were destroyed, others were prevented from being built, and new converts were unceremoniously expelled” (Valverdu 2002: 56) from their communities and even from their families. In the social aspect, as well the religious division had an important impact. The critique of each other practices as the cult of images, the authority of the Pope, the self-interpretation of the Bible,

and some other moral statements generates a certain polarization within the communities, especially in the ones where the previous social and political constructions whereas well linked with the religious practices and ceremonies, an intersection inherited from colonial times that is still present in many rural areas of Central and Latin America.

Another argument normally stated in the debate between Catholicism and Protestantism is the promotion of individualism. According to different authors, the Protestant cults tend to promote individual values that normally are confronted with the communitarian values that have shaped the Latin American and Central American region. Catholics as well trace this as a differentiating feature and a critique, laying in an argument of how the conversion to these religions is impacting the communitarian links by promoting egoism and separating families and communities which is threatening the persistence of the communities not only in a social sense but from an economical perspective, as it depends on the social bonds.

In a society where religion has been constantly related to the political and economic aspects, the political parties as well have reflected the religious transformation. The Evangelical parties, however, have been normally acting jointly with other Christian parties mainly in opposition to the left movements that have increased considerably all around the region. Currently, the labor of Protestant practitioners has been even more directed toward the political and social institutions. As Alberto Santana stated in his book: *Nacidos para gobernar* (Born to govern), in which the author makes a strong case for Evangelicals' political engagement as a matter of course (Pérez-Guadalupe 2019). However, with the arrival of Protestant politicians to different political plains, social issues have become more controversial, especially topics such as homosexual marriage, abortion, and so on. In this sense, statistically, Catholics have shown to be more open to acceptance while Protestants in particular Evangelical parties denied completely the possible inclusion of those topics in the agenda (Cruz-Esquivel 2017).

In summary, Central America's current religious formulation is the result of many different historical processes that relate to one another. While the Catholic Church is still the principal religion in the region, new Protestant beliefs have been consolidating as well, especially in recent decades coming from South America, and have been positioned in the region, where in some countries Protestants already outnumber Catholicism in membership. The entrance of these new Christian forms has not been, however, peaceful and easy. Confrontation and violence towards Catholicism and from Catholics to them have been shown. Competition, to gain adepts or to stop the conversion, has taken the Catholic Church to new political forms that are more integrative toward marginalized groups, however, also there have been changes in the Catholic practice modifying the till a certain point the externalization in the region in order to avoid conflict. Also, pluralism has increased the exchange of ideas and practices between Evangelicals and Catholics who seem to possess a part of each other, probably as a result of conversion as well.

Chapter 2. Religion in the Shelter

“We do not talk a lot about religion here because there are people from different beliefs, and we cannot just discuss it. Some of the things you do are blasphemous for me, and for Catholics, we are just separated and lost people” ...

The previous quote was one of the most interesting quotes I heard when I first started talking about Religion in the “Belen” migrant shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas on the Southern border of Mexico and Guatemala. To a certain degree, the exclamation struck me due to its oppressive connotation, especially considering that the shelter is run by mostly Catholic staff and is part of the pastoral activities of the Diocese of Tapachula. Even when I previously knew that the shelter hosts people from many different nationalities and religious beliefs and that, being catholic was not a requirement to be there, the existence of interreligious frictions in the shelter was something that surprised me. In a way, the religious tensions of their home nations and families were reproduced in this space where an infinity of events happen at the same time. In this sense, migration cannot be out of the scope and the shelter as a point of encounter and convergence, not only for Central American migrants but many other nationalities as well, gives a perfect scenario to understand the general religious panorama accented by the uncertainties and challenges that the migrant is experiencing. The present chapter aims to connect present the religious horizon in the shelter, the daily practice, and the religious events present in daily life, as well as the encounters and discounters in it.

2.1 The shelter and its mission

While doing participant observation in Tapachula, and after a conversation with Padre Ernesto chaplain of the main church in the town, I had the possibility of accessing the “Belen” shelter, a shelter run by the Catholic church in cooperation with international organizations. The shelter

turned out to be an impressive experience where many religious practices, beliefs, and representations joined in a single space.

The Belen shelter (further referred as the shelter) is a very important migration enclave in the city of Tapachula, jointly with the shelter “El Buen pastor” are the two main shelters of the city, a city that receives thousands of migrants per day. After crossing the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala, people from all around the world, arrive in the city. When arriving the migrants have mainly two different options, staying in the city and asking for refugee status or continuing the journey illegally through Mexico and trying to reach the United States. Many migrants not willing to take the first option, due to time and money constraints, decide to continue just staying in the city for a couple of nights. For solo migrants, the shelter El Buen Pastor offers a place to stay for up to three nights if the person is not willing to go through the migration process. The Belen shelter offers accommodation only for families, making it a less violent place and has the same conditions, it offers a maximum of three nights of accommodation for families not going through the refugee process.

Anyone having a family can stay in the shelter without restrictions on religion, sexual orientation, or ethnic identification. However, for staying in shelters, certain rules should be followed. The person should refrain from the consumption of any alcoholic beverage, or drugs and should not bring arms (even pocketknives are forbidden). As well, any type of violence or illegal activity (especially related to drug dealing) would end in the expulsion of the person from the shelter. There are restrictions on the times that a person can go out. Every day, each person is allowed to go out two times for short periods (less than an hour) mostly to go to the shop and buy water or food and a long one (without time restriction) to go to the city center or to the different appointments they have to follow in order to get their documents. No one can come back to the shelter after 6 pm when the main entrance is closed due to security reasons.

For some migrants, the conditions of staying in the shelter are quite strong and hard to accomplish so they preferred to stay in the main squares and parks of the city.

The shelter is located in the peripheries of the city, located in a space that previously was conferred to the seminar and which has been adapted for being used as a migrant shelter. In the shelter, the spaces are divided into daytime and night-time. Starting from the street, the shelter has a built area mostly composed of the reception, a couple of offices, the dormitories, kitchen, and eating area all located around a central courtyard. After the built area an endless garden appears with some covered spaces: the basketball court and the chapel (See Appendix 1 for pictures).

Every day after waking up around 7 am everyone receives a breakfast that normally consists of coffee and sugar bread. From the time of the breakfast, everyone should leave the bedrooms taking all their stuff to the storage room where everything is guarded during the day. No one can access this place and the things the people require during the daytime should be taken with them. During day hours, everyone is in open-air spaces, a very hard condition taking into consideration that the average temperature is around 33°C and 35°C. The only covered spaces where people can stay are the basketball court and the chapel. Many migrants look for shelter away from the sun there, using the benches to sit and on occasions even the altar as a table to locate their food. The authorities of the shelter find this offensive and sometimes speak with the people to avoid it without any outcome. A second meal is offered at 10:00 giving a bigger breakfast composed of eggs and beans, or a sandwich. Around 15:00 the shelter serves another meal for everyone. This mostly consists of a main dish, beans, and rice accompanied with bread or tortillas, and finally, the last coffee time with bread is given at 18:00. These meals are completely free. Before the main meal, everyone joined in the central yard to do a prayer. The person presiding over the prayer applies voluntarily and everyday changes. Once a week there

is Mass and only catholic celebrations are held in the shelter. At night, the bedrooms are separated by men and women (even if they are families, women sleep apart) to prevent any type of harassment. At 18:00 everyone should be back in the shelter to take a place in the bedrooms, and no one is allowed to be outside the bedroom after 22:00.

When speaking with the Director of the shelter, Padre Cesar, he explained to me the importance of the shelter as a part of the catholic mission. “The shelter is important because it is our opportunity to see Christ in the other. As Pope Francis has told us, we need to go back to the poor and start from there our ministry. If we are not able to see in the eyes of the needy, Christ, then we are not on the right path to salvation. When you come and talk to them about religion, you are turning part of this catechesis and that is something they need. As Jesus said “Not by bread only man lives”. Also, he showed a lot of enthusiasm because the Pope himself was aware of the work that is being held in the shelter and the importance that it has for the Church. Feeling that the shelter was part of a larger missionary project was essential for all the staff in the shelter, in a sense the work in there is understood as a missionary pastoral service, which in a way excuses the low salaries and the scarcity that most of the collaborator’s face.

In the Church as a whole, the Refugees have turned into an important philosophical and theological topic. In the last encyclical of Pope Francis “Fratelli Tutti” there is an entire section regarding migrants and refugees:

“Migrations, more than ever before, will play a pivotal role in the future of our world. At present, however, migration is affected by the loss of that sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters on which every civil society is based. Europe, for example, seriously risks taking this path. Nonetheless, aided by its great cultural and religious heritage, it has the means to defend the centrality of the human person and to find the right balance between its twofold moral responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens and to assure assistance and acceptance to migrants. I realize that some people are hesitant and fearful concerning migrants. I consider this part of our instinct of self-

defense. Yet it is also true that an individual and a people are only fruitful and productive if they can develop a creative openness to others. I ask everyone to move beyond those primal reactions because there is a problem when doubts and fears condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed, and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other” (Fratelli Tutti 40 - 41).

What Pope Francis has labeled the fight against the “Throwaway Culture”, the approach to the poor and the other, and the openness that is visible in *Fratelli Tutti*, is rooted in that Latin American Liberation theology deeply rooted under the Jesuit identity, congregation to which the Pope was a member of and from which its formation comes from (Bell 2020), nowadays institutionalized as the Social Doctrine of the Church. Important evidence in this sense is the constant references to precarious work as an open wound and the rapprochement he has been willing to have with the indigenous movements which have not necessarily passed without critiques into more conservative Catholic circles.

However, the catholic church is not the only institution that has been involved in the care of migrants. Since the 1980s in the United States, many churches in a joint attempt to create safe places for migrants started what today is called the Sanctuary movement. The movement has spread to the city, county, and state governments that have passed sanctuary policies that limit their cooperation with federal immigration authorities in tracking down and deporting undocumented immigrants. It began with congregations that provided shelter to refugees and immigrants facing deportation.

“The sanctuary movement traces its roots to religious philosophy, as well as in histories of resistance movements to state injustices. The term indicates a site of refuge where the authority of God prevails over the authority of the government. Its genealogy extends back to the origin stories of Exodus and of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, stories that speak to our obligation to welcome the stranger” (Paik 2017: 6).

In this sense, many different parishes, churches, and sanctuaries, took into protection migrants facing threats of deportation. Even when the legal frame in the United States does not allow religious organizations to protect anyone not compelling with the Law, and migration authorities have the possibility to enter and apprehend whoever they need to, it's more a good practice to respect the religious centers, so in there, migrants can find protection and shelter.

In 2017, the Trump administration threatened migrants, and the migration policies were strengthened, as a result, the Sanctuary Movement experienced a revival and since 2017 many more other sanctuaries, parishes and churches have been providing shelter to the threat of being deported migrants. Even when there is not an explicit link between the Sanctuary movement and the Belen Diocesan Shelter, this, in conjunction with the Catholic Church's main disposition led by Pope Francis, might have been one of the sources that inspired the opening in the 90s decade and reopening in 2019.

2.2 Religious clashes and encounters

Under the missionary and the idea of “the encounter with the other” based on Pope Francis' encyclical and in the Christian inspiration values, many truly uninterested actions take place in the shelter, in giving food, shelter, and protection to the migrants. However, the evangelization mission still laid on the fundamental pillars of the shelter, and an example is a hegemonic role in spiritual guidance that the Catholic church maintains on it. This is one of the main points of critique among the non-catholic population on the shelter.

Intending to generate a more vivid exchange of ideas and an open conversation with the people staying in the shelter, I decided to apply a focus group methodology which allowed me not only to understand the personal practice of religion but also the general and group practices. However, the outcome of this methodology surprised me. Even when I was aware that in the

shelter people from different religions are living together every day, the religious divisions were not directly perceived.

In the first focus group that I had the opportunity to guide, the starting point of the conversation was quite difficult, however, as the general questions started to flow the responses regarding the personal importance of religion, the meaning of God in the journey, and the role of their beliefs in difficulties and challenges that they were living, everything was fine. However, there was a constant sentence “We all have the same God regardless of how we practice”. Everything changed when during a later focus group, I raised the question of how they were living their religion in the shelter. Carmen, a Honduran woman around 40 years old, who identifies herself as a Jehovah’s witness, stated:

“In the shelter, the only religion to practice is the Catholic, if you are not Catholic you just shut up. I have to keep my distance when I see that the mass is going to begin. I just go away, not to participate. I don’t want to condemn my soul. Is like when you are in a murder, if you are in there and you do nothing to stop it, you are also committing the crime”.

Angela, another woman around the same age, added: “Yes, and what about the images? They are everywhere. It’s like adoring the golden calf”. This time Laura, a Nicaraguan woman of 37 years, and mother of 3 kids responded to the previous:

“As a Catholic, I like the place and the fact that in the chapel there are images of the virgin and the Saints but sometimes people do not respect the place probably because they do not know the importance that it has. We are not adoring the image; we adore God and Jesus. The image is just something material that helps to create an image of Christ and God as well.

Angela answered this time:

“It is that in the Catholic religion, you do not read the Bible. In the same Bible, God has forbidden to adore any kind of image. Even in the 10 commandments, it's written”.

The discussion continued for a while, however, it seemed that the tone was scaling so after gathering some answers and contrasting points of view I decided that probably, it was better to throw another question in order to change the atmosphere which was already dense. However, the fact that the discussion started in such an easy way can be linked with the fact that those topics were present in the mind of the women resulting from a daily contention effort. Later in an interview, Angela told:

“We do not talk a lot about religion here because there are people from different beliefs, and we cannot just discuss it. Some of the things you do are blasphemous for me, and for Catholics, we are just separated and lost people. Even when we are reading the Bible on ourselves, not just following what others tell. All Christians need to go back to the Bible to understand what is real”

In the Shelter, even when religion seems to be a part of daily life, the fact that Catholicism has such a strong symbolic presence on certain occasions is invasive for the people who practice other religions. The images of Saints, of the Virgin Mary and the Crucifixes, are a major source of discomfort as the two major represented religions, Evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses, do not agree with them. Additionally, the mass and the fact that only catholic authorities access the shelter was a main point of confrontation, as many people want to have a certain group or specific place for prayers. To get it, people asked me to search on Google or Facebook for the different Assemblies and parishes to be able to go and connect with people from the same religion.

The fact that symbolically Christian religions are connected does not seem to fulfill the will of the non-Catholic population in the shelter as they clash with some of those elements, and it is hard to react to the things that are not accepted by their churches. Geertz well describes this

approach. where religion is a cultural system itself. “Composed of both beliefs and practices, religion serves the same function of culture as a whole: make sense of life and convey the sense made. All humans, for Geertz, need to make sense of life” (Segal 1988). Making sense of life helps the human being to explain the phenomena one experiences in a coherent whole. What is outside those patterns is either rejected or avoided.

However, not only clashes were present but also encounters were tangible. That was the case of a Cuban woman whose best friend on the journey is a Honduran Woman. One of them is a Jehovah's witness while the other one is Evangelical. After being in the shelter for more than a month, both started collaborating in the kitchen which allowed them to have joint routines. María Elena, the Cuban woman, stated that she would never realize how near both churches were. Only by talking with her friend she did understand that their religious practices were very similar so that, even in the kitchen before starting cooking, sometimes they discuss the religious messages that they received through WhatsApp groups, and on certain occasions they exchange them.

Similar is the story of Manuel and Victor, who meet on the journey through Guatemala Both of them are Catholics from El Salvador. In an interview, Victor told us that the friendship with Manuel is very constructive for him due to the fact that Manuel is a very spiritual person. When asked what he was referring to with the term “spiritual,” Victor answered that he is very near to God, he prays, and he goes to mass which makes him a good person.

In this sense, it is possible to conclude that even when religion in the shelter is a point of rupture, it is as well a point of encounter where similarity plays an important role in grouping or separating people. In the case of the shelter, the missionary vision that the authorities have, gives a very caritative sense where they look for providing what is required by the migrants at every stage of their stay. However, there has not been a real openness and integration in the

religious part where little actions like removing the images of saints or selecting special places to gather all the symbolic objects would help to avoid the oppression feelings of the non-Catholic migrants who stay in the shelter. Also, the bible as a meeting point of the different Christian traditions can take a central role in generating meeting points in the people instead of breaking points.

2.3 Devotional rhythms and joined spirituality

While being in the shelter, a methodological tool I used after the application of Focus groups was the interview, in these interviews a more personal religious interpretation was research. While mostly all the interviewees stated that religion was a very important part of their life their daily life practice of it varied in impressive ways not only depending on the different religions, they professed but also, based on familial and cultural traditions.

In general, religion for the people staying in the shelter is important. Men and women from very different ages agreed that religion was a fundamental element of their life and that since they started the journey, they had a stronger spiritual need. However, the specific practice was expressed as well as an important part as parents express their concerns about their children converting to other religions, or just losing faith, and also that the religious connection has been strengthened along the journey. This makes sense going back again to Geertz who stated that when the individual adopts a certain religious vision of the world, this vision will allow them to manage uncertainty and act according to a predefined set of principles.

“To make sense of life is for Geertz, to cope with three kinds of threatening experiences: inexplicable events such as death; unendurable events or suffering and outright unjustifiable events. A culture that copes fully with threatening experiences would tell one not only what to believe about them but also how to act in the light of these beliefs. It does so, by putting the threatening experience in a larger even cosmic perspective” (Segal 1988).

Migration is a threatening and challenging experience for the people, so religion is a helpful resource in order to give sense to the whole experience as well as to find hope. In the shelter's authorities, this idea is very present, and, in a way, they have tried to create a structure that also fulfils the Catholic migrant's spiritual needs

In this sense, in the shelter, there is a central spiritual moment every day: the blessing of food. The blessing of the food is a moment of prayer before the main meal is served. Around 14:30, everyone joins in the central yard and starts helping to set the tables and chairs and take a place on the different benches around the area. Before the meal is served a bell ring and someone postulates voluntarily to make the prayer. Depending on the belief and religion of the person doing the prayer, it can contain different symbolic elements. Sometimes, the person leading the prayer shows gratitude for being safe, having shelter and food, and then starts with the "Our Father" prayer. On some occasions, people just say a few words of gratitude and finish the prayer. Adults and children participate in leading the prayer, and everyone around maintains a respectful attitude and silence. As the only time when the people in the shelter have a spiritual joint moment regardless of their religion, the event generates a very special atmosphere. People in this time, express different feelings out loud which is as well a cathartic practice as some of the others might be experiencing the same.

The Catholic mass is another important devotional moment of life in the shelter. Normally held on Sundays, the Mass gives a sense of temporality to the people in the shelter (at least the Catholic ones) as it is once a week and takes everyone away from routine. The first that is required is to clean and order the chapel. Certain people volunteer to help with this. As described previously the Chapel is one of the covered daytime places where people gather and lay away from the sun. This causes that the place is not always tidy and ordered. After being ordered the participants are selected and again people voluntarily express their desire to read

one of the lectures, the psalm or the antiphons. The mass is also held with respect and silence. Catholics express their gratitude for having this kind of practice in the shelter because it helps them to keep the link with God despite the adversities that they are facing.

A last joint spiritual moment held in the shelter is the night prayer. This was only described to me by a woman who states that in the dormitories, normally someone starts praying and people who want may join. However, due to the time visit restrictions that the shelter has, I was not able to participate in it.

The different praying times and even the mass are not only devotional times but also mark the rhythm of time in the shelter and the different stages of the day in a kind of ritual. The joint practice of these rhythms and devotional acts as well creates a certain sense of community regardless of the religious differences in the shelter. As stated by Singh (2007) “There are many conceptualizations of spirituality involving the term connectedness. It implies feelings of relatedness with others and linkages with the wider universe. Spirituality removes barriers between us and others. Spirituality is the courage to look within and to trust. What is seen and what is trusted appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and openness to the infinite”.

Chapter 3. Personal devotions and religious practice

The shelter for the migrants is either a place of transit or a long-time accommodation. The people who decide to undergo the refugee process create an important link with the shelter. The average stay in the shelter for this process is a month but, in some cases, this extends up to three months depending on the workload of the office and the situation of the person. After that, the migrants can stay in Mexico and move freely in the country. However, in the process there is a huge waiting time where people cannot work, the time outside the shelter is restricted and the people around them are moving, some of them arrive and some of them leave. In this context, two main points were pointed out, how the family joined and became more important, and how they had a lot of time to think and question their life, their actions, or the future. This chapter has a goal to explore the personal religious implication of being in the shelter, of the journey, and how people experience and understand religion in this liminal process.

3.1 Religion and home

Religion for the migrant is also a connection with home, a connection with the family that taught them those religious beliefs, with whom they had different common practices, and connect them back to those moments of the memory, therefore is as well a very personal experience. In the shelter, whole families are hosted, in this sense, it becomes a home for them in which the practices they do, will not only connect them with the past but also, built their future and impact the children's education. Here, therefore, there is a constant negotiation of what they used to do and what they are now doing. As proposed by Kim Knott (2016) “The tensions between change and continuity, and renewal and conservation, can add new possibilities for agency in tension with both traditional and novel resources. The social and

geographical dislocation brought about by migration creates an opportunity for innovation in religious identity practices”. In this sense, the families in certain cases implement new religious practices while being in the shelter, continue with old ones, modify some of them and delete some others from their routines. This generates new traditions and transformation of the home practices and their connection to their previous home.

While interviewing Anna a Nicaraguan 27-year-old catholic woman, Aurora her six-year-old daughter, said unexpectedly: “For me, religion reminds me of my grandma. She always made me pray before going to sleep and also, she always carried a rosary with her so when she was bored, she could pray”. The comment of the girl also inspired the mother as she was referring to her mother and connected as well with the girl's memories. The continuation of this practice connects their present with those old remembrances through their religious practices.

For the migrants not only in the journey but also in the integration of their destination's communities, religion is a source of connection with those traditions that in a sense are attached to their identity and gives them a sense of belonging. “Religious traditions provide resources for people as they prepare to migrate, make their journeys, arrive and settle, establish themselves in the new contexts, and negotiate their minority status and rights” (Knott, 2016). In general, in Latin America and in particular, in Central America, the concepts of religion are highly linked with motherhood, as it's mostly the mother who is normally educated on the religious beliefs and the faith in general. That fact generated a mental connection as well between religion and family and religion and mother.

In Catholicism, this is also shown with the veneration of the Virgin Mary, a fundamental symbol for Catholics all around the world and which connects the Church and the faith with Motherhood, protection, and caring. In Mexico, this motherhood protection is strongly embedded in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most spread image in the shelter (See appendix 1

for pictures). In Mexican culture, the Virgin of Guadalupe represents the mother of the Mexican, who provides blessings and supports their children. The phrase “Am I not here who am your mother” pronounced by the Virgin in the tale of her first appearance to an indigenous Mexican, shows the confidence and that protection the authorities of the shelter want to imply in their interest of spiritual wellness inside the shelter. Unfortunately, the message does not get to everyone and is not interpreted in the same way, as many migrants do not recognize the image, some of them are not allowed to venerate in their religion, and some others consider blasphemous the Virgin’s veneration. In this sense, again the clashes between the Central American diversity and Mexican Catholicism are not necessarily recognized by the shelter’s authorities, which fails to provide comfortable home-like accommodation.

Besides that, the concept of home is very related to a sense of protection and comfort in the migrant’s mind. The memories that religious practices create in the migrant relating him to home are also a source of calm, protection, and certainty. Also is a source of identity based on belonging which connects the person who he was, the person who is, and the person who wants to be. In this sense, home is also performed in daily life by the different religious rituals and the different religious traditions that the person enacts. The little actions such as crossing oneself in the morning, doing the night prayers, going to Mass and other celebrations, and reading the Bible, are activities that connect with the intimacy of the home in the memory of the migrant and are a way of venerating those who stayed behind as well as giving them a sense of belonging even in far distance latitudes.

3.2 Religion and hope in the migrant

Religion is also a source of hope. Staut and Hagan (2016) present in a good way how “if asked how they managed to bid farewell to family and community, to survive the hardships of the dangerous migration journey, and to settle in a foreign land, many will respond with “the help

of God,” or “the clergy,” or “my faith.” The certainty that someone is having a major plan for the person is a constant belief in Christianity. This creates the possibility to overcome the different challenges that might be present in the journey. For Hagan (2008), while economic considerations are the main force behind migration decisions and social networks are a crucial driver of where individuals migrate to. The author demonstrates how religious ideas, practices, and institutions are intertwined with the entire migratory process.

When selecting when the best moment is to move and cope with the problems of undocumented migration, undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America rely on their trust in God and their culturally distinctive religious rituals. “They mobilize religious resources to provide spiritual and material resources on their way to their final destination. In turn, religious beliefs and practices are transformed as migrants credit their successful migration (or their survival of an unsuccessful trip) to God and other divine intermediaries, oftentimes deepening their faith through the challenges of migration” (Nawijn 2010:1635).

In the shelter, this trust in the fact of getting refugee status, or arriving in the United States and finding a job to change their life is expressed even in the eyes of the migrants when telling their plans. Whether they want to stay longer in Mexico or continue the journey the expectance of something better is always expressed as hope. Hope according to Pine (2014) is:

“a complex, many-layered notion resting on the capacity for imagination, on a sense of time and of temporal progress, on a desire to believe in a better future or in the possibility that something can change, and to some extent on uncertainty. We hope for a particular future, but we do not know with certainty that it will take place or take place in the way we desire. We fear that the outcome of this uncertainty may be despair or what will happen if hope diminishes and fades away”.

Some of the migrants in the shelter stated that before leaving their home countries, they went through a reflection process. This reflection process seemed to be a general initial point in the

migration process. Specifically, a man from the shelter called Jorge, said that he went to the mountain every day for a few hours just to think. He was desperate since he was not having enough money to pay the rent and even the food was starting to be a problem so his whole family was in danger. After some reflection, he decided that nothing could be worse than that situation and decided to talk with his wife to start planning the routes to take and the departure date. In a way after this reflection process, he had the conviction that God would take care of them and will take them to a better place than he had designed for them, as he stated.

In this sense, the feeling of comfort and protection that the religion provides to the person based on a sense of control and order of a broader plan, allows the person to feel comfort and hope. Hope is one of the most important features in migration as it not only gives peace but also strength based on the conviction that there is something better, to deal with the daily challenges and live the migration process with a broader sense as the plan “God has for oneself”.

Conclusions

In the different chapters that compose this thesis project, the religious dimension of the Central American migrant during their journey to the United States were explored. Beginning and concentrating in the period they spend in Tapachula in Belén's migrant shelter. While exploring the results of the fieldwork conducted in there, the different contradiction between the Mexican prevalent Catholicism, strongly maintain in the shelter and the religiosity of the Central American migrants staying in there, represented a major inquiry. In this sense, the first chapter aimed to provide a better understanding of the historical differences in the religious conformation the region as well as the actual panorama of religiosity in central America. From the colonial relation to the development of Liberation theology, its institutionalization till more recent religious trends such as the religious diversification in Latin America and the shift Pope Francis in giving in the Catholic Church, connect and explains the tensions that are manifested in the shelter in a micro scale. In the migrant all those historical periods, and transformations are personalized and can be easily articulated in the daily tensions against the strong Mexican Catholicism present in the shelter and which in many cases the shelter's authorities cannot understand.

Currently it is clear that not only the Catholic Church is present in the region anymore, but many other religious beliefs have consolidated in the region, in its majority Christian protestant movements have permeated the cultural and religious spheres. This has model as well the general practice of Catholicism in the region. In the shelter, the clash between these visions create a feeling of oppression for certain migrants who negotiate internally between their religious unconformities in order to stay in the shelter and have its protection.

However, what is undeniable, is that the religious conflicts that prevail in a communitarian local and even national level, arrived as well to the shelter. The dynamics of exclusion and

theological conflicts are tangible and latent in the shelter to the level that in general religion is not a topic of conversation. The previous is even more surprising when considering that the shelter is run by the Catholic Church and this direction is demonstrated in the daily routines to which migrants normally surrendered to. Catholic migrants, feel however comfortable and protected with the different symbols and devotional rhythms however, the rest (which is not a small percentage) does not feel identify with certain practices. This might be the major contribution of the present thesis: the identification of the religious tensions and confrontations in the spaces specially developed for migrants.

Religion has been described as an important matter for almost everyone in the shelter. This might be connected to the concept of home as well as to a certain sense of hope that they experience when conceptualizing life and specifically the migrant journey as part of a great plan that God has developed for them. While thinking of religions ' connections with hope and home, the familiar ties with the people who stayed behind is a fundamental part of the religious connection as well. As well, religion makes the migrants part of something bigger giving a sense of belonging and therefore a process of identity construction is being held as previously stated.

Many different topics that have been touched in the present research project, should experience a longer and more in-depth evaluation and some other might be added. Examples of them might be the connection of the United States religiosity and Latin America transformational waves, linking that to the migration networks that might have been developed. As well the topic of religion outside of the shelter is a matter of great discussion, the religious practice in the migrant caravans and the religious networks that the migrant might create are all important topic that provide us with an enormous number of new questions in this regard.

Bibliography or Reference List

- Bell, M., (2020). "Fratelli Tutti: Pope Francis' Encyclical and Implications for Labour Law",
retrieved from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344904849_Fratelli_Tutti_Pope_Francis'_Encyclical_and_Implications_for_Labour_Law/link/5f9859d9299bf1b53e4b7d0c/download on May 10th, 2022
- Cruz - Esquivel, J (2017), Transformations of Religious Affiliation in Contemporary Latin America: an Approach from Quantitative Data, retrieved from
<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41603-017-0007-4.pdf> on May 3rd, 2022
- Dussel, E. (1995), "Teología de la Liberación Un panorama de su desarrollo", Potrerillos Editores, S.A. de C.V., Mexico City.
- FAO, (2015), "Centroamérica en Cifras, Datos de Seguridad Alimentaria Nutricional Y Agricultura Familiar", Retrieved from:
https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/AGRO_Noticias/docs/CentroAm%C3%A9ricaEnCifras.pdf on April 3rd, 2022.
- Gonzalez, G., (1992), "Una mirada al pasado y al futuro de la Iglesia en Centroamérica", Scripta Theológica 24 (1992/1).
- Hagan, J. (2008) Migration Miracle: Faith, Hope, and Meaning on the Undocumented Journey Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- JF, (2020), "Unprotected Migrants Roam Through Southeastern Mexico" IN TELESUR, Retrieved on February 24th from
<https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Unprotected-Migrants-Roam-Through-Southeastern-Mexico-20200528-0007.html>
- Jurado, M. (2012), "Fraccionamiento de una Encomienda: una mirada desde el liderazgo indígena. Qaraqara, 1540-1569", Surandino Monográfico, Second Section of Prohal Monográfico, Vol. II, No. 2, Buenos Aires, Argentina. ISSN 1851-90914.
- Knott, K. (2016) Living religious practices. In Saunders, J. et al (2016) Migration and Religious Intersections. Retrieved on the 15th of June from:
<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/978-1-137-58629-2.pdf>
- Nawyn, S., (2008), "Migration miracle: faith, hope, and meaning on the Undocumented Journey by Jaqueline Maria Hagan, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Parker C., (2005), "¿América Latina ya no es católica? Pluralismo cultural y religioso creciente",
retrieved from
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26472185_America_Latina_ya_no_es_catolica_Pluralismo_cultural_y_religioso_creciente Retrieved on May 5th, 2022.

- Paik, A., (2018), "Abolitionist futures and the US sanctuary movement" Retrieve from https://solidarity-city.eu/app/uploads/2018/06/Sanctuary_USA.pdf Retrieved on May 10th, 2022
- Pérez- Lozano (2019) Abandoning the Catholic Religion in Mexico: Leading Factors. Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Tampico, Retrieved on June 9th from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265642578_Abandoning_the_Catholic_Religion_in_Mexico_Leading_Factors
- Pérez, J., (2019), "Evangelicals and political power in latin america", Instituto de Estudios Social Cristiano, retrieve from https://www.kas.de/documents/269552/7547874/Evangelical_and_political.pdf/9add7f47-4e1a-bd5d-2261-f227c939a0a0?version=1.0&t=1573506917588 Retrieved on May 14th, 2022
- Pine, F. (2014). Migration as Hope: Space, Time, and Imagining the Future. Current Anthropology, 55(S9), S95–S104. <https://doi.org/10.1086/676526>
- Rivera, L. (2014), "Migración centroamericana en tránsito por México hacia Estados Unidos: diagnóstico y recomendaciones", ITAM, México.
- Saunders, J. et all (2016) Migration and Religious Intersections. Retrieved on the 15th of June from: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/978-1-137-58629-2.pdf>
- Straut, H. & Hagan, J. (2016) Religion as Psychological, Spiritual, and Social Support in the Migration Undertaking. In Saunders, J et all (2016) Migration and Religious Intersections. Retrieved on the 15th of June from: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/978-1-137-58629-2.pdf>
- Secretaría de Economía, (2020), "About Tapachula", in DATAMEXICO, retrieve from <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/tapachula> Retrieved on April 2nd, 2022.
- Segal, R., (1988), Interpreting and explaining religion: Geertz and Durkheim. An Interdisciplinary Journal. Vol. 71, No. 1, Geertz, Religion, and Cultural Systems (Spring 1988), pp. 29-52. Retrieved on 25 November 2021 from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41178436>
- Sing, B., (2007), "Integration of Spirituality with Community Development For Peace", Thesis, Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia, Cambodia.
- UNHCR, (2022), "¿Cómo solicitar ser refugiado en México?", retrieve from <https://help.unhcr.org/mexico/como-solicitar-la-condicion-de-refugiado-en-mexico/> on February 24th, 2022.
- Viqueira, J.P. (1998), "Los altos de Chiapas: una introducción general", en J. P. Viqueira y M. H. Ruz (eds.), *Chiapas. Los rumbos de otra historia*, México, UNAM/CIESAS/CEMCA/Universidad de Guadalajara, pp. 219-236.
- Vallverdú, J. (2005), "Violencia religiosa y conflicto político en Chiapas, México), University Rovira I Virgili, retrieve from

http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-06362005000200004 on May 5th, 2022

Appendices









