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# César Chávez and the Secularization of an American Prophet of Social Reform

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**CÉSAR CHÁVEZ AND THE SECULARIZATION OF AN AMERICAN PROPHET OF  
SOCIAL REFORM**

SUBMITTED TO  
PROFESSOR GASTÓN ESPINOSA  
AND  
DEAN GREGORY HESS  
BY  
CHELSEE LYNN COX

FOR  
SENIOR THESIS  
SPRING 2012  
APRIL 23, 2012

This thesis is dedicated to those who devoted their lives to the pursuit of human dignity and justice for all regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.<sup>1</sup>

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## Preface

A largely overlooked chapter of American history is the struggle of Mexican Americans to achieve equal civil rights and humane working conditions. Although much ink has been spilled on the struggle of African-Americans to achieve civil rights and throw off the yoke of racial oppression, little attention is paid to the similar struggle carried out by Mexican Americans and the similarities and differences between them. It has been my desire to shed light on this forgotten story, because it is still relevant in the current political climate, given the explosive growth of Latinos in the United States today (50 million), their increasingly important role in presidential elections, and given their struggle for comprehensive immigration reform.

What Mexican Americans have contributed to America is present in almost every facet of American life. Their presence in this country pre-dates the expansion of the United States from the Atlantic (Florida) to the Pacific (California) and is evident in national holidays, festivals, and our favorite restaurants. However, I have to admit that I was completely unaware of Mexican American history and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s prior to taking on this project. The only things that I knew about Mexican Americans ended around the Texas Revolution in 1836 and the little I learned about my Chávez in my American Religious History class. This thesis has succeeded in correcting stereotypes that I previously held about not only the Mexican American community, but also the critical role that religion played in one of its most important and iconic figures.

Religion has been always been an important component of life in America. Christianity has contributed to the way that government in the United States was formed and in the moral values that Americans consider important in leadership. Religion has been the driving force behind many of the most groundbreaking and momentous shifts in this nation from the abolition

of slavery to the African American Civil Rights Movement. The Farm Worker's struggle and larger Chicano Civil Rights Movement are no exception. César Chávez stood out not only as the leader of a secular movement, but a moral guiding light for Mexican Americans within this movement. Chávez's popular legacy within the Mexican American community exalts him as a moral and political leader, but scholarship has until recently painted him and the movement he championed in a secular light. This thesis hopes to help correct this imbalance.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, mentor and dedicated reader, Professor Gastón Espinosa. In the last four years, I have learned so much about the world around me through my continued pursuit of academic knowledge. However, through Professor Espinosa's continued insistence that I challenge myself and my peers, I have learned much about what I am capable of and what I have to offer the world. Professor Espinosa's wealth of knowledge and wide interests has allowed me to explore many avenues within Religious Studies under his guidance. This thesis would have seemed like an insurmountable task without his constant encouragement. I'm thankful for all of the time that Professor Espinosa has invested in my education.

Next, I would like to thank Professor Karen Yonemoto, for her continued interest in my personal and academic development. Professor Yonemoto has been a continued source of guidance in my life, both academically challenging me to see the world differently and personally aiding me in making decisions about life after college. Professor Yonemoto has encouraged me to challenge my perceptions of religion in America and among those who are among the religious minority.

I would like to recognize Professor Oona Eisenstadt. Oona has allowed me to explore countless philosophical movements within Religious Studies and has helped me solidify my own personal religious philosophy through exposing me to the thoughts of others. Her guidance has pushed me to be a better scholar and a better student.

I would also like to thank my fellow thesis students, Mary Doyle, Evan Zwizler and Sarah Patzer. They have been a source of knowledge, inspiration, and support through countless mental and writing blocks. Their consistent feedback and encouragement helped make this thesis a possibility.

Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful mother, Jamee Cox, whose constant support and encouragement has given me strength over the years. Without her continued sacrifice, I would not be where I am today. My mother's unconditional love has made me the student, scholar, and person I am today.

## Introduction

*“For me, Christianity happens to be a natural source of faith. I have read what Christ said when he was here. He was very clear in what he meant and knew exactly what he was after. He was extremely radical, and he was for social change.”*<sup>1</sup> – César Chávez in 1975

America is a nation founded on the idea that civil protest can facilitate social and political change. This concept became particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s as racial minorities began to attempt to change the system of inequality through protest. Most of the scholarship has focused on the political and civic activism of people like Martin Luther King Jr. in the American South. However, in the American Southwest, Mexican American minorities were engaged in a similar struggle to secure civil rights and economic equality. Out of this struggle emerged the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement and the United Farm Workers (UFW) Movement. One man emerged as a leader in this struggle: César Chávez. His fight on behalf of the farmworkers, often called *La Causa*, brought their plight in California and other states in the Southwest to the national stage. In line with the protests led by King to challenge the treatment of African-Americans in the racially divided South, Chávez organized and led protests that protested the treatment of Mexican Americans, Filipinos, and other exploited and underserved farm laborers of all races in the Southwest.

The uphill struggle for the civil and economic rights for farm workers is an extension of the overall climate at the time in the United States. The African-American struggle for civil rights stimulated an age of challenging the system and served as the catalyst for other ethnic minorities in the United States at the time. Protests were being led by Mexican Americans such as Reies Lopez Tijerina, a Mexican American Protestant Pentecostal activist who attempted to reclaim the ancestral lands (ejidos) of Hispanos in New Mexico, which were taken through arguably unjust politicians and land speculators in the wake of the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-48.<sup>2</sup>

In Texas, José Angel Gutiérrez was another Mexican American student striving for civil right and educational reform at St. Mary's College.<sup>3</sup> In some areas of South Texas, people of Mexican origin were the majority of the voting age population, but the rights of citizenship were often denied to them. The political system was controlled by wealthy Anglo-Americans who sought through political and legal manipulation to keep them politically, economically, and socially subordinated. Although Latinos formed groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (1929) and the Mexican American GI Forum (1940s) to advocate for Mexican American civil and social rights, these groups were largely secular because there were very few Mexican American and Latino priests that could participate, lead, and shape them like African American clergy did with the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).<sup>4</sup>

In California, Mexican Americans were beginning to exercise the only type of power they had, the power to halt production by refusing to work. People of Mexican origin were needed to do the physically demanding labor on large agribusiness farms for low wages. It was a system created by and for white farm growers. There were a few strikes prior to the 1965 Delano table grape grower strikes, but they were often unsuccessful because – ironically – strikebreakers, normally poor migrant workers from Mexico, were brought in to work for “pennies on the dollar.” This economic exploitation combined with a push by Mexican Americans to call for unionization and to reclaim their ancient ethnic identity, led Mexican Americans to challenge the economic and racial caste system in the Southwest. At this pivotal point in the master narrative of American history, the climate was right for mass social, political and economic upheaval that would challenge the structure of the United States: these two leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

and César Chávez, were able to step in and supply the rhetoric, symbols, and social capital (i.e., human bodies) to call for revolutionary social change within their respective worlds.

### **Origins of César Chavez's *La Causa* – and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights Struggle**

The 1965 to 1970 strike against the table grape growers in Delano, California, is the starting point for the Mexican Civil Rights Movement and the Montgomery Bus Boycott from 1955 to 1956 is the starting point African-American Civil Rights Movement. They are similar in their backgrounds, goals, strategies, and lasting implications. Although the leaders that arose out of these two movements, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and César Chávez, had different backgrounds, their goals, strategies, and legacies are similar. However, these similarities are often overlooked in scholarship, a fact that this thesis seeks to correct.

The 1965 Delano Grape Strike is often depicted as a struggle to end the economic oppression of Mexican American migrant workers in the San Joaquin Valley. Chávez's contributions have largely been hailed as economic and social, but this has stripped Chávez's of what Frederick Dalton has called his deeper moral reasoning. Rodolfo Acuña argues in his book *Occupied America* that Chávez used religion and civil rights in his labor dispute to avoid a long strike and in order to achieve economic rights he painted his labor movement in economic terms.<sup>5</sup> Acuña also argues that Chávez knew the importance of nationalism in organizing his union: he used religious symbols and rhetoric to rally the strikers and make them believe God was on their side. The argument that Acuña makes regarding the labor struggle embarked on by Chávez concerns mostly the economics of the region. He gives very little attention to the nature of Chávez's religious activism per se. In fact, in his 1972 edition, he's quite critical of religion and does not see it as an important rallying point. Acuña, like other Mexican American scholars, depicts the Catholic Church as a non-acting entity in the struggle to end economic oppression. As

a result, scholars like Acuña often misrepresent the relationship between civic activism among Mexican Americans and the church. Some scholarship has pointed out that the criticisms directed at the Catholic Church by scholars such as Acuña have presented an inaccurate perception of the Latino population. The misperception is that Latinos are disengaged with the church leadership and the Catholic Church as an institution. It also creates the perception that Latino activism is divorced from the Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Both King and Chávez struggled to make America live up to its promises of justice and equality for all. They were devoutly religious (King publically, Chávez privately) men that drew upon their Christian faith in their activism. However, Chávez's legacy was secularized in scholarship in a way that King's was not. Chávez's depiction in scholarship is that of a social and political activist who started a labor union for Mexican American farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley for purely economic reasons. Scholarship often points to Chávez's use of Mexican American symbolism to stimulate ethnic pride, but not to Chávez's belief that it was his moral obligation to help his fellow man, something noted in Frederick John Dalton's book, *The Moral Visions of Cesar Chavez*. Personally, Chávez was a devout Catholic, something that he carried from his private life into his public activism. However, Chávez did not perceive himself to be a secular actor.

This thesis seeks to understand why this phenomenon in scholarship has occurred. Chávez's legacy cannot be fully examined in secular terms; much of his activism is based in his Catholic faith. Yet, it was also ecumenical and even interreligious. He actively worked with Protestants and in some cases Jews on behalf of the migrant farm workers.

This struggle resonates today. Despite the activism of Chávez of in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the union contracts have since been lost and the struggle for the economic justice of the

farm worker continues. There are 1.3 million farm workers in the United States and migrant labor continues to be underpaid and exploitive. As of 2004, 61 percent of the farm worker population lived in poverty; with the median yearly pay of a family of farm workers was only a combined 10,000 dollars.<sup>7</sup> In the current political climate and because the plight of the migrant farm worker is still a hot button issue in the Southwest, it is important to understand the origin of such a movement. In truly understanding the origins of Mexican American activism, we can better understand the motivations and goals of those still involved in the struggle. This thesis seeks to examine the implications of such Chávez and *La Causa*, which was both the struggle for unionization as well as a struggle for civil rights. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to shed light on and redefine the role of religion in his legacy.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how and why some scholars and writers have attempted to secularize the activism of César Chávez and the Farm Workers Movement. In light of the comparison of Chávez and King, this thesis hopes to prove that the Catholic faith of Chávez fueled much of his activism and was instrumental in the direction that *La Causa* progressed and was pivotal to the long-term impact of his UFW movement. Due to the similarities in the motivations and goals of Chávez and King, it is historically inaccurate to secularize either.

Furthermore, this thesis seeks to prove that Chávez is a prophet of American civil religion and that his legacy redefines and expands American civil religion to include both racial minorities and Catholics, which is unique because Robert Bellah historically understood this as largely applying to the Euro-American WASP mainstream.<sup>8</sup> This redefinition of civil religion that provides a space for racial minorities did not exist prior to the activism of Chávez and King because Americans gave them moral authority to legitimize their movements. King was set up as

a prophet of civil religion, a space that Chávez himself should occupy as well. Religious Studies scholar Rudiger V. Busto challenges Bellah's notion of civil religion stating that Bellah's conception of civil religion only applies to those minority civil rights activists that can speak to the greater American society and express the universality of American civil religion.<sup>9</sup> In my restructuring of Bellah's notion, I propose that it is to civil religions favor to grow and change to include those leaders that seem to fulfill America's promises of the full rights of citizenship and a living wage regardless of race or ethnicity.

One of the primary questions this thesis explores is what caused the legacy of César Chávez to be secularized and what implications has this had on the American view of him today? This thesis seeks to analyze the activism of Chávez on a macro-level and illustrate that Chávez's activism was defined by a mixture of his Catholic faith and his Mexican heritage. Yet, we know that he also drew on and worked alongside of other Protestants and Jews as well.

Frederick John Dalton argues that Chávez should be viewed not only as a labor leader, but as a moral leader and a champion of justice. Dalton also contends that Chávez's legacy should be understood in light of his experience as a poor farm worker and in light of his faith that carried characteristics of liberation theology, a movement in the 1960s and 1970s that argued that God sided with the poor against the pharaohs of this life.<sup>10</sup> Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda argue that the perception of the relationship between Mexican Americans and the church along with a culture in the 1960s and 1970s that was disenchanted with organized religion and experimenting with Marxist and socialist teachings has created this secularized model of Chávez. They challenge this conception of both religion and civic activism. Religious Studies scholar and professor Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett identifies two distinct groups that are responsible for the secularization of Chávez that this thesis will explore. The two groups that Moffett identifies are

the “liberal intelligentsia” and “Chicano activists”. The liberal intelligentsia, Moffett argues, “saw in Chávez a minority leader who shared their goals of social justice and who gained the moral capital from his people needed to enact his vision. They sought to co-opt Chávez and his cause. Yet, their humanist basis for social justice was largely incommensurate with that of Chávez’s religiously basis.”<sup>11</sup> In order to fit Chávez into their movements and vision of social activism, they stressed elements such as his social organizing and painted him as a revolutionary leader. The Chicano activists needed a figure that represented a militaristic, Chicano manifesto: “They created a Chávez that could fit within their model. For them, he was not motivated by a social ideology for justice or by a desire for nonviolence, but by a Chicano manifesto to liberate his people. Thus, Rodolfo Acuña in *Occupied America* presents Chávez as a social revolutionary and the essence of *La Raza*.”<sup>12</sup> This thesis hopes to add to that scholarship by analyzing the ways that these parallel movements developed in relation to one another and how that challenges the way that Americans should view both Mexican American civic activism and their own conceptions of civil religion. This thesis also seeks to challenge the image of Chávez as the secular leader of a secular movement and the stereotype of American activist as secular social movers.

Another question this thesis seeks to answer is in what ways were King and Chávez similar and different and how should this change our perception of the Farm Workers and Chicano Rights Movements? While the American Civil Rights Movement under King is viewed in light of the religion of King, the Farm Workers and Chicano Rights Movements have been secularized. This may be a product of the intelligentsia and Chicano activists in the 1970s seeking to use Chávez for their own ends. This has created a secular perception of Chávez that provides an incomplete view of his life and activism.<sup>13</sup>

Religious Studies scholar Luís D. Leon argues that both men were part of a wave of men of color that waged religious crusades to end the injustices against the poor and disenfranchised. Leon argues that the conditions of racial minorities leading up to the movements of Chávez and King were similar.<sup>14</sup> However, this thesis departs from Leon's analysis insofar as it seeks to prove that Chávez should occupy a place both as a civic activist and prophet of civil religion and, as Lloyd-Moffett argues, a Catholic mystic. The two are not in contention, but should be recognized as two different parts of Chávez.

### **Why the Study of Chávez's Religion Should Matter to the Academy and Religious Studies**

The final question this thesis seeks to answer is how should Chávez's public theology influence his repackaging into civil religion and what should this mean for his legacy? Many actors in American political history have been stripped of their religious motivations and secularized: it is not until religious studies scholarship explores these individuals at their deepest ideological level that their religious motivations are brought to the forefront. This secularization normally occurs to make the legacies of these actors more consumable to universities and other secular institutions that, until recently, did not see the value of religion in the classroom. Often, in their attempt to remain politically correct, there is absolutely no mention of any religion in the classroom and this hyper separation of church and state can harm rather than help scholarship. Studying religious motivations of key public leaders like Chávez can lead to a greater understanding of his activism and the strengths and weaknesses of American society in that particular period of time. This thesis hopes to shed light on this often overlooked portion of Chávez's activism.

Drawing on the scholarship of religious studies scholar Luís D. Leon, I hope to prove that Chávez's private religiosity influenced his public life in a way that gave him moral authority in

America, because Americans value the facets of civil religion such as equality, dignity and justice. León argues Chávez worked ecumenically with all faiths to spread his message of self-sacrifice and activism.<sup>15</sup> Chávez's activism also allowed for the incorporation of new symbols and traditions into American civil religion, along with the concept of liberation and salvation for the poor and destitute. However, León provides Chávez with too much agency over his own legacy: while all of these things should be true of Chávez's legacy, it was not a calculated motivation of Chávez to enlist the support.

### **Methods and Approach**

This thesis will employ the ethno-phenomenological approach to the study of Mexican American religions formulated by Gastón Espinosa. This secular, interdisciplinary approach attempts to bridge the gap between religious studies and other forms of scholarship such as sociology, anthropology, and political science and seeks to understand religious actors and movements like Chávez and the UFW on their own plane of reference. Using this approach, this thesis will attempt to examine Chávez in light of his social, political, ethnic and historical frame of reference and resources in American society.<sup>16</sup> This thesis will not seek to understand the entire Mexican American Civil Rights Movement and all of the players that contributed to its successes and failures, as that is too broad in scope for this work. Instead, this thesis attempts to understand and fuse religious, theological, sociological, historical, and political concepts into an accurate perception of Chávez and his leadership. It will also draw on the religious studies methodological framework and insights of religious studies and sociology of religion scholars like Mircea Eliade, Jonathan Z. Smith, Robert Bellah, Stephen Lloyd-Moffett, Frederick Dalton, Luís Leon, and Rudy Busto.

This thesis will not review all of King's contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, but only those pertinent to Chávez's own life and struggle. King is used in this thesis as a point of comparison. This thesis will also not review Chávez's entire legacy, but mainly the years of 1965-1970, which are the years of the strike in Delano table grape growers strike and the years that I believe had the greatest impact on Chávez's legacy.

I hope that this thesis will contribute to a greater understanding of the role of religious symbolism, rhetoric, and activism-in minorities' communities. This thesis also hopes to shed light on the power of religious symbols and motivations in a movement that helped change the face of America.

### **Theoretical Framework and Thesis**

Leon defines prophet as "a person, a human, who advocates for social change by critical discourses and acts based in religious and moral convictions vis-à-vis the status quo."<sup>17</sup> These leaders, Leon argues, normally emerge out of religious, social, and political crises.<sup>18</sup> However, these prophets should not be viewed as infallible or ordained by God. Chávez was a charismatic leader with a powerful appeal whose authority came from the people. To add to this analysis of Chávez's activism I will draw on the scholarship of Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett (a Claremont McKenna College religious studies graduate) who argues that Chávez was a Catholic mystic as well as a social and moral leader. He argues that he was part of a thousand year-old tradition of "social mystic-prophets" who served as agents of social reform, going all the way back to people like Catherine of Siena, who had a profound influence on the socio-political culture in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis of Assisi and Theresa of Avila.<sup>19</sup>

In this thesis, I draw on Moffett's theoretical lens to argue that Chávez was endowed with the special characteristics of a mystic including being able to commune with the divine and with

his people in a way that allowed him to occupy the role of leader in his movement.<sup>20</sup> Chávez role as self-denying prophet who fasted and did penance for himself and his UFW union gave him moral authority with the American people. However, this is not to say that he manipulated religion in order to further his movement. Chávez's social activism was driven by his deeded religiosity and not solely by the economic plight of the farm workers of the San Joaquin Valley. Although, Americans are more likely to trust the motivations of a Christian man of faith than of a man who lacks faith, this reality is simply a beneficial byproduct of Chávez religiously influenced notions of social justice and activism. Furthermore, Chávez's ethnically tailored mystical Catholicism made him a potential target for criticism in (which he in fact received – being “messianic”) post-JFK America that was not interested in religion and it's place in society, but was slowly moving toward public skepticism in the shadow scientific discoveries and the war in Vietnam.

This project's main thesis is that Chávez was a social prophet, (or someone who revolutionizes the way that a key component of society functions and treats people at all class levels) who through his devout religious faith, mystical experiences (i.e., 20 days fasts), and Mexican American tailored activism, was able to revolutionize the perception that Mexican Americans had of themselves in the United States and the way that they were viewed by other racial groups. Furthermore, and just as importantly, Chávez's activism forced growers in agribusiness to negotiate with unions and recognize the indignities suffered by those employed in their fields.

## **Defining Prophets of Civil Religion**

Civil religion is defined in this thesis as a national belief in symbols, rituals, traditions and institutions that express the common ethos of the people of that nation.<sup>21</sup> Robert Bellah argues that the characteristics of civil religion are “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.”<sup>22</sup> Bellah contends that American civil religion is void of overtly Christian symbols. This thesis seeks to prove that Bellah’s proposal that civil religion is void of Christian symbols is not true after the activism of Chávez. King’s sermons, prayer vigils at picket lines, pilgrimages (commonly called marches), and pleas for Christian love and compassion are Christian symbols that were packaged into civil religion when he was afforded the place of prophet. These symbols were written into American civil religion by those who memorialized King after his death: those Americans that believed that he was the fulfillment of the American destiny as a blessed land and people. As African-Americans won their civil right struggles and King was catapulted to the national stage, the American public began to view him as someone who could speak for the American people with authority. Of course, there were those racists who discredited King, but he was nonetheless memorialized with streets, a holiday, monuments, and festivals. Chávez’s pilgrimages, fasts, and masses held therefore should be religious authority and packaged into civil religion as well. Also, the activism of King and Chávez has forced the concept of justice and human dignity to be added to civil religion. Bellah contends that Americans believe they were divinely appointed to carry out the will of God on Earth, but does not go on to explain what he means by the will of God. However, Bellah does contend that there will be a third time of trial for Civil Religion- the first one being independence and the second being the question of slavery- that added new elements to civil religion. This third trial, Bellah says, will be how to obtain some sort of world order and

perhaps a world civil religion.<sup>23</sup> However, I disagree with Bellah on what the third time of trial was for civil religion: this thesis seeks to prove that the third time of trail for civil religion involves the struggle for civil rights and the legacies that those who struggled for rights of the disadvantaged and marginalized.

This is not what happened: the third time of trial was how America reconciled it's racism with its American promise, something which it's arguably still struggling with today. However, new leaders and symbols have been added: such as King. Chávez allowed Mexican Americans to be fully religious and thus fully human in the eyes of a society in the 1960s, a society that was built upon the idea that non-Whites were less than human and practiced an inferior form of religion, especially popular Catholicism. He challenged this and inverted the social order and showed how popular Catholic symbols, stories, traditions, songs, and penitential practices could be used to challenge the religious and social establishment and thus create a new space not only for popular Catholicism, but also the Mexican American people who practiced them.

Also, Chávez's activism and religious orientation creates a space for new dimensions to civil religion that were not present. Chávez's life and activism adds a space in civil religion for popular Catholic mystics, before thought of as zealots or otherwise misunderstood by the greater American public, and a space for Catholic social teaching and its preferential option for the poor. Now within American civil religion there is a space for those that use Christianity not only to prosper, but also to save those that are suffering under the yoke of oppressive institutions and exploitation.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

This thesis consists of five chapters that seek to explore the role of religion in César Chávez's United Farm Workers (UFW) unionization movement. In chapter one, I explore the early life of

Chávez and the early motivations behind his decision to fight for the rights of the farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley. In addition to the pivotal developmental aspects of Chávez's life, in this chapter I discuss the role of civic activism prior to Chávez, drawing on the work of religious studies historian Timothy Matovina in *Conquest, Faith and Resistance in the Southwest*. Matovina argues that Mexican Catholicism was pivotal to activism and resistance in the nineteenth-century after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) was not honored in the wake of the Mexican Secession.<sup>24</sup> In this chapter, I discuss the abuses experienced by Mexican Americans after the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-48 and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. These abuses were pivotal in creating the oppressive climate for social change that allowed for Chávez and other leaders of *La Causa* to fight for the right to unionize and to call strikes against grape growers in Delano.

In chapter two, I discuss faith-based activism and its role in the Delano strike. Fundamental to the motivations behind Chávez's decision to champion *La Causa* were ideas of social justice present in Catholic Church doctrine and social teaching. Chávez promoted and embodied these principles, such as human dignity, self-sacrifice to the poor, penance – including pilgrimages, fasting and prayer, and emulating the life of Christ and humanity's brotherhood in Christ. I argue that these elements were also present in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Chávez's role as a Catholic mystic, because it is important to my argument that Chávez was a religious rather than a secular prophet, which is how he is portrayed in all but one of the first dozen biographies written about him during from the 1970s-1990s, something pointed out by Lloyd Moffett.<sup>25</sup> I also draw on this to argue that Bellah and others need to expand their notion of civil religion to take into account racial-ethnic social protest and symbols.

In chapter three, I begin my examination of the secularization of César Chávez. While the previous two chapters will prove that Chávez was in fact a modern prophet of religion within the Mexican American community, chapter three examines the reasons for the secularization of a man so obviously religious. Chapter three explores the relationship between Farm Workers Movement and the Counterculture Movement, the rise of the Mexican American middle class, the media, and the rising Mexican American intelligentsia. I contend that each one of these movements or institutions was instrumental in the secularization of Chávez's image and had something to gain by doing so. Each one of these movements refashioned Chávez so that his activism would serve a specific end for their movements. For American history this has led to a distorted view of Chávez that does not honor his actual activism or legacy nor explain his popularity and success, but leads to multiple distorted and disconnected visions of him and helps to perpetuate the myth that America is becoming an increasingly secular society. I argue that when you take into account the activism of racial-ethnic minorities like Chávez – to say nothing of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X – that nothing could be further from the truth. Racial-ethnic minorities actively drew on their faith to bring about social change and a new vision of their society that was shaped by their faith traditions.

Chapter four explores the motivations behind secularization. Each of the previously mentioned movements or institutions was instrumental in changing Chávez's image, but for what reasons and to what ends? Chapter four also explores what was different about the climate of the United States in 1965 when the strike in Delano started from the climate at the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott ten years before in 1955. It is my belief that since the Delano strike started in the post JFK years, it originated in a United States that was more comfortable with secularized Catholicism because in JFK's own words, he was the Democratic candidate for the

Presidency of the United States who “happened” to be Catholic. Chávez brought back into American public life a truly popular Catholic worldview in his rhetoric and activism, one that challenged the Catholic and Protestant establishments, while at the same time seeking to draw on progressive elements in both.

The Chicano student Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s in East Los Angeles generated an entire generation of scholarship that kept Chávez’s legacy alive by secularizing it to make it consumable in a secularized university culture. Secular elites in American universities were not interested in a mystical, moral leader; they were interested in secular social and political leaders like Che Guevara or later liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez. Ilan Stavans in his forward to *Sal Si Puedes*, the groundbreaking account published in 1969 of Chávez’s work and life in Delano during the grape strike, writes that the emergence of a Latino middle class began to see itself as “the owner of a hyphenated identity, a life in between” that would allow them to better assimilate into American society.<sup>26</sup> The mainstream and the status quo forced these Latinos to dilute themselves to assimilate into American society and American religion – in this case white middle class Euro-American Catholicism, which had consequences on the legacy of the leaders of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. Instead of celebrating Mexican American contributions to the great American melting pot, scholars and the emerging middle-class streamlined legacies like that of Chávez’s to make them fit into what they thought was the modern American ideal. This has led some religious studies scholars like Rudy Busto to criticize and juxtapose firebrand Reies Lopez Tijerina and his land grant struggle in New Mexico during this same period to Chávez, as someone part of the larger social establishment. But this downplays the racial politics on the ground and marginalization and uphill struggle Chávez faced throughout his struggles.

Chapter five draws on the work of James Cone and others to explore the Chávez and King comparison and how differences in their strategies, motivations, and backgrounds and the needs of their communities caused the chasm between the scholarships on their legacies. I present the reasons why Chávez's legacy should be studied in light of his religiosity and why not studying his legacy in this light does his legacy a disservice. Both King's and Chávez's activism embody the principles of American Civil Religion that merit a special position in American History. Spencer Bennett argues that the predominant motif of the American Revolution compared the revolutionaries to the people of Israel. The revolutionaries were characterized as a downtrodden people who would, through faith and action, emerge as a powerful force and prosper for generations. Bennett argues that this is also true of the Mexican American in the 1960s and 1970s; they too characterized themselves as an oppressed people who would in the end be victorious in throwing off their oppressor.<sup>27</sup> This, combined with the elements of civil religion that Americans value (equality, dignity and justice), comprise the activism of Chávez. Scholarship on King's legacy has recognized that while scholarship on Chávez's legacy has ignored this. Recent scholarship has attempted to correct this, but much remains to be analyzed and discussed.

## **Chapter 1: The Plight of Mexican American Labor & the Rise of Chávez**

*"The only counterpower of the workers in general has been the power to disrupt-- the power to stop production-- a power that has been difficult to implement, since it depends on organizing hungry, dependent men who are afraid to put their families in jeopardy."*<sup>1</sup>

-- Rodolfo Acuña

### **Mexican Americans in the United States**

Mexicans have been a permanent feature of the Southwest since 1598, well before Plymouth and Jamestown. Racial tensions began after Texas gained independence in 1836 and continued as the U.S. made more territorial gains after the Mexican American War of 1846-48 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Through war and treaty, the U.S. acquired almost half of Mexico's landmass, but less than 100,000 Mexicans since these northern territories were sparsely populated.

Although the Mexicans in those territories were promised full citizenship, they were often treated as foreigners and second class citizens. As Anglo-Americans began moving into the Southwest (primarily in response to the Gold Rush in 1849, but then during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s as well), Mexican American fortunes throughout the region began to decline for them economically, socially, and politically. They lost their large ranchos through Anglo squatters and new land laws, ability to make a living from ranching, and thus their upper class standing.<sup>2</sup>

Unable to understand American land grants and squatter's rights, Mexican Americans were often pushed off of their land or had their property squatted on by these new Anglos who did not honor the Mexican or Spanish land grants that had been the law for centuries. The California Land Act of 1851 created difficulties when Mexican Americans tried to document and litigate to keep their land grants. As a result of high litigation costs, many Latinos had Anglos were primarily farmers to declare bankruptcy. The act violated the spirit and some say letter of U.S.-Mexico Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), which gave Mexicans the right to keep their land. Furthermore, schools attempted to suppress Mexican American culture, language, religion,

and customs in favor for Anglo customs, by making it against the rules to speak Spanish and allowing people to make derogatory statements about Mexican life and culture. After they lost their ranches and means to maintain their powerful status in the Southwest, Mexican Americans were considered second-class like the African-Americans. They were also looked down upon because of their indigenous Native American roots. Anglo-Americans' viewed the Mexican Americans as both tools for productions and lazy and slothful because of their tradition of taking an afternoon siesta.

In the early years after the acquisition of the Southwest, the pattern of migration into the United States from Mexico was circular. That is, Mexican nationals would come in to the United States on a temporary basis in order to work and go back into Mexico when the season was over. Young men, and sometimes young women, could come to the United States, earn some money and return home at the end of the season. Similarly, men could come and earn money for their families and return to Mexico. The United States supported this type of migration until immigration laws became stricter in the 1920s. The emergence of these laws required Mexicans to decide which side of the border they would settle on permanent, causing increased permanent migration into the United States as family units.<sup>3</sup>

There was a breakdown in the pattern of circular migration in the years of the Mexican Revolution. After the Mexican Revolution in 1910, there was an increase in immigration to the United States from Mexico. Between 1900 and 1930, more than 1,500,000 Mexicans immigrated to the U.S.<sup>4</sup> This was caused by those fleeing the hardship and violence of the Mexican Revolution as well as an increase in the patrol of the border between the United States decreased the fluidity of movement between the United States and Mexico. This changed the face of the Mexican American communities in the Southwest. The communities grew, adding many more

native Spanish speakers and further separating the Mexican American communities from their Anglo counterparts. This also caused the formation of barrios, or areas where the majority of the population was Spanish-speaking. However, there was rampant violence in these border towns that were created due to the immigration of Mexican nationals into the United States. The violence in the border towns perpetuated the stereotype that Mexican Americans were a violent, amoral people.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, when braceros came into the United States during World War II in 1942, they often came without families and often lived in near poverty in migrant farm labor camps. The lack of familial structure meant that in some cases the camps where these young men lived became playgrounds for prostitution and other forms of vice. But a positive repercussion of the influx of Mexican nationals is that this immigration kept the Mexican Americans that had been separated from Mexico after the acquisition of the Southwest connected to their Mexican identity.

By the 1960s, many solos (Mexican male workers that came to the U.S. without their families) found a way to bring their families north and began to settle down in the migrant farm labor communities. They raised families and their children and grandchildren began to work on the farms, though without many of the same legal and civil rights protections afforded other Americans because everyone assumed they were foreigners. The Farm Worker's Movement capitalized on this hybrid Mexican and American identity by challenging the American public to accept *all* citizens in accordance with their values.

Prior to World War I, the border between the United States and Mexico relatively easy to cross. This is due in part to the circular migration. Also, this was due to the United States inability to check at the borders because the United States Border Patrol was not created until

around 1924.<sup>6</sup> In 1921, Mexicans were forced to pay 18 dollars to enter the United States, a fee that many Mexican nationals couldn't afford. As a result, by 1928, 75 percent of Mexican immigrants living in the Southwest were illegal immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Although working conditions were harsh and unfair the Mexican workers could not complain, for fear of deportation back into Mexico. This meant that workers were often abused, lived in slums, and cheated out of fair wages. Adding to this list of abuses, when wages were cut drastically during the depression, farm owners would often over-advertise for work causing a surplus of workers to flood the area. This caused the workers to underbid one another until they were working for pennies.

During World War II, the need for labor increased in the United States as factory production boomed due to war industry, however, the need for soldiers abroad shortened the labor force. To fill the gaps, Americans began to look to Mexico laborers or braceros. The U.S. and Mexican government entered into an agreement and created the Bracero Program in 1942 to help the war economy in the United States and lowered the pay scale, which forced Mexican American families to migrate elsewhere or into the cities into barrios and factory work. Despite the existence of a federal minimum wage, farmers circumvented the law by shorting Mexican American farm workers with their paychecks, or requiring them to pay a contractor or foreman who simply returned the money to the grower, and by exchanging housing and food supplies for labor – in some cases a virtual debt peonage. The Bracero Program, also known as Public Law 78, brought Mexican nationals in need of work across the border to work in the fields of California and Texas. These Mexican nationals would work for less money than the Mexican Americans already living in these agricultural areas. Mexican Americans then moved into the urban barrios and factory work or into other farming areas. This also contributed to the fluidity of

the border between the United States and Mexico, a fact that has continued to cause conflict into the present day.

Following World War II, the bracero program was renewed despite the decreased need because of the return of soldiers. However, farm owners encouraged the flow because the Mexican nationals would work for less money than others. Braceros could be used to lower the working wage and to break strikes. The use of braceros when there were American national workers available was forbidden, but Anglo-American law enforcement did not enforce the law.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Mexican nationals, in need of the money and unable to find work to sustain their families in Mexico, had no method to complain of harsh conditions that they were forced to work under for fear of losing their jobs, which meant that farm owners did not have to invest time and money into improving conditions. Braceros would work for lower wages, thus lowering the minimum wage within communities. Community housing was built on farms to house farm workers, but the living conditions were dismal: they often had no running water, no clean facilities, and no plumbing. The housing was often closed to Mexican Americans. Farm owners often said that the housing was open to single men migrant workers, closing the communities to families. This system of injustice became one of the fundamental reasons for the farm workers movement. Chávez felt that the farm workers had been mistreated and deprived of the basic human rights and the ability to provide a stable and good life for their families. Though not every farmer treated their Mexican laborers this way, enough did to prompt Chávez and others to create the United Farmworker's Union.

The life of a farm worker was difficult. Although, some hourly farm workers made more money than *some* factory workers, the work was seasonal and heavily dependent upon the harvest. As a result, families only earned on average \$2,500 dollars a year.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the

farmers would find ways to manipulate the workers out of fair wages. The workers lived in shanty towns and labor camps with gouged rent, or slept outside in the fields when housing was not provided or when they could not afford housing. Children were pulled out of primary school to work in the fields to bring in extra money, so their education was minimal. Also, farmers were violated child labor laws by allowing the children to work in the fields. Workers had no access to benefits, so injury in the family or death of one of the working members of the family could lead to financial disaster. Life expectancy was shortened to forty-nine years due to the harsh working conditions and consistent exposure to harmful pesticides.<sup>10</sup>

Some growers were often aware that they were exposing their workers to harmful conditions, but did little to protect them. Workers were viewed as almost anonymous foreign laborers, especially with the language barrier. In holding this view, it allowed some farmers to reconcile the consistent mistreatment with their American and Christian values. Chávez saw these inequalities between the farm worker and the farmer and saw the deprivation of dignity and justice. Chávez viewed economic equality along with social and political rights as a basic human right. Chávez challenged the powerful in the United States to live the values that they deemed fundamental to the foundation of the United States and a healthy society

### **Religious Activism Prior to Chávez**

In the years prior to the 1965 Delano strike, the Catholic Church focused more on service than on activism. As a result, few agencies were set up by the church to advocate for the rights of farm workers. One reason for the lack of activism could have been because the farmers themselves in the San Joaquin Valley were immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Eastern Europe and were often Catholic. They supported the local Catholic Church and were often a key to its financial livelihood. Thus, there was hesitation to demonize the farmers in favor of the farm workers since

they realized that the issues were admittedly complex. A more negative aspect of this desire not to demonize the farmers that scholarship points to is that the church simply did not want to speak out against the farmers because they needed the tithes that the farmers paid to maintain their churches.

A priest by the name of Father Vizzard accused the Catholic Church of neglecting the plight of the farm worker for fear that the farmers would withdraw money from the church. Vizzard went on to state what he believed was the purpose of the church: “Church institutions do not exist for their own sake. Nor does the Church itself exist solely for the comfortable, affluent, and powerful who support those institutions. Christ had a word to say about the shepherd who, out of fear and because the sheep weren't his, abandoned the sheep when they were under attack.”<sup>11</sup>

Chávez also accused the Church of lavishness and too much concern for money. He called on them to embody the principles in the Catholic encyclicals on the rights of labor that he was exposed to with Father Donald McDonnell. Three such encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*: On the Condition of the Working Classes issued in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, *Sigulari Quadam* issued by Pope Pius X in 1912, *Quadregesimo* issued by Pope Pius XI in 1930, all condemn the industrial world and the rise of Capitalism for the emergence of a greater income inequality between the emerging economic classes. These encyclicals call for a fair wage to close the gap between the poor and the rich, as well as affirming the right of the working man to unionize.<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic Church occupied the uncomfortable position of needing to choose between their parishioners: the rich farm owners who were likely of Italian and Irish descent and tithed to the church, or the poor farm workers who were Mexican and couldn't pay high tithes. However, as religious studies historian Timothy Matovina points out an interesting fact about the Catholic

Church: Mexican American parishioners in the Southwest were being served by priests who were of European descent who did not fully understand the ways of the Mexican people in their parishes. The priests often belittled the ideas of Mexican Americans including the festivals and combining Catholic and folk traditions (e.g., Dia de los Muertos, the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, pilgrimages to Chimayo, New Mexico, etc.). Matovina points out that “criticism and conflict frequently marked relations between established Hispanic Catholic communities and the Catholic religious leaders who arrived in the wake of the US conquest.”<sup>13</sup> The new Mexican Americans used their Catholic heritage as a form of resistance in refusing to conform to the European Catholic standards and continuing to celebrate their own rituals and devotions in public spaces.<sup>14</sup> Some scholarship accuses the Catholic Church of attempts to silence priests who attempted to advocate on behalf of the farm workers in the years prior to the Delano strike. The priests that attempted to work alongside of the farm workers were forced out of the ministry, moved to other dioceses, or forced to be silent.<sup>15</sup>

The Migrant Ministry, a Mainline Protestant organization, was one of the only organizations providing religious services from the 1920s to the 1940s for the farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley. The Migrant Ministry was concerned with service and not activism at this time, just like the Catholic Church. The organization was ecumenical, but geared toward offering religious relief, evangelistic support, education for children and mechanisms to help cope with the harsh living conditions to the farm workers rather than offering a way for them to organize for better rights.<sup>16</sup>

However, by the mid-1950s there was a shift in the type of work that the Migrant Ministry was doing. In 1951, the National Council of Churches of Christ, which was the parent company of the California Migrant Ministry, issued a statement about migrant workers and the

conditions under which they worked. This statement, along with the shift away from pure migrant work to the establishment of more permanent homes by Mexican American farm workers, allowed for the Migrant Ministry to begin experimenting with community organizing. The community organizing included short-term goals, as well as a major long-term goal to help better the farm worker conditions.<sup>17</sup>

One of the reasons for this shift at both the national and the local level was that the Migrant Ministry opposed the Bracero Program. The Migrant Ministry felt that the program created inequalities and violated laws that could only be solved with its abolition.<sup>18</sup> After World War II, many Mexican Americans returned to the United States to realize that the inequalities in the United States prevented them from moving up in the economic and social structures. Those racial inequalities created economic and social injustices that the Migrant Ministry sought to address. Catholic leaders, like Father McDonnell, traveled though out the state of California attempting to put an end to Public Law 78 which legalized the Bracero Program. Protestant groups, like the California Migrant Ministry, also aided in the fight to end the Bracero Program. During this time more pastors that held advanced degrees from universities and who were more experienced with issues of social justice began to occupy leadership positions within the Protestant Church. These new Protestant clergymen were influenced by the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch as well as Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's struggle for African American Civil Rights in the South.<sup>19</sup> This facilitated the establishment of these organizations within the Catholic and Protestant churches concerned with the condition of the farm workers. The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama served as an example of the power of religion in social movements for these new organizations.

In 1945, the Bishops Committee for the Spanish Speaking was established by Archbishop Robert E. Lucey within the Catholic Church to service the archdioceses of San Antonio, Denver, Santa Fe, and Los Angeles. Archbishop Lucey felt that it was important for the Catholic Church to serve the needs of the Mexican Americans. The issues the committee was set to address were evangelism, religious education, and farm labor. Out of the BCCS appeared the Lucy-McGowan Blueprint, which was to serve as a program to use religion to change the social and economic conditions of Mexican Americans. The blueprint laid out plans for community centers, as well as better educational opportunities. One method allowed priests to go into the fields and offer masses and devotional classes to the farm workers along with encouraging them to join the established unions. Another method for advocating justice was allowing Catholic lay leadership to advocate for legislation on behalf of the farm workers, for benefits such as social security and better public housing. This blueprint outlined the first activism and community organization that was to come out of the Catholic Church. However, the blueprint was never able to be fully implemented within the farming communities. The only portion of the plan that was able to be implemented included Mexican priests joining the braceros in the fields.<sup>20</sup> One of the failures of the committee was its lack of funding and backing from the government that did not see any need to end programs such as the Bracero program. Furthermore, Archbishop Lucey did not have the institutional backing from the Catholic Church that was necessary to begin to fight for the social justice of the farm workers.

Since the Bishops Committee for the Spanish Speaking served more educational and service needs, there was still a need for true advocacy within the farm worker community for the rights of labor and their working conditions. Sensing this need, Father Donald McDonnell and Father Ralph Duggan asked the archbishop to establish the Spanish Mission Band in the San

Francisco Bay Area. In seminary, McDonnell and Duggan studied encyclicals, such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Singulari Quadam*, and *Quadragesimo*, from the Catholic Church that supported advocacy and unionization. Although these encyclicals were written for the urban industrial setting, the principles of fair wages and the right to unionize could be applied to the new industrial agribusiness sector. McDonnell himself believed in the unions, his family had been pro-union. In the beginning, the Spanish Mission Band evangelized, held masses, taught devotional classes and other typical duties that priests typically did in these communities. Along with these duties, they also helped establish credit unions, find affordable housing, and opened centers for braceros and other Spanish-speaking workers.<sup>21</sup>

In 1950, tomato pickers in Tracy, California, began a strike against the farmers. The workers approached McDonnell in search of guidance and support for their cause. McDonnell was aware that according to Catholic encyclicals social justice, the workers had a right to organize and form a union. However, the Archbishop of San Francisco, John Mitty, forbade him from helping the workers organize and eventually the strike disbanded. In 1954, when the opportunity arose again to help Mexican American farm workers organize into a union, McDonnell was asked to help. McDonnell was allowed by a new generation of Catholic leaders to lend support and aid to the fledgling union as long as the language around the union was cloaked in ambiguous terms. The Archbishop was forced to recognize the necessity of helping the farm workers in a spiritual capacity. However, the Catholic Church did not want to appear to favor the cause of the farm workers by allowing their priest to become involved in union organizing.<sup>22</sup> Father McDonnell was not supposed to allow the Spanish Mission Band to become involved in unionizing efforts; however, in 1958 with the help of Dolores Huerta, McDonnell founded the Agricultural Workers Association, a union for the farm workers.<sup>23</sup>

However, as McDonnell and Duggan began to advocate for the farm workers, they encountered opposition from the farmers who were Catholic as well. The Spanish Mission Band was painted by farmers to the media as an organization that spoke for the Catholic Church and its feelings toward unionization. Eventually in 1961, the new Archbishop of San Francisco, Thomas McGucken, disbanded the Spanish Mission Band, but not before the seeds of revolution had been sown.<sup>24</sup> It was during his time with the Spanish Mission Band that Father McDonnell met Chávez and introduced him to the papal encyclicals that would become instrumental in informing Chávez's activism.

### **Chávez's Early Life**

When César Chávez was born, his family owned a farm in Yuma, Arizona. However, as with many Mexican American farm owners, circumstances after the depression caused the family to lose their farm to the wealthy landowners in Yuma. The Chávez family was forced to become migrant farmers. The family was unable to make enough money to support themselves, so young César was forced to leave school after the eighth grade and work in the fields alongside his family. Chávez explained that becoming a migrant worker took away his freedom and that to own land and be able to provide for yourself and your family is the true definition of freedom and for this reason it's not surprising that African Americans wanted their 40 acres and a mule to help farm it. Owning a man's labor is quintessential to owning him.<sup>25</sup> It was in the fields, where Chávez first witnessed the injustices suffered by the farm workers. Religious studies professor Frederick John Dalton points to these experiences in the fields as the foundation to Chavez's his moral vision, because he lived in solidarity with farm workers. Chávez understood from personal experience the need to struggle to end the injustices that were being suffered.<sup>26</sup>

Young César learned of the power and the sustainability of the Mexican people from his uncle, who also spoke of the injustices and exploitation that the Mexican Americans suffered when they came into the United States after the Mexican revolution.<sup>27</sup> Chávez's mother instilled in him a great sense of faith, devotion, and sense of servant hood toward his fellow man. Juana Chávez, through her proverbs (dichos) and devotions, passed down a Mexican American popular devotional Catholicism that practiced a fundamental belief in the basic humanity of every individual. From Juana Chávez, young César learned to respect his fellow man regardless of their religious or cultural background. Juana Chávez and his grandmother, Mama Tella, were responsible for young César's religious instruction. Without a formal church in Yuma, it was Mama Tella's dichos that prepared young César for his first communion by drilling him at home in the catechism. Mama Tella then convinced a priest that young César was ready to receive his first communion. Chávez's religious upbringing is characteristic of many of the Mexican Americans in the Southwest at this time. It was a mix of Catholicism and Southwest Indian tales that formed a faith that was personalized for the Mexican American experience. More on Chávez's religious experiences are explored in Chapter 2.<sup>28</sup>

Young César's experiences in school was also characteristic of what the child of a Mexican American farm worker experienced in the Anglo-American run schools in the Southwest. The schools taught children like the young César that they were different because he spoke Spanish and he was made to feel inferior because he was Mexican. The schools attempted to strip Mexican American children of their identity by equating this identity with speaking English and not having another culture other than Anglo-Protestant mainstream. Like many other Mexican American young people, Chávez was not allowed to speak Spanish in school without fear of punishment.

Chávez summarized his experience in Anglo schools to his biographer Jacques E. Levy: “It’s a terrible thing when you have your own languages and customs, and those are shattered. I remember trying to find out who I was and not being able to understand.”<sup>29</sup> Chávez saw his customs and identity repressed at the hands of the Anglo teachers; however it was this Mexican American identity was formed and later harnessed to inspire pride in the striking farm workers.

Chávez joined the Navy in an attempt to escape the fields. During his tour in the Pacific at the end of World War II, Chávez suffered racist comments outside of the fields. Chávez recognized that the ideals that America was attempting to spread into the oppressed nations of Europe and Asia were not fully extended to the ethnic minorities back home in the United States. As a citizen of the United States, Chávez and other Mexican–Americans should have had equal opportunities and access to equal education. Economic circumstances made it impossible for many Mexican American children to stay in school. Although Chávez experienced some racist treatment in the Navy from other service men, after he returned to the United States he realized the extent of the mistreatment that was being experienced by the servicemen who sacrificed their lives for their country. These servicemen did not have access to quality work or a decent way of life in their own country, though they were disproportionately drafted into the armed forces and killed in combat.<sup>30</sup>

In 1946, after his marriage to his wife Helen, Chávez went to work in the fields and it was here that he witnessed all of the injustices that were suffered by the farm workers first hand. In 1952, Chávez worked for the Community Service Organization (CSO), first as a volunteer but then as a paid employee.<sup>31</sup> The CSO was founded in Southern California in 1947 by Fred Ross to serve the needs of the urban poor in Los Angeles and surrounding areas. They offered voter registration drives, citizenship classes, and other methods of political activism for the Mexican

American population. Chávez was responsible for conducting campaigns to attempt to end the racial and economic oppression of Mexican Americans, mostly in the urban barrios. Chávez, however, was interested in advocating in the rural areas, a task that the CSO allowed him to begin. In his childhood, Chávez experienced the peculiar type of poverty that is rural poverty and knew that the farm workers needed a leader to organize them. Chávez attempted to live in solidarity with the farm workers, often showing up to work unshaven and tired. He protested the conditions of the farm workers and the CSOs newfound middle class activism.<sup>32</sup> However, Chávez felt that this middle class activism (activism that attempted to assimilate Mexican Americans into the society without recognizing their differences), was detrimental.

In 1958 Chávez organized a successful strike in Oxnard, California, and requested to organize the farm workers permanently, but the CSO refused to allow him to organize and advocate full-time for the farm workers permanently. Powerful people had begun to attach themselves to the CSO for political reasons; these people were not interested in organizing the farm workers. Chávez accused the CSO of inactivity in the name of the farm workers. Chávez felt that the organization was too concerned with money and appearances and not truly concerned with ending injustice, so he resigned in protest.<sup>33</sup>

In 1962, Chávez moved to Delano, California, a small town where the majority of Mexican American farm workers were table grape pickers and also where Helen Chávez was raised. Chávez picked Delano because the farm workers were shifting toward permanent living arrangements in this area. Furthermore, Delano's placement in the San Joaquin Valley was ideal because of its long history of confrontation between the growers and the farm workers.<sup>34</sup> It was here that Chávez founded the National Association of Farm Workers (NAFW), which later became the United Farm Workers (UFW) Association. Chávez lived in solidarity with the

workers that he wanted to advocate for, turning down several lucrative job offers to organize on a national level. Chávez believed that the union should come from the people, and those that organized the union should not be answerable to the money of high-powered donors.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of this philosophy, Chávez also turned down several offers for funding from outside sources. No outside funding meant that they would only be answerable to their own demands and Chávez believed it would keep the union honest. Chávez believed that in order to advocate for the farm workers, he had to live as the farm workers did: he spent his entire savings and was then forced to ask the community to help him support his family.<sup>36</sup> Chávez's union was founded on interpersonal relationships between himself and the farm workers he advocated for. Chávez took pride in making a union for farm workers headed by those who best knew about the plight of the farm worker through firsthand experience.<sup>37</sup> Solidarity in the cause was foundational in the union that Chávez developed. Helen worked in the fields as well to bring in income while Chávez, and his brother Richard, spent his time talking to farm workers in an attempt to organize them into a union.

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<sup>1</sup>US Constitution: Amendment 15.

<sup>1</sup>Jacques E. Levy, ed., *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>2</sup>Arnoldo De León and Richard Griswold del Castillo, *North to Aztlán: A History of Mexican-Americans in The United States* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2006), 168-169.

<sup>3</sup>De León and Griswold del Castillo, *North to Aztlán: A History of Mexican-Americans In The United States*, 168-169.

<sup>4</sup>Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement. Online. NLCC Educational Media, 1996.

<sup>5</sup>Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: the Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda, "Introduction: U.S. Latino Religions and Faith-Based Political, Civic and Social Action" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 3-16

<sup>7</sup>Public Broadcasting Organization, *On The Border*. [Online] Rev. May 28, 2004. Available:

<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/migrants.html>. [March 29, 2012].

<sup>8</sup>Spencer Bennett, "Civil Religion in a New Context: The Mexican-American Faith of César Chávez" in *Religion and Political Power*, ed Gustavo Benavides and M.W. Daly (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989): 151-166.

<sup>9</sup>Rudiger V. Busto, "'In the Outer Boundaries': Pentecostalism, Politics and Reies López Tijerina's Civic Activism", in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, eds. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>10</sup>Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003) 2-3

<sup>11</sup>Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 42.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez," 43.

<sup>13</sup>Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez," 35-52.

<sup>14</sup>Luis León, "American Prophecy : César Chávez in light of Martin Luther King and Gandhi" in *Wading Through Many Voices Toward a Theology of Public Conversation*, ed Harold J. Recinos (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011) 115-129.

<sup>15</sup>Luis León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 53-64.

<sup>16</sup>Gastón Espinosa, "History and Theory in the Study of Mexican-American Religions," in *Mexican-American Religions Spirituality, Activism and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press),17-56.

<sup>17</sup>Luis D. León, "César Chávez in American Religious Politics: Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line," *American Quarterly* 59 (September 2007) 859.

<sup>18</sup>León, "César Chávez in American Religious Politics: Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line," 859.

<sup>19</sup>Lloyd-Moffett "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez," 35-51.

<sup>20</sup>Lloyd-Moffett, "*The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez*," 36-38.

<sup>21</sup>Spencer Bennett, "Civil Religion in a New Context: The Mexican-American Faith of César Chávez" 153.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, ed Robert Bellah (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1970). 172.

<sup>23</sup>Bellah, 183-186.

<sup>24</sup>Timothy Matovina "Conquest, Faith and Resistance in the Southwest" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the Untied States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 20-33

<sup>25</sup>Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez,"35-51.

<sup>26</sup>Ilan Stavans "Forward" in *Sal Si Puedes (Escape if You Can)* by Peter Mattheiessen (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), xix.

<sup>27</sup>Bennett, "Civil Religion in a New Context" 1.

<sup>1</sup>Rodolfo Acuña., *Occupied America: the Chicano's struggle toward liberation*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 153.

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- <sup>2</sup>Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement. Online. NLCC Educational Media, 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 132-134.
- <sup>4</sup> Sánchez, 18.
- <sup>5</sup>Francisco A. Rosales, *Chicano!: the history of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement*. 2nd rev. ed. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1997. 29-38.
- <sup>6</sup> Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American*, 20.
- <sup>7</sup>Acuña, *Occupied America*, 158.
- <sup>8</sup>Moises Sandoval. *Fronteras: a History of the Latin American Church in the USA since 1513*, (San Antonio ,Texas: Mexican-American Cultural Center, 1983).
- <sup>9</sup>Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes (Escape if you can)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
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- <sup>11</sup>Sandoval, *Fronteras: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA Since 1513*, 382.
- <sup>12</sup> Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum: On The Conditions of the Working Classes.” Papal Document. May 15, 1891., Pope Pius X, “*Sigulari Quadam*,” Papal Document. September 24, 1912., Pope Pius XI, “*Quadragesimo*” Papal Document. May 15, 1930.
- <sup>13</sup>Timothy Matovina “Conquest, Faith and Resistance in the Southwest” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the Untied States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 23.
- <sup>14</sup>Matovina, “Conquest, Faith and Resistance in the Southwest,” 27.
- <sup>15</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 158.
- <sup>16</sup>Alan J. Watt,*Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010. 39.
- <sup>17</sup>Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, 58-60, 72.
- <sup>18</sup>Watt. *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, 48-50.
- <sup>19</sup>Watt. *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, 50.
- <sup>20</sup>Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, ,50-53.
- <sup>21</sup>Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, 53-58.
- <sup>22</sup>Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: the Movement in California and Texas*, ,53-58.
- <sup>23</sup> Jorge Iber and Arnoldo De León, *Hispanics in the American West*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 254.
- <sup>24</sup> Iber and De León, *Hispanics in the American West*, 254.
- <sup>25</sup>Jacques E. Levy, ed., *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 32-54.
- <sup>26</sup>Frederick John Dalton. *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*. Maryknoll, (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 19.
- <sup>27</sup>Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa*, 32-34.
- <sup>28</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 29-62.
- <sup>29</sup>Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* 24.
- <sup>30</sup>Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement. Online. NLCC Educational Media, 1996.
- <sup>31</sup>Peter Matthessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, (New York: Random House Publishers, 1969) 47-49.
- <sup>32</sup>Matthessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 49.
- <sup>33</sup>Matthessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 49-52.
- <sup>34</sup>Matthesen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 54-56.
- <sup>35</sup>Matthensen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 50.
- <sup>36</sup>Matthessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 57-60.
- <sup>37</sup>Matthessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 56-58.

## Chapter 2: Faith Based Activism

*“Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.”<sup>1</sup> --James 5:4 (NIV)*

Though the life of Jesus, Christians are supposed to learn to give to those less fortunate and recognize God’s justice for the poor and downtrodden. Divine justice will right the wrongs that are committed against the poor and the righteous will stand up for the rights of those that cannot speak for themselves. The New Testament book of James promises that misery will befall those who have murdered and oppressed others in the pursuit of wealth. Furthermore, James promises the Lord will relieve the suffering of those that are being oppressed if they are patient and persevere. James promotes the power of prayer as a relief of suffering.

The Bible and its talk about divine justice and fair wages is a source of the activism for César Chávez. In his struggle against the growers of the San Joaquin Valley, Chávez’s incorporated religious symbols and methods because he believed that the struggle was divinely mandated. Frederick John Dalton points to Chávez’s Catholic faith as the primary source of his sacrificial service and solidarity with the poor as well as his nonviolent action in the quest for justice and human dignity.<sup>2</sup> Chávez believed in a Christian commitment to nonviolence, and a Christian theory of justice and that in adhering to those tenets of Christianity, the oppression of the farm worker would be lifted. This chapter seeks to prove that Chávez was a devoutly religious man who truly believed that the way to serve and honor God was to devote one’s life to the service of others. Chávez devoted his life to the service of the farm workers because he recognized them as the poor and downtrodden that Jesus’ teachings and followers were supposed to free. Chávez’s major influences were his upbringing in Mexican popular Catholicism and studying of papal encyclicals on the rights of labor. He saw it as his duty to end the injustices

being faced by his people. He also invited and worked alongside of Protestants in the Migrant Ministry: people such as Reverend Chris Hartmire became instrumental to the success of his movement. These people offered their support on the picket lines and services free of charge. His ecumenism was derived from his belief in the brotherhood of all humans, but his message was for the Catholic Mexican American farm workers and their struggle since over 85 percent of them were Catholic at that time.

Luís León argues that Chávez's gospel of "sacrifice, nonviolence, and social justice" was created to harness support from the majority of Americans who had the money and influence to change legislation in the United States.<sup>3</sup> However, Chávez's religiosity was derived directly from his Mexican American heritage and his Catholicism, neither of which was popular in the United States at the time. In addition, Chávez was known to not want to take money from American businesses, often denying grants and funding because he wanted to build a union that was built by and for the farm workers. The acceptance of money from Euro-America had the potential to compromise the integrity of his message. Furthermore, despite repeated demands that the Catholic Church come to the aid of the oppressed farm workers, most in the church remained markedly silent. The United States is a Protestant Christian nation (52% today), affirming such a staunchly Catholic worldview could potentially scare away some of the moral leaders of the nation. John F. Kennedy's presidency cooled the fires of Catholic distrust, but the Catholicism that Kennedy presented was watered-down in rhetoric to be easily digestible to Protestant Americans because it was so secular. The Catholicism that was presented by Chávez was not diluted and appeared in direct contrast to the Anglo Protestantism and Euro-American Catholicism of the powerful in the United States. Furthermore, the growers of the area were Catholic as well, thus Chávez ran the risk of alienating the Catholic Church. If the Catholic

Church supported the farm workers, it would mean alienating the farm growers who were also Catholic.

### **To Be Catholic and Mexican American**

The Catholicism that was practiced by Chávez was influenced by his Mexican American heritage and based mostly in the home. Mothers and grandmothers were typically the keepers of religion in the home. Since attending an actual church was often impossible for farm workers because the farms were isolated from social centers, Chávez's grandmother, Mamá Tella, prepared Chávez for his Catholic confirmation by drilling him in the catechism and convincing a priest that he was old enough and prepared enough to be confirmed in the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> Catholicism was passed on by Mamá Tella in the form of sayings and proverbs and sayings (*dichos* and *consejos*) that were easily memorized by the children.<sup>5</sup> These *dichos* were often centered on the figures of the Mexican revolution, inspiring pride in being Mexican in the children.<sup>6</sup> Chávez's mother, Juana was instrumental in the formation of Chávez's religious viewpoint. Chávez's mother believed in helping those less fortunate than herself, even if they were white.<sup>7</sup> Chávez's mother also instilled in him a great sense of selflessness. Chávez recalled that his mother would make the children share and if someone complained, everyone's portion got taken away. Chávez's mother also taught her children that giving to others was the best reward that life had to offer.<sup>8</sup>

One product of the mixture of Mexican indigenous traditions and Catholicism, the religion of the Spanish Conquistadores, is Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Virgin of Guadalupe – which was an incarnation of the Virgin Mary. According to the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, she appeared twice to an indigenous convert to Catholicism named Juan Diego, in an apparition in 1531. Guadalupe told Diego that she wanted her shrine built upon Tepeyac Hill, outside of

Mexico City, where the Basilica of Guadalupe now stands. Our Lady of Guadalupe became the patron saint of the Mexican people, and was very influential in Mexico's fight for independence from Spain after 1810. Our Lady of Guadalupe was also used as a symbol of the revolutionary forces led by Emilio Zapata in the Mexican Revolution of 1910.<sup>9</sup> The importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe is understated in scholarship. The use of her image during the marches and protests of the UFW unified the Mexican American people under a common banner, a rallying point that they could all understand and support. César Chávez, influenced by his mother and grandmother's affirmations of Mexican traditions and religion, recognized the importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Mexican American people. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe reminds the Mexican American people of their strong and glorious history. Our Lady of Guadalupe blesses the Mexican and Mexican American people and serves as a guiding light against the forces of evil that corrupt the world and attempt to oppress this chosen people. She also serves as a metaphor for the struggle to end the oppression of the Mexican American people by the growers and of God's promise to stand behind the poor and faithful.<sup>10</sup>

This brand of Catholicism is tailored to fit the Mexican and Mexican American people. The unique mixture of indigenous roots and European imported Christianity is common among minority communities in the United States. The religion speaks to the particular Mexican condition that is relevant to both the struggles and the victories of the people. In times of conflict and struggle, religion anchors these communities providing an unbreakable bond among the people. Catholicism was important to Chávez and he understood the power that religion had in his life and the lives of those around him. Chávez once said, "It doesn't work to disregard tradition. First I try to get the group to identify with its own tradition, then to cooperate with others in a union because their immediate interests are the same."<sup>11</sup>

Catholicism was central in the lives of the Mexican American farm workers because it provided them with the strength to live through the challenges presented by their impoverished conditions. Chávez knew the problems that were experienced daily by the farm worker, problems that he then interpreted through his own faith.<sup>12</sup> Dalton extrapolates upon this stating: “the blending of faith and religious practices with the problems and needs of daily life is characteristic of Mexican popular Catholicism, a characteristic that shaped the farm-worker movement led by César Chávez.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Catholic Social Teaching**

Some of the central themes of Catholic social teaching that were influential to Chávez’s activism; include human dignity, the rights of workers, economic justice, human rights, the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, and peace.<sup>14</sup> Scholarship points to economic and social reasons for Chávez’s activism, but the improvements to the economic and social conditions of the Mexican Americans that were a result of this activism were all byproducts to what Chávez believed was a religious duty to live the life of Christ on earth by improving the conditions of his fellow man.

Chávez was introduced to Catholic social teaching when he was working for the Community Service Organization (CSO). Father McDonnell was versed in the encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Singular Quadam* and *Quadragesimo*, all of which spoke of the rights of the worker. He introduced Chávez to those same encyclicals. Chávez traveled with Father McDonnell when he ministered in the fields, absorbing any and all information that he could, and observing how religious figures interacted with the workers. It was during these outdoor masses and spiritual educational exercises that Chávez saw how effective religion was in empowering the Mexican American farm workers to strive to end the discrimination against the

poor.<sup>15</sup> When forming his union, Chávez focused on the principles of justice, equality, and dignity; principles that he found religious support for in the encyclicals.

An undercurrent in Catholic social teaching during this time, surely something that Chávez himself would have been introduced to, was liberation theology. One of the central tenets of liberation theology is that socioeconomic systems that oppress the poor are morally reprehensible and that God speaks directly for and to the poor. Although this movement did not gain momentum until the mid-1970s, the roots of the movement were present in Catholic social teaching. A second undercurrent during Catholic social teaching at the time was God's preferential option for the poor, although the articulation of this thought (and the language) did not emerge until the late 1960s with the rise of liberation theology. Although this movement was not fully articulated in Latin America until the Conference of Latin American Bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, the concept has existed since encyclicals from the industrial revolution. This is scripturally supported: God challenged the Israelites to protect the poor in the Old Testament and Jesus proclaims in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>16</sup>

This new teaching challenged Christians to work to end oppression and to “look at the world from the perspective of the marginalized and to work in solidarity for justice.”<sup>17</sup> Chávez's Catholic faith challenged society to recognize that there was a moral void within society that failed to support and protect the farm workers.<sup>18</sup>

One published encyclical that Chávez did read and frequently quoted in his union periodical *El Malcriado* was published by Pope Leo XIII, titled *Rerum Novarum: "On the Condition of the Working Classes."* This encyclical was published in the wake of industrialization and confirmed the rights of the worker to unionize and improve his conditions. In this encyclical, Pope Leo XIII acknowledged the plight of the working class poor as unjust and recognized that the Catholic Church was morally obligated to speak out against the injustices, in the name of peace between the rich and poor.<sup>19</sup> This document also recognizes the preferential option to the poor, although it does not proclaim it in those words exactly. In depriving the workingman of the ability to earn a living, or own land and property, the rich man was depriving the poor man of his natural right to self-preservation. The right to self-preservation is God-given and to deprive another human being of that right is dishonorable to God. Furthermore, Pope Leo XII condemns the hiring process of the factory owners and rich men as a method that converts labor to slavery: "To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself."<sup>20</sup>

According to Pope Leo XIII, this is an undesirable way of life because it leads to envy and discord. Eventually the wealth will go away and no one will have the ability to exercise their talents in this world.<sup>21</sup> Pope Leo XII encouraged the wealthy landowner to respect his employees as human beings and not to treat the laborers as a bondsman would treat his slave. Pope Leo XIII stated: "But, if Christian precepts prevail, the respective classes will not only be united by the bonds of friendship, but also in those of brotherly love. For they will understand and feel that all men are children of the same common Father, who is God; that all have alike the same last end

which is God himself...”<sup>22</sup> Under the common bonds of Christianity, all men would become equal and all men would honor God though striving for this equality. Furthermore, Pope Leo XIII encouraged the rich persons in power to allocate fair wages. These wages should be enough to support himself, his wife, and his children and the conditions that the worker is subjected to must be fair, sanitary and safe.<sup>23</sup> According to this encyclical, no other remedy can be found other than one that is centered in religion and the church, because the church is the moral authority of the world. These efforts will foster brotherhood between the classes and enlighten the people. Furthermore, the church has a moral obligation to bring civil society out of evil and reaffirm the bonds of brotherhood.<sup>24</sup>

The encyclicals issued by Pope Pius X and Pius XI, *Singulari Quadam* and *Quadragesimo* respectively, readdress the issues that were faced by laborers. These two encyclicals reaffirm the teachings of *Rerum Novarum*, as well as contribute new thought. *Singulari Quadam*, published in 1912, approves of labor and trade unions.<sup>25</sup> *Quadragesimo*, published in 1930, denounces the classism that is being developed in Europe as a result of a small percentage of the population gaining wealth at the expense of the masses.<sup>26</sup>

These teachings were influential to the activism of Chávez. Chávez used these encyclicals to force the Catholic Church to recognize the rights of the farm workers to organize. The intellectual tradition of Catholicism that Chávez was introduced to by the priests of the CSO informed what his mother and grandmother taught him when he was a young boy. Chávez and others were obligated by Christian sense of charity and duty to advocate on behalf of the poor. This is religion’s everyday purpose: to give to man a sense of power, hope and dignity.

### **Gandhi and Hindu Influences**

Chávez, like Martin Luther King, was an avid reader and follower of the teachings of the Hindu, Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. From Gandhi's principle of *Ahimsa* which is the Hindu doctrine of nonviolence and his principle of *Satyagraha* or truth were key influences on Chávez's activism. "It is in the creative, nonviolent, spiritual response to ma modern theology of human design wherein the synergism between Chávez, king, and Gandhi thrives."<sup>27</sup> What Chávez derived from Gandhi was a basic belief that love, truth and nonviolence for the enemy would be a more effective means for achieving ethnic equality.

Both Gandhi and Chávez believed that violence was demoralizing for the enemy and for the victim. Violence creates a cycle in which no one is actually liberated, but driven further down into the depths of suffering and oppression. What Chávez also learned from Gandhi (and to an extent, King) was the power of direct action protest. Gandhi put himself, and his followers, into the physical spaces of oppression by leading fasts and strikes in the public areas where Indian people were segregated, dehumanized and oppressed. Thus Gandhi made himself and the spaces of oppression visible on a world stage. Chávez emulated this in his activism, he put himself into the spaces of suffering—leading strikes, boycotts, fasts, pilgrimages, vigils and masses in the spaces of oppression.<sup>28</sup>

### **Suffering**

Chávez understood the suffering of the farm workers because he himself lived it. His family was forced into poverty after they lost their farm in Arizona. Chávez knew firsthand the degrading conditions and the poverty that characterized the life of a farm worker. Chávez also experienced the dehumanizing racism that was characteristic of relationships between Mexican American farm workers and the growers. Chávez knew that this racism originated in the refusal of some growers to see Mexican American farm workers as anything more than beasts of burden.

Furthermore, he knew that the farm workers were viewed as amoral by the growers, thus unfit to inhabit the same social space. Chávez also learned about the power and resiliency of the human spirit in the fields with the farm workers.

Chávez saw solidarity in this poverty. He believed that the suffering that was being experienced by the Mexican American farm workers was a direct product of the poverty that the growers subjected them to, and that this poverty demoralized them.<sup>29</sup> During his work with the CSO, Chávez often came to work unshaven, refusing to eat much and refusing to take money. Chávez believed in the importance of suffering in solidarity with the farm workers that he wished to advocate for. In an effort to not appear disingenuous to those farm workers, Chávez forced his family into poverty when he founded his union in Delano: he turned down several lucrative job offers. Chávez's suffering was informed by his Catholic faith. Jesus' words challenge Christians to live in solidarity with those that are impoverished in an effort to bring about the growth of all of humanity. Chávez stated in a speech about the friendship and commitment of Jesus Christ: "By his life is he's calling us to give ourselves to others, to sacrifice for those who suffer, to share our lives with our brothers and sisters who are also oppressed."<sup>30</sup> The importance of the teachings of Jesus Christ to Chávez movement is reaffirmed by statements such as this one, where he uses the teachings of Jesus to solidify commitment to the cause of social justice and preservation of human dignity.

For Chávez, living in poverty was a form of resistance; it created a bond between Chávez and the Mexican American farm workers that allowed them to resist the efforts of the growers to break the union. For Chávez to suffer under the yoke of poverty in solidarity with the farm workers was "to embrace their suffering not for the sake of suffering, but for the sake of

justice.”<sup>31</sup> You will experience God’s grace if you live and work in an effort to end the suffering of the poor.

## **Sacrifice**

One popular quote often cited by religious scholars of Chávez that affirms his belief in sacrificing one’s self to servant hood is: “I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.”<sup>32</sup> Chávez believed that voluntary sacrifice would end the suffering of the farm worker. Affirming the dignity of the farm worker was viewed as a way of living out God’s grace here on Earth. Chávez lived this sacrifice daily: he refused a living wage, choosing instead to forego the material possessions of this world in an effort to live in solidarity with farm workers. Chávez believed in giving to others as a way of ending the inequalities and injustice of the world. Chávez believed that his sacrifice was a way of serving his community.

Matthew 19:23-24 affirms Chávez’s belief in sacrifice: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Romans 12:3-8 calls for man to sacrifice his talents to serve others as a way of honoring God’s grace. Chávez’s activism affirms these Christian principles. However, Chávez continued to affirm these principles: he used his life as his testimony of his Christian beliefs. Just as Jesus challenged his followers to sacrifice for others and to share their lives with those that were oppressed, Chávez challenged the people that supported his union to do the same. Chávez affirmed that Jesus’ message challenged Christians to give themselves to sacrifice for those who suffer and to share their lives with those

that are oppressed and needy. By sacrificing themselves onto others they would join the struggle to end oppression.<sup>34</sup>

Chávez's insistence upon sacrificing material possessions and devoting yourself to the service of others would not have won him many supporters in American society in the late 1960s. Although there were many protests going on at the time on behalf of the Vietnam War, such overt declarations of Christian principles would not have won him many followers within liberal society. Although these progressive social movements believed in protest, a protest with such Christian overtones could have potentially been unpopular. Many of these protesters were young and educated and believed that religion could do more harm than good in a society that should be more concerned with promoting secular solutions to economic and social problems. Religion, for many, was part of the problem. He inverted the social order and transformed popular religiosity, and in time, the institutional church as allies in his struggle for social justice and to unionize the farmworkers. Furthermore, the presidency of John Kennedy secularized Catholicism in order to make it consumable for the Protestant American, but Chávez's activism reaffirms the basic social teachings of the Church and re-invoked Catholic symbols in his struggle. However, to Mexican Americans these tenets of Christianity were affirmed and reaffirmed by their faith over the years. Sacrificing for the community, giving to the poor not only money, but time is an important facet of Mexican American Catholicism.

## **Fasting**

In the weeks prior to Chávez taking on his first fast, many people began to lose faith in the power and truth of nonviolence. Chávez took on the fast to call back those in his union to a commitment

to nonviolence and to renew the covenant that they made with God when they chose to commit themselves to the union's cause, which first took place in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Delano. Chávez, in reference to his fast, stated "the fast is informed by my religious faith and by my deep roots in the Church. It was not intended as a pressure on anyone but only as an expression of my own deep feelings and my own need to do penance and be in prayer."<sup>35</sup> The only food that Chávez consumed for the majority of his fast was communion, which he took daily in order to stay connected with God throughout his endeavor.<sup>36</sup> The fast actually caused many members of the union to leave, feeling that these overt displays of religiosity took away from the seriousness of the cause that they embarked on.<sup>37</sup> The fast may have received media attention, but the rationale for the fast was to reconnect the strike and unionization to God, and, just as importantly, a just life. The motivation for the fast was to remind the followers of the movement about the power of nonviolence. Although the fast is often equated with the hunger strikes that protesters of the Vietnam War were engaged in, the fact that Chávez chose to break his fast by taking communion solidifies the religious narrative that underscored his undertaking.

Chávez's fast also solidifies his position as a mystic within his community. The fasts that Chávez partook in were used to place him closer to God and to obtain spiritual guidance to lead his movement. Chávez used his fasts to obtain a clearer reality through his communication with the divine during his fast and to gain authority for his movement from the divine powers.<sup>38</sup> Chávez's fasts were used to make him spiritually stronger and more attuned with the needs of his people and his movement.

### **Pilgrimages and Nonviolence**

Chávez linked Mexican popular Catholicism with social, political, and economic protest. "In every religion-oriented culture 'the pilgrimage' has had a place: a trip made with sacrifice and

hardship as an expression of penance and commitment...”<sup>39</sup> God would bless their movement, if they showed him the proper respect, and the government would listen to them if they protested loudly enough. For Chávez, this was not a protest march, but a declaration to God to bless their movement and to pay for the past sins of those that had lost their commitment to nonviolence. A pilgrimage was a way for the entire union to pay penance to God as a community, to purify the movement for the future.

The near 250-mile pilgrimage to Sacramento was a way for Chávez to remind those involved in the movement of where the true power of their movement came from. It was also supposed to be a reminder that commitment to the principles of nonviolence would be the only true way of reaffirming God’s grace. Long-term goals could only be achieved through a commitment to nonviolence. For Chávez, nonviolence in a cause, for a purpose was the way of Christ but it requires time and sacrifice. Nonviolence was a way of reaffirming the truth.<sup>40</sup> When those involved in the movement began to lose faith, the pilgrimage to Sacramento reminded them that ultimately their union would win, because they were on God’s work. “Through prayerful fasting César Chávez was able to draw attention to the unjust suffering of farm workers while at the same time witnessing to the power of sacrifice for the sake of liberation.”<sup>41</sup>

Nonviolence within this movement reaffirms the dignity of the farm worker. Nonviolence is a necessity to Chávez's movement because of its underpinnings in Catholic thought. The gospels teach nonviolent action toward your aggressor will overcome the violence through love. Violence not only brutalizes the victim but also the aggressor and dehumanizes them. To Chávez, the teachings of Jesus Christ remind mankind to not exact violence on one another, because it can serve no useful purpose. This is what Dalton describes as Chávez's “theology of nonviolence,” because his choice to use nonviolent confrontation was directly informed by the

Catholic lens through which he saw the world.<sup>42</sup> Although Chávez was adamant that nonviolence was the only way to affirm human dignity and enact social change, it did not mean passivity and inaction. Chávez thoughts on his own nonviolence were that nonviolence required more militancy than violence because “Non-violence forces you to abandon the short cut-in trying to make a change in the social order. Violence, the short cut, is the trap people fall into when they begin to feel that it is the only way to attain their goal. When these people turn to violence, it is a very savage kind.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Challenging the Church**

Initially, Chávez did not have the help of the institutional Catholic Church. However, that did not mean that Chávez was without church support. The California Migrant Ministry, a part of the National Council of Churches, headed by Chris Hartmire was some of the first supporters of Chávez’s movement. Chris Hartmire and the California Migrant Ministry promised monetary and moral support for the grape strike and boycott. The California Migrant Ministry was “a largely ignored stepchild of the Council of Churches” founded in the 1920s.<sup>44</sup> Prior to Hartmire and Chávez’s relationship formed in the 1960s: holding vacation bible schools bring food to the farm workers, bringing news of jobs to the farm workers and other forms of poor relief. The mission of the Migrant Ministry was to bring relief to those suffering under the yoke of agribusiness, but that was originally limited to poor relief. Five mainline protestant traditions were involved in the founding and support of the Migrant Ministry: the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Methodist Church, the Disciples of Christ and the Augustana Lutheran Church.<sup>45</sup> Together, these churches formed the national ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches. However, the Migrant Ministry was not in the business of labor organizing prior to 1962, it was strictly a poor relief service directed toward the farm workers.

Hartmire and Chávez developed an interesting and groundbreaking relationship: Hartmire provided moral support and credibility with the middle class to the movement in the beginning of the grape strike. Hartmire brought with him to the fields, middle class Protestants who could provide financial support to the movement as well as be a physical presence in the movement. The relationship was complex, in that Chávez and the farm workers were largely Catholic and the Migrant Ministry, a long term support network, was Protestant. Chávez's activism never lost its Catholic underpinnings, but ecumenical support was accepted where it was needed.

Luís León speaks of Chávez's use of religion to gather support for his movement from the Catholic Church and the other deeply religious people in the United States at the time. According to León, he needed support from this powerful institution in order to gain moral support that would give him more political clout in a nation as religious as the United States. While I do reaffirm that Chávez's moral standing gave him more power in the United States and bought much needed press to the movement, I challenge León's reading that Chávez's religiosity was inspired by a need for political and social credibility. One such reason for this challenge is Chávez's criticisms of the Catholic Church in California. Chávez may have been unable to gain support from the Catholic Church for one important reason: many of the growers in the San Joaquin Valley at this time were Catholic as well. Chávez challenged the Church's silence on the plight of the farm worker, a move that could have potentially harmed rather than helped his movement.

Chávez accused the Catholic Church of being more concerned with its material needs than in serving the needs of the poor. Advocating for equal rights and reaffirming human dignity Chávez believed should have been one of the primary concerns of the Catholic Church. Chávez

accused the church of not practicing true servant hood. The Church, Chávez believed should “sacrifice with the people for social change, for justices, and for the love of the brother.”<sup>46</sup>

Chávez’s religiosity appears at a time in United States history where being overtly religious may not have normally given him the liberal support that he could use to gather attention to his movement and force the growers to give in to his demands. However, because of his heritage and devotion to the principles of Christianity outlined in Catholic social teaching and in the Mexican American popular Catholicism that he learned from his mother and grandmother, Chávez’s activism stands out as a model for what Christianity can do for social justice and immigrants to this day.

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- <sup>1</sup>James 5:4 (NIV).
- <sup>2</sup>Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003) 3.
- <sup>3</sup>Luís D. León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*. ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 54.
- <sup>4</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 33.
- <sup>5</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 33.
- <sup>6</sup>León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," 56.
- <sup>7</sup>León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," 56.
- <sup>8</sup>Jacques E. Levy, ed., *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 19.
- <sup>9</sup>*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Our Lady of Guadalupe," accessed December 07, 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/629932/Our-Lady-of-Guadalupe>.
- <sup>10</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 33.
- <sup>11</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 70.
- <sup>12</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 27.
- <sup>13</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 33.
- <sup>14</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 46.
- <sup>15</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 48.
- <sup>16</sup>Luke 4:18-19 (NIV).
- <sup>17</sup>Notre Dame Center for Social Concerns, An Introduction to the Principles of Catholic Social Thought. [Online] Rev. 2008. Available <http://socialconcerns.nd.edu/mission/cst/cst4.shtml>. [December 7, 2011].
- <sup>18</sup>Dalton, 27.
- <sup>19</sup>Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum: On The Conditions of the Working Classes." Papal Document. May 15, 1891.
- <sup>20</sup>Pope Leo XII, Rerum, Paragraph 2.
- <sup>21</sup>Pope Leo XIII, Rerum, Paragraph 15.
- <sup>22</sup>Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum: On The Conditions of the Working Classes." Papal Document. May 15, 1891.
- <sup>23</sup>Pope Leo XIII, Rerum, Paragraph 44.
- <sup>24</sup>Pope Leo XIII, Rerum, Paragraph 25-40.
- <sup>25</sup> Pope Pius X, "*Sigulari Quadam*," Papal Document. September 24, 1912.
- <sup>26</sup> Pope Pius XI, "*Quadragesimo*" Papal Document. May 15, 1930.
- <sup>27</sup>Luís León, "American Prophecy: Cesar Chavez in Light of Martin Luther King and Gandhi" in *Wading Through Many Voices: Toward A Theology of Public Conversation* ed. Howard J. Recinos (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011) 125.
- <sup>28</sup> León, "American Prophecy," 116.
- <sup>29</sup>César Chávez, "Good Friday Letter" in *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches* ed. Ilan Stevans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008) 60-64.
- <sup>30</sup>César Chávez, "Jesus Friendship" in *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches* ed. Ilan Stevans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).
- <sup>31</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 116.
- <sup>32</sup>César Chávez, "After The Fast" in *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches* ed. Ilan Stevans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 47-47.
- <sup>33</sup>Matthew 19:23-24 (NIV).
- <sup>34</sup>Chávez, "Good Friday Letter.", 60-64.
- <sup>35</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 131.
- <sup>36</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 132.
- <sup>37</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 131-132.
- Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 39.
- <sup>39</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 86.
- <sup>40</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 142-143.
- <sup>41</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 137.
- <sup>42</sup>Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 122

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<sup>43</sup>César Chávez, “Creative Nonviolence,” in *Peace and Nonviolence: Basic Writings*, ed. Edward Guinan, (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 38-39.

<sup>44</sup>Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez’s Farm Worker Movement*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>45</sup>Sydney D. Smith, *Grapes of Conflict*, (Pasadena, California: Hope Publishing House, 1987), 43.

<sup>46</sup>César Chávez, “No More Cathedrals,” in *An Organizer’s Tale: Speeches*, ed. Ilan Stevans, (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 64.

### Chapter 3: Martin Luther King Jr. and César Chávez Compared

*“Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.”<sup>1</sup> –Deuteronomy 16:20*

Some have argued that the activism and life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is the fulfillment of America’s promise and civil religion. With his life and his invocation of a religiosity that could only be understood against the backdrop of American history, King challenged Americans to adhere to the presuppositions about humanity laid out in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution. King challenged America to recognize the humanity of African-Americans and thus afford them their God given rights as citizens of this country. King used religion to challenge and upright an unjust system in the United States and right centuries of wrong that had been done. Thus, King has gone down in history as a martyr for civil rights and civil religion. His life serves as a testament to the power of belief in this nation. King’s legacy has held up the African-American community in the decades after his death, he has stood as a symbol for the community and the United States at large of a dream fulfilled and a truth realized.

So, what does this mean for César Chávez? Chávez was catapulted into the forefront of the farm workers movement, a movement that strove not only to end economic injustices but also the social inequities that were present as a result of the belief that Mexicans were disposed to low-paying, dehumanizing labor. Chávez challenged growers to see workers as human beings and thus afford them basic human rights and a wage at which it was possible to attain those rights. Chávez’s legacy has been recently immortalized in schools, holidays, memorials and streets and other symbolism that Americans afford their prophets. However, Chávez’s legacy has been written as one of simply a labor leader who attempted to get economically disadvantaged persons the economic security that they deserved. This is true, Chávez did obtain economic

rights for the Mexican and Mexican American farm workers; however it is an incomplete reading. Chávez's activism forced the grower to see the Mexican Americans as people not only deserving of a fair working wage, but also deserving of basic human rights such as access to water, clean and safe housing, protection from pesticides and a decent education for their children. This makes Chávez more than a labor leader; it makes him an activist for civil rights.

King and Chávez were cut from a similar cloth and this is reflected in their activism, their speeches, and their legacies. Thus, it is a miscalculation to afford one a place as a prophet of civil religion without offering the other the same legacy. That is not to say that the men were dissimilar. This chapter will also explore the differences between King and Chávez that prevented King's legacy from being secularized and occasioned Chávez's secularization. One such difference has already been discussed: Chávez was a Catholic and King was a Protestant. Although Chávez worked closely with the Migrant Ministry and other Protestant organizations, his rhetoric and the primary source of his faith was in the Catholic Church. Both men were inspired by some of the same leaders including Gandhi. Furthermore, both men were influenced by similar life experiences, similar theologies and similar beliefs in the Christian tradition. Despite the differences between these two men, their similarities and their similar results ultimately should earn them a place within civil religion as prophets.

Luís León points to Chávez's activism, referring to it as his prophecy saying that in his activism Chávez exposed one of the sins of America to Americans: the mistreatment and mass suffering of farm workers. In his activism, he lifted the veil on injustices in America tantamount to modern-day slavery. Chávez learned to incorporate these politics and conditions into the public Christianity (i.e., civil religion).<sup>2</sup> This is one of the key similarities between King and Chávez; both men challenged America to fulfill the promise of citizenship for their respective

minority groups. This chapter will analyze the different and similar strategies that these reformers used to achieve their goals.

### **Upbringing**

In the upbringings of these two men is where we see the greatest differences. Both men were educated religiously and socialized in a way that put emphasis on the importance of Christianity and that it can help heal the wounds from societal wrongs as well as end societal evils. For these two men, this life lesson played out in their rhetoric of love for your enemy and prayer for the continuation of the movement. The Christian ideal of love, King learned from his parents at an early age. When he was a child, King's mother and father would tell him that he should not hate the white people who dehumanized him, but that it was his duty as a Christian to love them.<sup>3</sup>

This lesson was instrumental to King's activism and one of the fundamental aspects of his fight for nonviolence. Similarly Chávez's mother, Juana Chávez, taught her children the importance of turning the other cheek toward violence, to love those less fortunate than you and to always be selfless.<sup>4</sup> Many of the ideals are present in the Christian concepts of love and compassion, and would be instrumental to Chávez in later years as he lives side by side in poverty with those farm workers that he advocated for.

King, like Chávez, was influenced by his mother, Alberta Williams King. King spoke of her devout Christian belief that she worked to instill in her children. Alberta King also attempted to instill in her children a sense of self-worth and personhood.<sup>5</sup> The same can be said of Chávez's childhood, except it was through the stories that his uncles told the children about Mexico and how their grandfather came to America.<sup>6</sup> Though these stories, Chávez learned to be proud of his Mexican heritage.

King and Chávez were similarly exposed to the injustices of racism at an early age. King speaks of a time, when he was a child about the age of six and a white playmate told him that his father instructed him not to play with the young King anymore.<sup>7</sup> This was the first time that King was acquainted with the injustices of racism and the realization that he was disliked simply because of his skin color. Chávez similarly was introduced to racism young, while he was in school. Chávez was punished in grade school for speaking Spanish and in the integrated schools in California he was laughed at, picked on, and subjected to being called “that Mexican” by the Anglo staff and students.<sup>8</sup> These exposures at an early age raised the racial awareness of King and Chávez, opening their eyes at an early age to the injustices of the systems that they were born into.

Another important lesson that both men learned at an early age was that economic injustice and racial injustice often go hand in hand. Although King grew up in relative economic comfort, he saw that many of his classmates and playmates at the segregated school were unable to afford the basic necessities in life.<sup>9</sup> In the segregated system, economic mobility for racial minorities is barricaded. After his family lost their family farm, Chávez was forced to become a migrant farm worker. Chávez’s family was often exploited and subjected to the harshest conditions and their wages were unrightfully taxed by labor contractors.<sup>10</sup> These lessons exposed these future civil rights leaders to the obstacles that prevented their racial groups from social and economic mobility.

For both of these men, these lessons were critical. They would carry on into their activism and would influence their worldview. The ability to believe in the personhood of all individuals allowed for both King and Chávez to recognize the injustices that were ever present in their communities and recognize them as social evils. By not internalizing the persistent

dehumanization, King and Chávez were able to rise as leaders of their communities. These rites of passage into the radicalized society of the United States fueled distaste for injustices and a passion for social reform that would challenge the status quo of American society. Although the upbringings of both of these men were different the core lessons were similar and remained with these men through their lives.

### **Influences**

As was previously stated, the families and upbringing of these two leaders was influential. However, both of these men were influenced by similar Christian thought that was foundational to their activism. King was inspired by liberal Christian thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, while Chávez was inspired by Catholic encyclicals on the rights of labor published in the same era as Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel. Most importantly, these men were influenced similarly by the life and work of Gandhi. The similarities between King and Chávez are most noticeable in the ways that they attempt to incorporate prominent thinkers into their activism.

Although King was raised and socialized in a southern Baptist church, at an early age he would have seen the ways that African-Americans used their faith to explain social justices and wrongs in society. His father was a role model in this respect. A prominent feature of the black church is the use of the Bible as “a sharp sword to protect black people in their fight with racism.”<sup>11</sup> King saw the ways in which African Americans made Christianity their own and used to counter the racism and dehumanization that they experienced day to day. Chávez experienced the healing power of faith as well: his mother selflessly gave to others reminding Chávez that if he helped others, then God would help him.<sup>12</sup> This proved to be a pivotal lesson for the young

Chávez who showed a Christ-like option for the poor and believe that though God, they could fight to end the social evils that plagued the Mexican American people.

King was influenced by the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch advocated for the relief of the trouble of poverty through social responsibility. For Rauschenbusch the sins of society, such as allowing rampant poverty and unfair working conditions, to persist would mean the destruction of society. The sinfulness of society needed to be addressed, for while individuals could be sinful so could institutions. Rauschenbusch also preached that in society, religion, and social life should be connected spheres.<sup>13</sup> King took this theology to heart: “It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion that professes concern for the souls of men and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”<sup>14</sup>

This concern for the poor and the downtrodden was something that Chávez learned as well through studying Catholic encyclicals. One encyclical that Chávez surely came across and whose message is reflected in his activism is *On the Condition of the Working Classes: Rerum Novarum* issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Although the primary concern of this encyclical is the condition of factory laborers in industrializing cities, its message resonates in Chávez’s legacy. Like Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, this encyclical calls for an end to unjust wages and economic oppression of the rising factory working class. It condemns the actions of those that continue to subject humans to these conditions.<sup>15</sup> Thus these men were both influenced by socially progressive Christian thought and yet still worked within and drew on their theologically and morally conservative institutions to bring about social change. It was the blending of these

two strands of thought that was the secret to their ability to reach people across the political and religious spectrum.

Perhaps the most profound influence on the activism of these two men was Gandhi. Both men point to Gandhi as one of the key influences to their nonviolent activism. Gandhi believed that to resort to violence in the face of oppression not only dehumanized the oppressor but also the oppressed. Much like the tradition of Christian love and compassion, Gandhi's nonviolence (non-violent resistance – Satyagraha – be sure to note this and that it was a form a resistance to social and structural oppression) preached that forgiveness is a much stronger tool than violence when facing an enemy and that noncooperation with an unjust system will see that the system is abolished much sooner than fighting a system will.<sup>16</sup> This idea was critical for King and Chávez who lead extensive boycotts in their activism. Through Gandhi, King began to realize that Christian love and ethics could be applied socially and not simply to individual relationships. King recognized his own Christian upbringing in the teachings of Gandhi.<sup>17</sup> Chávez saw in the life of Gandhi the truth of Christian theology lived out. Gandhi provided the concrete example of nonviolence lived out in the life and the effect that leading a truly moral life could have on society. For Chávez, the life of Gandhi revealed more about the beauty of Christian love than any book or encyclical could because it was Christian theology enacted in the real world.<sup>18</sup> Both men were successful in leading nonviolent protests and boycotts modeled off of Gandhi.

### **Methods and Strategies for Social Change**

Perhaps the most important similarities between King and Chávez are in their similar strategies to achieve reform. Although Chávez's farm worker's movement started much later than that of King, their methods to achieve reform were remarkably similar. Some of their methods included, nonviolence, sermons and masses, and boycotts. They also understood the power of religious

symbols as rallying points and attempted to use religious ethics and rationales to criticize their opponents. These methods have helped to solidify King's position as a prophet of American civil religion, however have been largely secularized or overlooked in Chávez's legacy. These methods are important because they are commonly identified with the African-American civil rights movement, a time of trial for civil religion. In ignoring their importance in Chávez's activism, it becomes easy to mark Chávez's activism as that of solely a secular labor movement.

King pled with the followers of his movement during the Montgomery Bus Boycott to believe in the power of nonviolence and to not turn to violence after his house was bombed. King encouraged his followers to not "do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them."<sup>19</sup> King's life became a symbol of the power of nonviolence; in the face of violence he sacrificed his life to see the movement out to the end making the ultimate commitment. King encouraged his members to remember the life of Christ and to remember the importance of remaining committed to the Christian way.

Similarly, when Chávez's followers were losing faith and resulting to violence in the face of segregation, mass arrests and aggression, Chávez used his life as an example to uphold nonviolence. Chávez embarked on the pilgrimage to Sacramento, becoming physically ill, walking many miles with broke shoes, refusing to accept rides. Using direct action protesting including picketing and marching, Chávez, like King, put his body in the places in which segregation and oppression took place. Militant nonviolence became the method in which Chávez believed was the most apt way of enacting social change. Chávez used the Christian tenet of fasting to bring his movement closer to God. Chávez sacrificed his own body to the

movement, potentially putting his life on the line to uphold nonviolence. As the movement began to lose faith in nonviolence, Chávez embarked on a fast in 1968 to redirect attention back to the power of nonviolence: the fast had longstanding physical implications, he never fully recovered.

During the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King gave sermons at least once a week fulfilling his duty as pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. In these sermons, he encouraged the audiences that came to see him to remain committed to the movement, as it was God's work. The leading example of this is the sermon, often called a speech, given on the night that the bus boycott began in 1955 at Holt Street Baptist Church. In this sermon, King says that they will fight, with Christian love and compassion, for justice, because it is God's way and that they cannot be wrong in their fight: "If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer who never came down to earth. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."<sup>20</sup>

Both Chávez and King were informed through their study of Gandhi about the importance of the boycott as a form of nonviolent protest. The boycott became a way to draw attention to the social injustices inflicted upon these groups of Americans. The right to protest and refuse to participate in a corrupt system has been an important tradition in American society. In many aspects, it is the founding principle of our nation—the Revolutionary War was a form of protest and refusal to participate in a corrupt British system. King and those that participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott refused to participate in the corrupt system of segregation. Similarly, Chávez and those that participated in the Grape Boycott refused to aid the continued dehumanization of farm workers.

## **Lasting Impact**

These similarities serve to highlight the parallels in the lives and activism of these two civil rights leaders. Many of the characteristics of King that were above described have been used to justify his position as a prophet of civil religion that came to challenge America to fulfill God's plan. However, they are largely overlooked or secularized in Chávez's legacy. One possible reason for these characteristics maintaining their religious impact in King's legacy is his vocation: it would be very difficult to secularize an *ordained* Baptist minister, though even this fundamental fact is left out of some children's and other books. Another reason is that King was a Protestant, and Chávez, a Catholic. Furthermore, Chávez began his civil rights activism through organizing a labor union for Mexican Americans, both of which were considered suspect because the first was seen as a Trojan horse for communism and the latter because they were seen as un-American interlopers who'd eventually go back to Mexico. Because Chávez did not separate the two—because he believed that the two were inextricably linked to human dignity and justice—it has become easy for him to be secularized as a labor leader. However, anyone who advocates for the rights of the poor and downtrodden, the rights and justices and human dignities, should be remembered for the good they did for humanity and all of the key factors that motivated them and provided the resources they needed to succeed. Chávez's struggle was not merely an economic one, but like the struggle of King and African-Americans, it was a struggle for social justice.

The similarities that this chapter highlights between Chávez and King serve to prove that both have contributed significantly to civil religion in the United States. It is through his leadership that Mexican Americans began to gain access to the American dream, like it is through King that African Americans began to gain access to the American dream. Both of these

leaders should be afforded the same place in American history, as should the vitally important role that religion played in animating, sustaining, and shaping their activism.

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- <sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20, (NIV).
- <sup>2</sup> Luís D. León, “Cesar Chavez in American Religious Politics, Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line,” *American Quarterly* 59 (September 2007), 863.
- <sup>3</sup> Clayborn Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 7
- <sup>4</sup> Jacques E. Levy, ed., *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 17-22.
- <sup>5</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 3-4.
- <sup>6</sup> Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 32-34.
- <sup>7</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 20-22, 64-67.
- <sup>9</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 55-54.
- <sup>11</sup> Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, Ph.D., *This Far By Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 70.
- <sup>13</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. [Online] Rev. March 10, 2001. Available: <http://archive.org/details/theologyforsoc00raus> [March 12, 2012].
- <sup>14</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 18.
- <sup>15</sup> Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum: On The Conditions of the Working Classes.” Papal Document. May 15, 1891.
- <sup>16</sup> Mohandas Gandhi “Non-Violence,” in *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthropology of His Writings on His Life, Work, And Ideas*, ed. Louis Fletcher (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 133-143.
- <sup>17</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 23-24.
- <sup>18</sup> Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003) 2-3
- <sup>19</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 80.
- <sup>20</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 60.

## Chapter 4: The Problem with Civil Religion

“...*God’s work must be our own*”—John F. Kennedy<sup>1</sup>

The United States is a nation that prides itself on its fundamental presupposition that all men are created equal and that no religion will be persecuted in favor of another one. This is basically true: no one will be criminally persecuted in the United States for their religious beliefs.

However, what is not true is that the United States is a secular nation with no underlying religious beliefs. Scholars call the phenomenon of a national non-sectarian civil religion. This concept was first established, but not named, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in book *The Social Contract*. In *The Social Contract* Rousseau outlines the dogmas of civil religion in the United States such as “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance. All other religious opinions are outside the cognizance of the state and freely held by citizens.”<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah, in his groundbreaking work “Civil Religion in America,” popularizes this concept in the U.S. and academy, along with expanding its definition to “...a genuine appreciation of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.”<sup>3</sup> Bellah also outlines what he believes is the United States’ covenant with God as the “chosen nation,” endowed with divine blessings.<sup>4</sup>

This general definition of civil religion in theory should encompass all Americans. However, drawing on Bellah, I contend that civil religion in America until recently did not include all Americans. Because the United States was founded as a Protestant nation, civil religion in practice did not include experiences that fell outside of the white Protestant experience. Americans forgot the ethnic minorities and those who practice religions outside of the white Protestant religious experience and as a result their experiences were not thought to be

a part of civil religion in the United States. Part of this is ignorance toward ethnic minorities and a vain belief that religion is experienced the same way for all ethnic groups. Scholarship within religious studies has acknowledged that different ethnic groups experience religion differently, thus a space within the general framework of civil religion must be created for them.

Furthermore, a space has not existed within civil religion for Catholicism. As I outlined in chapter 3 of this thesis, Americans have been distrustful of Catholicism, thus Catholic faith has been left out of the civil religion in the United States.

Fundamental changes have taken place within civil religion to encompass other religious minorities such as the Jewish people and to an extent Catholics in a post-Kennedy era. However, civil religion until the Civil Rights era spoke primarily to the white experience that separated the church from the state and left sectarian differences in religion out of the public sphere. Kennedy, although he was a Catholic president, left his Catholic traditions and beliefs out of the White House, a calculated move to make himself more acceptable to his largely Protestant constituencies on the national stage without fully denouncing the Vatican and his Catholic faith. This does little to incorporate Mexican Americans for two reasons: one being that Mexicans and Mexican Americans experience Catholicism in a distinctive way that is very different from a white American from Massachusetts. The second reason is that the displays of faith that are common to Mexican Americans are very public and incorporated into every aspect of life. The distinctive Catholic symbolism was left to the private realm and Catholics were included in civil religion insofar as they did not breach the wall of public displays of religious devotion.

Robert Bellah points to the civil rights movement as a decisive moment in the history of American civil religion. The civil rights movement, Bellah argues, challenged Americans to live up to their values and make a space for African-Americans and other disenfranchised peoples.

However, Bellah does not argue that there are fundamental changes to the nature of civil religion and the symbolism that it does and does not include. It is my argument that Chávez activism not only created a space for Catholics and catholic symbolism to be included in civil religion, but also redesigned how religion can be used to support a movement. Pilgrimages, fasting, masses held before important events were not previously apart of civil religion. Also, prior to Chávez's activism, the only person to be exalted to the position of saint within American civil religion was President Kennedy, but that was because he was martyred not because he was such a paragon of Catholicism.

What this chapter argues is that the activism of César Chávez can be used to challenge and revise the definition of civil religion to make it inclusive of Catholic Mexican Americans. Just like the activism of Martin Luther King Jr. created a place for African-Americans, the activism and the methods of Chávez has done the same for Mexican Americans. Chávez did not manipulate religious symbols to further his activism and incorporate his movement into the greater narrative of civil religion. However, given the nature of activism in the United States and the space that we create for moral leaders, this is exactly where Chávez deserves to be. The public of America trusted him, perhaps unknowingly, because of his devout religious belief and his use of Catholicism in his activism. What Chávez's activism added to the dialogue of civil religion is a place for popular Catholicism and its ceremonies and rituals, a place for mystics, and a place for religious activism on behalf of the poor.

### **Protestant Civil Religion**

Until Chávez, civil religion carried with it a distinctly Protestant rhetoric. In the absence of a state religion, civil religion was born to perform the functions of a church.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the beliefs of this church would be Protestant in nature since the people that formed the civil religion and

who gave it credence would be Protestant. Although this was also Christian, there was no space for distinctly Catholic rituals and beliefs. Although Kennedy was Catholic, the traditions and symbols that were important to his faith he kept out of the public eye. The United States was founded on a fear of the power of public religion and the power of absolutism of the Catholic Church. Some of the Protestant founders in colonial America often fled Catholic Europe precisely because they were being persecuted and martyred for their faith, all of which was graphically portrayed in *Foxes Book of Martyrs*. The symbolism that was included in civil religion was generic: exodus and the Promised Land, chosen people, and a theology with its own sacred places, people, and events.<sup>6</sup> The beliefs that Americans held toward religion were distinctly Protestant in nature: our work ethic, the nature of our laws, or belief in the quiet and private practice of religion, the rhetoric used by our presidents, were all founded in Protestant Christianity. The United States was often intolerant to Catholicism, labeling it as “the other “and barricading off civil religion to its influences. Bellah points to the presidency of John F. Kennedy as proof that Catholics can be exalted by the American people, but I believe that the only reason that Kennedy was successful in the White House was because he secularized Catholicism and made it agreeable to the American mindset and because he was martyred .

That is to say that I believe that the civil religion that was instrumental to the formation and continuation of this nation was largely (Maryland was an exception) Protestant in origin. This is a byproduct of the people who founded this nation and the ideals that they held. The colonists that originally came to these shores were fleeing religious persecution from the Catholic Church, it only follows that the civic guidelines that would become foundational to this nation would be those that would prevent the Catholic Church from ever gaining the foothold in this nation that they had in Europe. In Europe, Catholicism had tremendous power because there

was no separation of church and state until after the French Revolution in 1769 and even to this day there are state-sponsored churches in many European countries. Although scholars like to analyze civil religion and point to its generic rhetoric that could fit with any religious experience, the fact is that it did not speak to the rituals, saints, and public theology of Catholicism until after Chávez was exalted to the position of public prophet. Furthermore, post-Chávez civil religion gained the ability to advocate on behalf of the poor and the disenfranchised without value-laden attempts to convert the recipients to Protestantism.

### **The New Symbolism**

Chávez's activism was influenced by a profound and devout belief in the tenets of popular Catholicism and the teachings of the Catholic Church as it pertained to advocating for the poor and disenfranchised. Prior to the activism of Chávez, there was little talk of using the religious beliefs of this nation to end the oppression of those that are economically oppressed. Protestant organizations attempted to do this, but always with the underlying motivations of converting souls. Furthermore, Protestant organizations were used to Americanize immigrants and indoctrinate them into American ways. Chávez used Catholicism and Catholic social teachings to help men, regardless of their faith and without the underlying motivation of converting souls. Chávez's activism also spoke specifically to the experiences and the conditions of the Mexican and Mexican American farm workers, using symbolism that they would understand and that would speak to them.

Pilgrimages were used in civil rights advocacy before Chávez. The marches from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama during the civil rights activism of King could be viewed as pilgrimages in effort to incite change. However, Chávez's activism added a new component to pilgrimages: penance and suffering. Chávez and the fellow farm workers walked over 300 miles,

Chávez did a significant portion of the walk in pain, with a fever and thin shoes, but refusing any medication because he viewed the walk from Delano to Sacramento as a walk for penance.<sup>7</sup> At every stop along the way, the members of *La Causa* would stop and hold masses and prayer vigils for the people. This was also an addition to the pilgrimage in civil religion: public displays of Christian religious devotion, such as masses were uncommon. Masses in general were not typically held, any religious service that had been held in an effort to end discrimination were Protestant in nature.

Another important feature that was added to civil religion was Our Lady of Guadalupe. This adds both an ethnic component and a Catholic component. It is important that the Catholicism that Chávez was a part of was one that was tailored to the experience of the Mexican American people: the symbolism that he used was the symbolism that would speak to their experience. Our Lady of Guadalupe is an important figure to the Mexican people: she represents their struggle and their favor by God. Although Our Lady of Guadalupe did not become a new component of civil religion, she was used and recognized by the members of this movement and she was recognized as religiously important to those who wrote about Chávez's legacy.

### **Chávez's the Mystic and Prophet:**

Rudiger V. Busto points out in his article, "‘In the Outer Boundaries’: Pentecostalism, Politics, and Reies Lopez Tijerina's Civic Activism," that Chávez used vernacular Mexican Catholic symbolism to overlap with the larger American meanings of religious sacrifice and sainthood.<sup>8</sup> However, Busto gives Chávez too much autonomy over his own place in history. Chávez's activism came from a devout belief in the principles of social action within Catholicism and from a belief that doing God's will on Earth meant sacrificing for the poor. The implication that Chávez orchestrated his activism to call on the religious convictions of the

greater American public denies what should be seen as a devout religious belief that was used to speak to the farm workers that he advocated for, not to the greater American public. What Chávez did not think that he needed was affirmation from the greater American public for his cause. However, Chávez did challenge the American public to live up to its oft-stated principle of equality for all.

The Christianity that Chávez knew was one that was riddled with the popular Catholicism of Mexican Americans. It is important to note that this symbolism would not have resonated with a white American public that some scholars claim that Chávez was attempting to gather support from. The manifestation of the Virgin Mary that is seen in Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Mexican people, her skin is *brown*. Chávez is not affirming the power of the white symbol of the holy mother, but of the brown one, the one that speaks to his people, but perhaps would not have spoken to the radicalized American people.

Never before was a leader such as Chávez exalted to the position of prophet. In his lifetime, Chávez closely attempted to imitate the life of Christ, much like many important Catholic saints before him. Moffett points to this lifestyle and says that in doing so, Chávez attempted to move closer to God and obtain special visions and premonitions for his movement.<sup>9</sup> Through fasting, suffering, and poverty Chávez hoped to move himself (and thus his movement) closer to God. This is the mysticism that I believe Chávez's legacy addresses, the power of a prophet of civil religion in the United States to stand in special communication with God and challenge the people of the United States to live up to their ideals. These actions, and his supposed special communication with God, would not win him very many followers in the United States at this time, for Americans saw themselves in special favor with God.

At this time in American history, the use of Catholic symbolism actually would not have won Chávez many followers. In a post-Kennedy era, Catholicism was the sect of Christianity that could be seen but not heard. Kennedy all but denounced his Catholic faith in order to win the Presidential Election of 1960 and this secularization of Catholicism is what he thinks made Catholicism digestible to the American public: they did not have to like it, but they could at least live with it. Chávez was not the secularized Catholic that Kennedy was, his activism brought into the public the saints and symbols of Catholicism that were important to the Mexican Americans that he worked with.

After his death, the farm workers that Chávez advocated for sanctified him. This is important because of the place in American history that it afforded him. Memorials, schools, hospitals and holidays were given to him. This is the most important and prestigious honor that America affords its prophets and it also certifies that they have a place within civil religion. In sanctifying Chávez, Americans unknowingly created a space in civil religion for Catholic social teachings and Catholic mysticism.

### **Revisionist Civil Religion**

So what does this all mean for the national religion? Chávez's legacy added two important components: a place for the experiences of Mexican Americans and a space for the symbolism and mysticism that is a component of popular Mexican American Catholicism. Furthermore, Chávez's legacy (along with the legacy of other civil rights movements) calls for Americans to advocate on behalf of social justice. Chávez's legacy is a call by the masses for the United States to remember its promises of equality. However, that is not to say that Chávez was aware in his lifetime of what his legacy would eventually be. Some scholars, such as León argue that Chávez knew that there was an infusion of religion and politics that was calculated.<sup>10</sup> I

contend that Chávez knew no other way: for him there was no distinction between the private, religious spheres and the public, secular spheres. The only real way to live on this Earth, for Chávez was to advocate on behalf of those that are less fortunate and live God's way.

Furthermore, post Chávez (and King); religion became a form of resistance. This form of resistance Americans must recognize as legitimate because they recognize Christianity as important. Chávez used religious rhetoric, some of it recognizable, some of it new but religious nonetheless, to challenge the United States to live up to its ideologies.

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Kennedy quoted in Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, ed. Robert Bellah (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 172.

<sup>2</sup>Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 172-173.

<sup>3</sup>Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 179.

<sup>4</sup>Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 168-189.

<sup>5</sup>Luís León, “César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 54.

<sup>6</sup>Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 186.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques E. Levy, ed., *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 211-212.

<sup>8</sup>Rudiger V. Busto, “‘In the Outer Boundaries’: Pentecostalism, Politics and Reies López Tijerina’s Civic Activism”, in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, eds. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>9</sup>Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, “The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 42.

<sup>10</sup>Luís D. León, “César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*. ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 55-56.

## Chapter 5: Lost in Translation

*“The perception of Roman Catholic faith, practice and polity as superstitious, corrupt, undemocratic, and ‘un-American’ is culturally ubiquitous.”*<sup>1</sup> - Mark Massa

Historically, mainstream Protestant America has not had a healthy relationship with Catholicism. As a nation founded by English Protestant Puritan and Pilgrims and initially populated by religious dissenters that were fleeing from the persecution of the dominant Anglican Church of England, Americans have historically not favored the Catholic Church, even though one colony – Maryland – was founded for Catholics. Seen as incompatible with democracy and too enthralled with ancient traditions that separate man from God, the Catholic Church has been largely ignored or mistreated in American scholarship. Andrew Greeley points out that Catholicism in an “immigrant religion” that has come into a culture that is typically “apathetic to Catholicism.” As a result, immigrants are “faced with the dilemma of becoming American enough to survive in the new society and remaining Catholic enough to maintain [their] allegiance to the world-wide Roman Catholic faith.”<sup>2</sup> Mexican Americans are then put into the difficult position of both assimilating culturally and religiously to America, while maintaining their own religious traditions. However, scholarship until recently has ignored the religiosity of Mexican Americans and Catholicism has been pushed into the background. This is a misrepresentation of what religion has meant for the public activism and social adjustment of Mexican Americans. Important leaders in Mexican American history have become historical pawns that scholars use to manipulate the legacy of Mexican Americans in the United States to prove a point about labor, social, economic, or political history.

Due to an array of circumstances, César Chávez’s legacy has been as the story of a labor organizer who strove to end economic oppression in the San Joaquin Valley. Chicano scholarship has written the history of Mexican Americans in largely secular terms. However, this

restricts the legacy of Chávez and ignores the importance of religion to the movement. This restriction has overshadowed and ignored the power of Mexican American popular Catholicism.

Recently in scholarship, there have been attempts to revive this lost history and relationship between Mexican Americans and the church. Scholars like León and Lloyd-Moffett have attempted to rewrite religion into Mexican American scholarship, but this is a long history to rewrite. Timothy Matovina points out "...scholars of the nineteenth-century Southwest tend to see religion, specifically Mexican Catholicism, as providing scant (if any) resources for the defense of a conquered people."<sup>3</sup> Mexican Catholicism has been placed in the home, a domestic or personalized experience that is not compatible with assimilation into the United States. The economics are separate from the reaffirmation of their cultural identity and not one in the same, the labor history is separated from the cultural history and not one in the same.

The separation is not by accident, however. America is a land where Protestantism rules (even today they make up 52% of all Americans) and other religious commitments are seen as outside of the religious norms. Devotion to the Vatican, in an American nativist context, would mean divided loyalties. Anyone who is not seen to fully support the American experiment in democracy with a full heart is viewed with suspicion by the Protestant ruling elite. In an attempt to assimilate into American scholarship and into the mainstream of American society, where Chicanos would finally become a part of the American dream, Chicano scholars wrote out the importance of Catholicism to the understanding of what it means to be Mexican American. Attempts to assimilate Chicano scholarship into the popular narrative of the United States history served to secularize the experience of being Mexican American for a public that does not understand devotion to the tenets of Catholicism.

Furthermore, the world that Chávez's legacy began to be written in (i.e., a United States that as in a post-Kennedy era) was not interested in the religion of a popular labor leader. One reason for this is because they wanted to brand Chávez as a communist and revolutionary social leader. Many groups rewrote Chávez's legacy to serve their own ends. An example of this is that those interested in subverting the capitalist legacy of the United States wrote Chávez into literature as a labor leader interested in undoing the wrongs done by a capitalist system with little regard for the minority working poor. Those scholars interested in race relations in the United States wrote Chávez's legacy as one that reaffirmed the beauty and long cultural history of La Raza Cosmic, which José Vasconcelos argued was a cosmic Mexican race. Although these are not misrepresentations of Chávez's legacy, they are half-truths that do not understand the whole picture. To understand the full truth of Chávez's vision and activism, popular Catholicism must be examined in conjunction to what it means to be Chicano in America.

### **Catholic "otherness"**

Catholicism has a longstanding history of being perceived as incompatible with the ordering of American society by some dominant voices. The birth of such sentiment is in the founding of this nation: the colonists that settled on the eastern seaboard were fleeing persecution for their Protestant lifestyles and religious ideas by a society ordered and regulated by Catholicism. The structure of American society is founded in a Protestant mindset that fears absolutism be it from the Church or from the state. The institutions that make up life in the United States such as the economy, the notion of work, schools, and the government are "rooted in a profoundly Protestant ordering of human society."<sup>4</sup> Mark S. Massa, S.J. proposes that it was the "fear of the outsider" that characterized American thought from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and that Catholics were washed up in this sentiment.<sup>5</sup>

Protestant Establishment in the United States constituted the real but unofficial civil religion in the Republic. This civil religion made others- Catholics, Jews, Mormons, etc. - somehow 'un-American' precisely to what extent that they did not share the Reformation/Enlightenment principles on which Mr. Jefferson's 'lively experiment' was founded.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the United States has often had a misconception of the nature of Catholicism. This misconception carried itself into the western frontier after the Great Awakening.

Massa points out that the Great Awakening was instrumental to the evangelical understanding of religion in the United States that found its way onto the western frontier. These frontiersmen believed in an evangelical ordering of society, one that was even more incompatible with Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> As the western frontier met the Mexican southwest, the two cultures collided with the American culture becoming the dominant narrative. The Catholicism of the Mexicanos that the Anglos encountered was misrepresented and misunderstood. The Mexicanos at the time were not given to the institutional Catholicism that Americans feared, but to a popular Catholicism that could be molded to fit with American society. However, Mexicanos were casted into the same light as other Catholics in some cases, but they were largely ignored.

America's long-standing misconception of Catholics further marginalized the Mexicanos in the United States. Catholicism then became another way of labeling this group in the United States as an "other," a group incompatible with the American lifestyle. The marginalization of Catholicism also further allowed for intellectuals to disengage Catholicism from the study of Mexicans and Mexican Americans: Catholicism was a sign of backwardness and a remnant of the old world.

## Chicano Intellectuals

Prior to the 1960s, there were few Mexican Americans with the advanced degrees required to create a field in Mexican American religion and theology.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there was very little interest in the field and little, aside from a few books on the topic written by people in history or anthropology, Chicano scholarship. This resulted in a void in the academy that would not be filled until those interested a growing number of Mexican Americans and other Latinos ~~in~~ received advanced degrees starting in the 1960s. Furthermore, few institutions thought Mexican American religion was a viable field of study, resulting in few schools with Mexican American religions as an academic track.<sup>9</sup> This limited the scope through which religiosity within the Mexican American community to being studied though the lens of secular fields such as history, sociology, and politics. Such a reading can gloss over important factors in religion that are instrumental to the way that Mexican Americans conceive of themselves within the greater network of the United States.

The nature of Chicano scholarship was an emerging field in the 1960s and the 1970s. Scholars like Rodolfo Acuña were emerging as key figures in describing the plight of the Mexican American in the Southwest since the land had become a part of the divine Manifest Destiny in 1848. However, scholars Acuña were less concerned with the religion of a man like Chávez. More important to their scholarship was the obvious economic disparities that were present in the fields of California. These scholars wrote the histories of the farm workers as labor histories, void of cultural references. In *Occupied America*, the references to religion in the Delano strike are there to show how Chávez used religion to create solidarity between the workers or to how the Church failed to respond to the needs of the farm workers.<sup>10</sup> Acuña's pessimism toward religion and the failure of organized religion to come to the aid of the farm

workers until late in the struggle reflects a general tone in the United States at the end of the 1960s towards organized religion. The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s in the United States saw a rise communism, socialism, and the Radical Left, which created the pessimism toward organized religion in the wake of world conflicts and a belief that organized religion was more harmful than helpful as it pertained to conflicts in the world. Chávez's legacy becomes a product of this revisionist history that leaves behind religion. Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda point this out in their introduction to *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, "The criticisms of Rodolfo Acuña and others like him have helped shape a generation of Chicano and Latino scholarship on Latino religions and politics. They have also contributed to the long-standing perception that religion has not had an important role in Latino political, civic, and social action."<sup>11</sup>

Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda continue to point out that scholarship was disinterested in religion because of increased interest in Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars who are interested in Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s recognize what was believed to be a disconnect between the world and religion. The poison of imperialism and the oppression of cultures worldwide by dominant European countries was justified through religion. The misconception that remains today, is that as the world progressed and imperialism broke down, the necessarily became less religious. Religion then came to be seen as the root of many of the problems in the world as well as the beginning of many conflicts. Religion further oppressed those already dealing with harsh circumstances in a way that was both unfair and unjust. However, religion could not rectify these wrongs because it was the source of these wrongs. One misconception often heard in the conversations of liberal arts students on elite college campuses is that the end of religion as a necessary worldwide moral force coincides with the starting point of the world

becoming more concerned with others and less concerned about sectarian differences. As far as the farm worker's movement is concerned, religion was viewed as one of the methods used to subjugate and oppress the farm workers. Scholars blamed the Catholic Church for all but sanctioning the oppression and unjust treatment of farm worker by the farm owners. Scholars like Acuña critique a church that they believe was an extension of white America.

### **Mexican American Middle Class**

Scholarship at this point is a middle class phenomenon. Those who are writing the scholarship are often removed from the everyday experience of the working poor. Furthermore, middle class Mexican Americans were influenced heavily by John F. Kennedy (JFK). JFK was also a Catholic, but was able to make Catholicism digestible to the American mind. However, after he became president, JFK secularized the role of the presidency in order to downplay the effect that his Catholic upbringing would have on his White House policies. In an attempt to separate himself from the Vatican, JFK secularized his Catholic values and made them more digestible to an America that was otherwise distrusting of Catholicism. In the 1960s, there was a belief that JFK merged the values of Catholicism with those of America, making Catholicism compatible to the American mindset. However, current scholarship has rewritten this history to tell the actual story: JFK secularized his image and the White House (as the Massachusetts Senator he was known as a champion of Catholic causes) in order to gain the popular appeal that was needed to be elected to the presidency. Thomas J. Carty wrote, "By endorsing an absolute separation of church and state in order to achieve election as president, Kennedy helped define the rigid requirements for Catholicism's acceptance within America's culture and religion." While Kennedy remained privately devoted to Catholicism, his public persona was that of a secular man detached from the Vatican and the laws of the church.<sup>12</sup>

This became the prototype of Catholicism that America expected to see, or rather to not see. Catholics were supposed to be seen and not heard and any instances of public displays of Catholic devotion were immediately labeled as deviant, superstitious, or trite. This leaves no space in the public sphere for Mexican American popular Catholicism. The Mexican American middle class began to assimilate into mainstream America they wanted to be good Catholics. Being a good Catholic meant, in a post JFK America, not wearing your religion on your sleeve. It also meant stripping their Catholicism of any popular elements, superstitions, and figures. Popular religiosity with its superstitions and the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe became incompatible with the greater American religious narrative. However, as more Mexican Americans begin to move into the middle class and scholarship becomes more middle class, there is a desire to rewrite Chicano history as a tale that is consistent with that of JFK. Chávez, the favorite son, then gets recast as influenced by JFK and Robert F. Kennedy, in a story that is digestible by the American mainstream. One scholar that does this is Steven W. Bender, in his book *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and the Dream of Dignity*. Bender, unlike some biographers of Chávez, does acknowledge the religious component of Chávez's activism, but not the Mexican influences. The Catholic influence is readdressed though the lens of Chávez's short lived friendship with Bobby Kennedy. The Catholicism is readdressed as a product of Chávez's upbringing and a method used to bring white America into the movement in order to give the movement more credibility.<sup>13</sup>

Middle class Mexican Americans wanted to frame their scholarship in a way that made sense to the mainstream America that they were beginning to assimilate into. This meant that the history that was written for Chávez was a labor history, void of the popular Catholicism that he believed so strongly in and void of the important characteristics of his activism that connected

him with the Mexican American farm workers. While this made Chávez applicable to the mainstream narrative of the United States, it robbed Chávez of many of the important aspects of his activism and appeal to the masses that can only be understood through the lens of popular Catholicism. Although this revision of Chávez's legacy made sense to the mainstream narrative of the United States, it made little sense to the Mexican American that Chávez advocated for.

The Mexican American middle class was attempting to find a place in the dominant social order of the United States. Tailoring their legacy to fit within a particular social movement within the United States would hasten this assimilation. The counterculture movement was a perfect movement for the Mexican American middle class to find themselves apart of. The counterculture movement challenged the dominance of white America and caused social upheaval related to a social reordering of society. Acceptance by the largely secular counterculture movement would mean acceptance by one group within the larger middle class society and thus easier assimilation. However, this would also mean allowing the counterculture movement to tailor Mexican American leaders for better acceptability into the movement. Thus, Chávez was stripped of his distinctive Catholic components and made digestible to the counterculture movement.

The climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s was one of political, social, and economic upheaval worldwide. The United States was caught up in a whirlwind of social movements aimed at changing the status quo such as the African American civil rights movement, Gay and Lesbian Rights movements, and Women's Rights movements and not to mention the student protests to end the war in Vietnam. César Chávez's movement, although particular to his time and conditions under which Mexican and Mexican American farm workers found themselves living in central California, got swept up in a wave of social upheaval by the media. I contend

that the media manipulated his image in an effort to situate him within the leftist, secular wing of ideology. .<sup>14</sup> This manipulation of Chávez's image aided in the assimilation-of the middle class, but hurt the scholarship of greater Mexican American civil rights movements, because the religiosity of the farm workers movement was lost to history.

Another reason for the secularization of Chávez in scholarship is the actual academy itself. The academy is a largely secular institution, which until recent years paid little attention to matters of religion in what on the face appeared to be mass political, social, or economic movements. This along with the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s meant the academy trended toward scholarship in fields like education, politics, sociology and history void of religion.<sup>15</sup>

During the twentieth century, the academy moved Catholicism out of the classroom. Massa states that the academy was distinctly anti-Catholic, placing Catholicism squarely within the Catholic institutions that were already established. In the 1960s when religion was distinctly under attack by these new secular institution, Massa contends, that Catholicism got attacked particularly hard. Catholicism began to be seen as distinctly against progress, while studies within the academy were trending toward secular pursuits that were seen more compatible with progress.<sup>16</sup> Religion could be studied as long as it was the Protestant religion studied within the context of the founding of the United States or the reasons why European nations remained in the darkness of the intermixing of church and state for so long after the United States rose above it.

Due to the overwhelming secularism of scholars and those that have obtained advanced degrees, the academy has maintained this secular nature. This is because scholars tend to write about things that are important to them personally and compared to the percentages of religious people in the general population, scholars tend to be overwhelmingly secular. As a result, many

in the academy are not interested in and thus do not write about things that pertain to religion and if they do, it's often cast in a decidedly negative light.

Also, there was a presumption that Mexican American experience of Catholicism and the experience of Catholicism by largely white communities were a part of the same narrative.<sup>17</sup> Catholic theology was a taboo subject within secular institutions and thus not a part of the curriculum of institutions of higher education. A major thought within these institutions was that Catholicism was unimportant to the study of secular institutions and thus best reserved for seminaries and Catholic schools. Within the academy, the study of theology was seen as unimportant and gave way to more “worldly” pursuits. Thus the study of religion within the Mexican American community remained stunted.

Furthermore, the academic field of religious studies over all wasn't conceived of until after the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision *School District of Abington v. Schempp decision*, which allowed for the teaching of religion in public universities.<sup>18</sup> So during the formative years of Chicano studies, the field of religious studies was a fledgling field and largely unknown within the academy. Popular thought was, and largely still is today, that religious studies scholars are theologians. The public largely does not differentiate between the two, although they are two distinct forms of scholarship.

The rewriting of Chávez's legacy in history was due to a number of factors including the pro-secular bias in the academy, the influence and biases of the counterculture movement, the rise of the status-hungry Mexican American middle class, and the history of anti-Catholicism in the United States. Recently, scholars have attempted to revise this history, properly placing Chávez's devout Catholicism into their analysis of his activism and legacy. However, the academy in the United States remains a largely secular space making it difficult for this

revisionist history to gather steam. Hopefully, there will be time to rewrite the Catholicism into Chávez's legacy and the academy will be able to recognize the importance of this popular Catholicism to the farm workers movement.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mark Massa, S.J., *Anti-Catholicism in America*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Experience in America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Timothy Matovina “Conquest, Faith and Resistance in the Southwest” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 19.
- <sup>4</sup> Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 9.
- <sup>8</sup> Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, “Introduction,” in *Mexican-American Religions Spirituality, Activism and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 1-2.
- <sup>9</sup> Espinosa and García, “Introduction,” 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: the Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 153-187.
- <sup>11</sup> Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda, “Introduction: U.S. Latino Religions and Faith-Based Political, Civic and Social Action” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas J. Carty “Religion and the Presidency of John F. Kennedy” in *Religion and the American Presidency* ed. Gastón Espinosa (New York Colombia University Press, 2009), 284.
- <sup>13</sup> Steven W. Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and the Dream of Dignity* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2007)
- <sup>14</sup> Moffett, “The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez,” 35-64.
- <sup>15</sup> Espinosa et al, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in the United States* 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Espinosa and García, “Introduction,” 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Espinosa and García, “Introduction,” 1-2.

## Conclusion

*“Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’”*<sup>1</sup> - Revelation 14:13 (NIV)

This thesis has examined the reasons for César Chávez’s secularization in scholarship, in light of his obvious religious influences. It has challenged several theories in scholarship, including the motivations of those who have charted Chávez’s legacy, Latino engagement with institutionalized religion, the treatment of Catholicism in America, the secularization of scholarship and activism and notions of civil religion in the United States. Civic engagement to institute social and political change has been an important characteristic of life in the United States since its founding. An important component of the rhetoric that is born of this type of activism is Christianity: the essence of peaceful protest in this nation is founded on the principle of engaging the nations Christian principles to encourage fulfillment of the American promise. We see this with activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., and with presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy.

It is a failure of scholarship to not acknowledge the religiosity of Chávez and the movement that he championed in California. It ignores many of the characteristics of his activism that made him trustworthy to the farm workers he was attempting to organize and to the American public. The comparison of Chávez and King is important to emphasize this fact: civil rights organization at this time carried with it a heavy religious component that was used to call the racialization of American society into question in light of their promoted principles of justice and equality. By speaking to a Christian society using the credibility of his Christian faith, Chávez—like King—was able to engage the United States in his struggle. Along with this, Mexican American popular Catholicism was an important aspect of life for the Mexican

American farm workers: by speaking to the symbols and theology that was pivotal to their day to day lives, Chávez was able not only to establish credibility, but he was also able to engage them on a common ground allowing them to come together in the struggle.

The problem with Chávez's legacy is the failure of scholars in a post-Vietnam, post Kennedy society to recognize the importance of religion in the activism of major civil rights leadership. Historians date the rise of conservatism to Nixon, culminating with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Scholarship on the left—arguably the scholarship most likely to engage with civil rights activism—began to reject religion, feeling that it served no useful purpose within American society. Religious studies scholarship is attempting to correct this, paying more attention to religion on the left, but it is an uphill battle. Latino religious studies scholars are attempting to correct this problem, but scholarship is still viewed as unimportant and politically incorrect in many universities.<sup>2</sup> A second problem was the rise of the Mexican American middle class that sought to divorce itself from Mexican American popular Catholicism that could potentially prevent their assimilation into Protestant American society. American has a long history of rejecting Catholicism in society, labeling as old world and primitive. Chávez's activism, important enough to be acknowledged by the Mexican American middle class, was divorced from the obvious Catholic elements in order to make it more marketable to the general American population.

Furthermore, the media during the rise of Chávez favored a more radical form of social activism. In light of the student protests of Vietnam, the rise of ethnic nationalism and other left of center forms of social activism, religion was not an important aspect of activism for the liberal media. Thus, the media stripped or ignored acts of Chávez of their religious elements: fasts become hunger strikes, pilgrimages become marches, and sacrifice simply becomes the right

thing to do. The media stressed Chávez's role as a labor leader, but largely eclipsed his role as a moral leader and as a civil rights activist. They stressed the ethnic component of Chávez's activism, but only as far as it will fit into the secularized portrait of the farm workers movement that they were painting.

Chávez was not only a labor leader and a civil rights activist, but he was also a moral leader. Chávez's activism was defined by a mixture of his Mexican heritage and his Catholic upbringing that resonated with the farm workers that he was advocating for. Never before was a labor struggle defined in such religious terms, never before did a labor leader combine civil rights: such as the right to economic mobility, to be treated humanely and fairly and the right to live, with economic rights and challenge an entire economic system in the United States.

Leaders of other movements and activist groups engaged him in the realm of religion: Martin Luther King commended his movement; the Migrant Ministry used their Protestantism to enlist the help of other church leaders and churchgoers for this movement. Chávez was thrown into the national spotlight as the champion for Mexican American rights.

What does this mean for civil religion? The immortalization of influential leaders is a unique feature of the United States, but Chávez's legacy has been largely secularized relegating him to the place of labor leader and largely ignoring his religious impact. American civil religion's third time of trial challenged the racism of American society and encouraged America to acknowledge the oppression of minorities. Activists like Chávez and King challenged America to fulfill its promises to minorities and to fully extend the rights of citizenship to those that were oppressed because of their race. The failure of American society to extend the rights and privileges of citizenship to minorities was disconnect between the rhetoric that the United States extended to the rest of the world and life in the United States of racial minorities. Americans all,

popular rhetoric during the World War II period, failed to recognize the racial, ethnic and religious other, the mixture present in United States society. Political action and social reform became a sacred action with the activism of Chávez and other leaders like him. The activism of people like César Chávez creates a place in American society for racial minorities and their specific experiences in the United States.

Scholars such as Luís León examine the impact that the religiosity of Chávez had on his legacy and his activism. León contends that “as a political leader and a catalyst for the Mexican American civil rights movement, Chávez’s legacy is well documented, but Chávez’s role as a distinctively *religious* leader has remained largely unexplored and not fully understood.”<sup>3</sup> However, León contends that Chávez “deftly created and manipulated symbols to enlist the ultimate loyalties of the multitudes—including the rich and powerful in this country and in Latin America.”<sup>4</sup> This is a miscalculation, Chávez wanted to create a union that was for farm workers and sustained without depending on middle class support, especially Mexican American middle class support which he didn’t trust. Although Chávez did enlist the help of Protestant organizations such as the Migrant Ministry in the early days of the grape strike and boycott, but the leaders of that organization believed in the same salvation and service theology that Chávez believed in.

Furthermore, Rudiger V. Busto argues that Chávez’s “...careful orchestration of vernacular Mexican Catholic symbols and ritual action overlapped with the larger American meanings of religious sacrifice and servant hood.”<sup>5</sup> It was not until Chávez challenged the American notions of equality and justice and enlisted the help of one major Protestant organization and allowed himself to be compared to Martin Luther King did he earn a place in civil religion. American society did not recognize his Catholicism, but as he began to speak in

ecumenical terms, in the language of civil religion, he was accepted and the Catholic symbolism (that the public generally ignored) became an important component of the legacy that he added to civil religion. Chávez's incorporation into the bounds of civil religion was much more complicated than Busto makes it out to be and his acceptance depended on a number of factors. One of those factors was his comparison to King: in light of all of their similarities, it becomes difficult to accept one of the leaders into the bounds of civil religion without accepting the other.

Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett contends that Chávez was granted special abilities to communicate with the divine, earning him the title of mystic. Chávez's activism might have been less popular had he not been repackaged for American society by the liberal *inteligencia* and other Chicano activists.<sup>6</sup> This secularization minimizes the importance that Chávez placed on his communication with the divine as he made decisions regarding the union, the strike and the boycott. Chávez was endowed with the title of mystic not by himself, but by those that he advocated for: they trusted his communication with the divine and thus gave him the authority to speak for them and guide them both in social and spiritual matters. Social and spiritual matters are not separate spheres in the Mexican American community, so this is an important distinction.

Furthermore, Chávez's activism forces the United States to confront its longstanding distrust of Catholicism. In the height of the Cold War, which coincided with Chávez's activism, there was a deeply rooted distrust of Catholics or any group that could potentially give their allegiances to authorities not directly under American control. Chávez's activism places Catholicism in the bounds of civil religion, forcing America to acknowledge this Christian minority. Catholicism, in the case of Chávez's activism was not against progress, but it was progress when the white establishment was refusing to recognize the humanity of the farm workers.

Chávez's activism is important today. Many of the gains made by the farm workers have been forgotten or ignored. Migrant workers still suffer economically and are exploited because of their vocation in life. The struggle to end economic oppression in the fields is a struggle that organizations such as the UFW continue to fight today. However, in the absence of a strong, vocal leader, the struggle gets less media attention than it deserves. Few Americans are aware of where the produce that graces dinner tables comes from. Mexican Americans are often marginalized in society today, despite the gains made by leaders such as Chávez.

This thesis seeks to fill the hole in scholarship by celebrating Chavez as a labor, moral and civil rights leader. It is not a conclusive study on the life of Chávez, as it stops in 1970 after the grape contracts were signed. However, I feel that this portion of Chávez's activism lends itself to the type of analysis that this thesis seeks to do. In the years after Chávez's death in 1993, the farm workers he advocated for has sanctified him, praising him for leading them out of the oppression and giving a voice to their situation. Streets, schools, building and memorials have been resurrected thought California for Chávez: a common memorialization of prophets of civil religion in this nation. Chávez's legacy cannot be secularized in light of the comparison between King and him: to secularize one would lead to the obvious secularization of another or there will be inconsistencies in the scholarship. Chávez's life was one devoted to sacrifice for others in the quest for social justice. Equality, justice and morality were all important components of Chávez's activism, necessary for the salvation of this nation and the people in it. Revolution and rebellion against the unjust systems in America themselves are sacred in America and Chávez fulfilled this, leading a group of disadvantaged and underprivileged people to challenge an entire system.

*“Rebel against the injustice of your grower. Revolt against the injustice of your labor contractor. God is witness to the abuses that have been committed against you. God is witness and judge and*

*will judge in the near future. All the abuses are against the dignity of man, who is made by God in his own image.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 14:13 (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. Garcia, "Introduction," in *Mexican-American Religions Spirituality, Activism and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Luís León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 53.

<sup>4</sup> León, "César Chávez and Mexican American Civil Religion," 54.

<sup>5</sup> Rudiger V. Busto, "'In the Outer Boundaries': Pentecostalism, Politics and Reies López Tijerina's Civic Activism", in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, eds. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 43.

<sup>7</sup> "Declaracion de los derechos del campesino," *El Malcriado*, no. 10, n.d., 8 as cited in Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 98.

## Afterward

The journey to my topic was an interesting one. What started as a quest to examine the life of an African-American leader, Martin Luther King Jr., turned into an exploration of the religion of an often neglected Mexican American leader, César Chávez. It was both rewarding and difficult and challenged a lot of my own ill-conceived notions about the Mexican American civil rights movement. Before embarking on this thesis, I knew very little about Chávez and the Mexican American civil rights movement and not that I would consider myself an expert now, but I am much more educated about it. This thesis was not meant to examine the ecumenism of Chávez, which may be a potential weakness of the analysis, but in the interest of time and focus, I chose to leave that to further study and focus on the Catholicism.

This thesis employed an ethno-phenomenological approach to the study of religion, choosing to not ignore the ethnic component of the religious experience. Mexican American religion cannot be studied without some focus on theology, a scary word in secular universities and college. This thesis employed a healthy balance between the religious and theological (Catholicism) and the secular (ethnicity), in an attempt to recognize their interconnectivity.<sup>1</sup> It drew on several religious studies scholars including, James Cone, Mario García, Gastón Espinosa, Luís León, Stephen Lloyd-Moffett, and Rudiger Busto. It challenged the ideas of León and Busto attempting to navigate the previous scholarship and synthesize the ideas of all of these scholars into a fitting perception of Chávez's life and activism.

This thesis employed religion, sociology, Chicano/a studies, Africana studies as well as politics. All of these things are intertwined in America and by focusing on simply one of them, analysis can be empty of important components that make them compelling and explain the

uniqueness of certain experiences here in the United States. Race and ethnicity are pivotal to the way that religion (in the case of this thesis, Christianity) is experienced. Religion is also a key component to how minorities navigate assimilating into American society: it can allow them to keep ties to their ethnic culture while still engaging in the American process. This thesis analyzed the way in which religious activists engaged the political process in order to enact social change.

This thesis challenges the notion that American society is experienced the same by all of those that are living in America. It also challenges the label of “American” by asserting that being an American is not a monolithic thing. Furthermore, it challenges the idea that Latinos are not engaged in institutionalized religion or in the political and civic progress. This thesis has allowed me to trace the development of Mexican American popular Catholicism and analyze its importance to the Mexican American community in California. This thesis has allowed me to analyze the importance of religious symbolism and rhetoric and how it can bring together a group of people for a common cause.

This thesis has allowed me to challenge my own religious beliefs and question my own engagement in political and civic society in the United States. It has allowed me to examine the nature of human rights activism domestically, the experience of different groups in American society and the effect that race, ethnicity and economic standing has on one’s access to the American dream. This thesis has made me a more sympathetic scholar and encouraged me to engage my Christian beliefs to help others who are suffering under unjust systems here in the United States. It is my hope that as I go forth from this thesis that I can be a more compassionate, trustworthy and sympathetic human being.

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<sup>1</sup> Gastón Espinosa, “History and Theory in the Study of Mexican-American Religions,” in *Mexican-American Religions Spirituality, Activism and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 41.

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