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Marianismo

Deena J. González

Gonzaga University, gonzalez@gonzaga.edu

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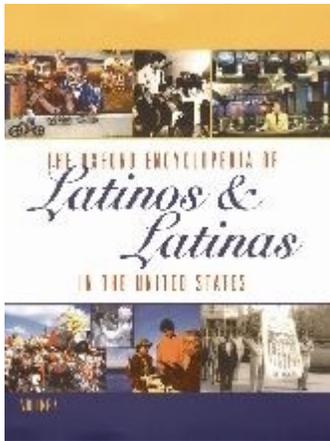
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Marianismo

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Author(s):

Deena J. González

Marianismo.

Viewed by some as the feminine companion to machismo, which is a distinctive form and practice of masculinity evident in Latino communities and derived from Spanish, Arabic, and Roman roots, *marianismo* also has several origins and takes many forms. In one feminized version, it offers women a place within the Catholic and Christian hierarchy because its name stems from the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the figure Catholics believe was the mother of God. In this context, marian devotions form an important part of the ritual and liturgy of Roman Catholicism. In another aspect, marianismo embodies a distinctive set of humbling character traits that traditional Latinas are supposed to exhibit, from piety to submission and shame. Finally, marianismo defines for Latinas distinctive social and cultural roles in society based on separate and complimentary spheres. For men, authority and esteem are vested in virility. For women, power derives primarily from marriage or motherhood, or perhaps both, under traditional marianismo. The awe with which women's ability to give birth is held would be an example of the traditionalism that marianismo assigns women's social status.

In the late twentieth century, marianismo came to include the religious devotion of Mary and of other virgin saints as well; it was grounded in the realities of women's subordinate social and economic positions in almost all Latino communities. More recently, included in the worship of the Virgin Mary, whether within or outside of the formal Catholic Church, is the idea that marianismo symbolizes a woman's alienation from her body and her sexuality, on the one hand, or on the other, that marianismo is critical of the view that Latinas cannot embody their sexuality or promote it. Much depends on whether adherents or advocates are followers of marianismo in a traditional or a nontraditional way. Inherent feminine spiritual superiority would be one aspect of nontraditional marianismo, because it focuses on women and categorizes men as incapable of reaching such spiritual enlightenment. In feminist-derived thinking, marianismo's practitioners develop a strategy for overcoming oppression or subordination. Although traditional marianismo deemphasized sexuality, except for the purposes of reproduction (procreation, as some Catholics would say), marianismo also becomes a tool for feminist and spiritual liberation. In other words, marianismo may be used in a traditional way, but it can also fulfill feminist, nontraditional expectations in women's lives.

Spirituality

Scholars have begun to explore other, hidden aspects of marianismo in an effort to understand the centrality of such worship, but also to enclose a series of behaviors, values, and spiritual practices under one referent, or idea around which all others can be grouped. Feminist scholars in particular have suggested that marianismo is not simply about conformity, but rather stems from a specifically “womanist” practice; that is, it involves the centering of women everywhere, including within religious hierarchies. According to the theologian Ada Maria Issasi- Díaz, the “spiritual role of Mary as the mother of Jesus cannot be underestimated,” among Latinos and Latinas, and marianismo allows that form of spirituality to grow beyond the specific focus on just one important icon or saint. Other theologians, however, argue that marianismo is grounded in a traditional practice intended to keep women symbolically in their subordinated positions. This is a narrower view of either the doctrine or the practice of marianismo and of its intended purpose. Whether considered along broad spiritual and cultural lines or as a matter of veneration, marianismo has served to inspire women and some would even suggest, to liberate them from traditional thinking, because the worship of the Virgin Mary or of one of her manifestations, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, becomes a call to political action.

Liberation theologians have suggested that marianismo allows women a space within a traditional male sanctuary, the Roman Catholic Church or its hierarchy and centers of leadership, to contest inequities or discrimination based on sex. Others believe that the worship of such a traditional symbol, particularly one based on motherhood, reinforces the notion that women must express themselves primarily through their reproductive capacities and not their talents, skills, or self-interests. Studies of Guatemalan women, for example, make the case that marianismo in Guatemala is guided primarily by economic situation and should be understood outside of its religious context. Because women in Latin American countries, and Latinas in the United States, make up such a large percentage of the informal economy, their choices in terms of worship or spiritual practice must also be considered when assigning meaning to a religious orientation. It might not simply be a matter of adoration of the Virgin Mary or of any other saint or figure, but rather what that figure signifies within the household economies of the venerator.

Beyond specific religious significance, marianismo is also understood as a doctrine or a way of life. Researchers have focused on the implications of twin cultural archetypes, machismo and marianismo, to discuss sexuality, behavior, and identity. Through these studies and through books examining the “Maria Paradox,” the subjects of feminine subjectivity, femininity more generally, and the situation of women or Latinas as devout or as worshipers, are gaining attention. Marianismo, as an area of study, allows researchers and students to examine critically not only sex roles but also the economic and cultural situations of different Latinas, from Mexican to Central American, Chicana to Cuban.

Critical differences lie in relating to the figure or saintliness of the Virgin Mary, often held up as the standard for evaluating *all* female behaviors and practices. Among Cubans and Cuban Americans, the scholar Alma de Rojas has concluded that marianismo provides a method for worshipping la Virgen de la Caridad, the Cuban patron saint; in turn, that saint is venerated because of her tendency toward rebellion or change. Marianismo as a practice or a set of constituted values is thus both a symbol and a set of practices, but neither of these is to be accepted uncritically. Sex-based role behavior, for example, of the type that says women should be passive and men aggressive, requires a better understanding of all symbolic and figural practices. Ultimately, marianismo is a tool with which to investigate the situation of Latinas in the United States within the spheres of religion, household economies, spiritual practices, and sexual values or identity.

See also [Religion and Spirituality](#); [Virgen de Guadalupe](#); and [Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre](#).

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Deena J. González