

The Delusion of the Religious Hispanic Culture

by Victoria de la Torre

I was born in Southern California into a Latina single-parent household. In the Latino community, the influence of the Catholic experience starts immediately after birth. In my family it probably started in utero, since my single parent was a former nun. Through the University of San Diego – a Roman Catholic institution – I was baptized, attended Sunday school, and began my undergraduate career.

Questioning my religion had rarely crossed my mind. After all, I didn't want to go to the "Hell" described to me by Catholic Church leaders. At church, I was constantly reminded of the fiery pits of Hell. Even as a child, Hell for me was real, and I was convinced that I would burn there if I didn't follow the teachings of the Church.

My Hispanic background yielded a strong Catholic identity as well as the restrictions and pressures that come with it. Every restriction my mother made was somehow rooted in religion. For example, I was not allowed to move out until I was married, and I certainly could not have sex until I was married.

Coming from a culture that so greatly emphasizes a supposed need for praise of the divine, I had begun to notice that there is a partnership distinct to the Latino community. Christianity, specifically Catholicism, becomes part of your identity as a Latino. Your culture is not separate from your faith. Rituals, traditions and celebrations in the life of a Latino are strictly religious.

The Jewish community has Bar- and Bat-mitzvahs for teens. La Quinceañera is the Hispanic equivalent, except it is only given to honor and celebrate girls becoming young ladies. A Quinceañera is what every girl dreams about. It is her big day to shine, to be accepted as a woman, and of course, to reaffirm her commitment to the Catholic Church.

I took my Quinceañera ceremony very seriously. I devoted months to prepare for my special day. The recommended preparation time is 18 months. I completed required Catholic courses and had my dress flown in from one of Colombia's top designers, whose dresses are used in beauty pageants. I ordered roses that I would need to offer to the statue of the Holy Mother (AKA the Virgin Mary). It was also necessary that I was certain that I *truly* believed the Catholic tenets I was about to commit to and reaffirm.

Now that I reflect on that time, I wonder how, on the eve of my fifteenth birthday and La Quinceañera, I could have possibly been able to freely "recommit" to a life of which I had no choice? How can young girls recommit themselves at such a young age to an oppressive divine system that doesn't even give women equal representation?

Part of La Quinceañera rituals is to offer 15 roses to the Virgin Mary, affirming a commitment to stay pure. In other words, to remain a virgin. One wonders why this ritual places so much emphasis on virginity, while the Catholic Church itself continues to discourage the use of contraceptions and avoids any type of sexual education.

As Latinas, we are reared in a patriarchal society. Religion is supposed to treat all of God's children equally, yet, in the Catholic religion women are valued by their virginity and their blind commitment to this stone-age religion while males are privileged.

In an effort to control both our minds and our bodies, the Catholic Church has for decades discouraged the use of contraception. The Catholic Church overall embraces science and technology, the theory of evolution, and other modern marvels that the secular world has produced, yet advances in birth control are ignored and demeaned.

Apparently, contraception is a completely distinct area in the view of the Catholic Church. The Church thinks that with the use of contraception we are admitting to having sex, or worse: that we *desire* to have sex. With the great taboo regarding sex, there is an absence of sexual education. With no contraception and no sex education, what is left for us? Abstinence.

Two years after my Quinceañera, I embarked on another religious expedition. As part of my education at the University of San Diego, it was necessary that I complete at least three undergraduate courses under the broad umbrella of "Theology and Religious Studies." A philosophy class was also required. Both studies led me down a life-changing road. Even though the University of San Diego is a Catholic institution, it exhibits a uniquely liberal stance in regards to philosophy, biblical studies, and support of lesbian, gay, bi, transgender and queer students. This somewhat liberal stance, embraced by most professors, helped me get through biblical courses examining the ancient texts of the Old Testament.

In my philosophy courses, we often discussed the role of religious belief in a person's ethical realm. We also covered the logical basis for the absence or presence of belief in a deity. I was fortunate to have enrolled in courses that would forever change my life.

Wanting to pursue a future in the field of law, I declared a major in Philosophy. After having taken stimulating logic and ethics courses, I finally arrived at Philosophy 410: Philosophy of Religion. It must have been the spring of 2010, because I remember the class opening with a discussion about the earthquake that devastated Haiti. My professor said, "The earthquake occurred



in the poorest city, of the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. It is as if it had been picked out.”

The point of his statement was to get us thinking about what our idea of an all loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God could and would do. We were forced to consider how our image of a god could or would play a role in a natural disaster. This class caused me to wonder whether God had not been presented to me correctly, or if he/she existed only in my heart and mind.

Attending philosophy courses did not make me an atheist. I became an atheist because I actually read the Bible. Reading the scriptures is what opened my eyes.

As a freshman, I also enrolled myself in a Biblical Studies course. Most of the freshmen in that course (and at the University) had previous Catholic education. This particular course was surprising. Instead of approaching these supposed “holy texts” as divine authority, we were required to view the text as if they were the same as any another piece of literature. In place of blindly believing every word of the Old Testament, I was taught about the political motivation behind certain texts. The idea of holding an objective approach to the Bible fascinated me.

The Bible became a blank slate for me. I was not tied to any religious dogma or divine authority, but instead directed by research methods. The existence of misogyny, dietary and sexual restrictions, child sacrifice, polygamy, and polytheism exhibited in the Old Testament was explained to me the same way any other ancient text could be read. My studies were thus simplified: there are political motivations and cultural customs that influence any text, and the Old Testament was no exception.

Another component of this course that made it easier to emotionally distance myself from my Catholic upbringing was the necessity of using the name “Yahweh” in place of “God.” By using an unfamiliar name, the deity now had specific traits and agendas. I now realize that if we had used the title God, I would have more likely been influenced by my own inclinations towards “Him,” and my own idea of who my “God” was. I detached myself emotionally and referred to the deity as Yahweh. He was no longer God, “The Creator.” He was Yahweh, one of many gods that ancient Israelites worshipped. This led me to realize that I was studying a more interesting course: mythology.

The more I distanced myself from the divinity that the Old Testament claims to have, the easier and more interesting it became. I regarded the ancient Israelite tradition as I would any other culture based in mythology. I excelled in this course. After weeks of learning about Yahweh, I began to develop a bad taste in my mouth when saying his name. Even to this day, that name reminds me of the murders, rapes, misogyny, and genocide that the Bible not only permits but demands under the disgusting rule of this supposed God. To me, Yahweh was a deity worse than any Greek, Norse, pagan, or Roman gods. I eventually distanced myself far enough to a place where I could view the Old Testament and the very notion of a belief in any god without the prejudice I once had. I then realized that without a bias in favor of the Bible, there was absolutely nothing that morally or intellectually tied me to the text or God.

I knew for sure that I would have not grown so much had it not been for my abandonment of partiality. At that moment of realization, the wise words of Plato came to mind: “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

Philosophy courses as well as my Theology courses led me down an intellectual path of reason. It was as if I had been unchained and led out of Plato’s cave, finding a sun with rays of logic, ethics, and reason shining upon me.

After these courses, I began to explore a more secular understanding of the world. I still wanted answers, without the use of a Bible. I directed my attention to another field that offers to explain the universe: science.

Like many people going through the motions, I was quickly drawn to the writings of **Dr. Richard Dawkins**. I remember reading *The God Delusion*. I absorbed every word and clung to every sentence. I realized that I had been living in the delusion that culture and religion must go hand-in-hand. Even my Quinceañera ceremony represented a delusion!

It was Dr. Dawkins’ admiration of **Charles Darwin** that led me to the book *On the Origin of Species*. After days of intense reading, I landed upon a particularly fascinating part of the book that gave me the answer I was looking for.

When I began to engage myself with scientific study, I was searching for an answer that would explain the universe. Even more, I was looking for any confirmation of the absence of a deity – just to make sure that I wasn’t straying from some kind of religious epiphany.

On The Origin of Species provided that confirmation. Darwin sealed the deal for me. Darwin notes the life and death of a caterpillar, along with the life and death of the Ichneumon wasp.

The female wasp uses the body of the caterpillar to lay and harvest her young. There is a dependence on this host, for if it was not for the caterpillar, these wasps would surely die. During this process, the caterpillar is completely unable to move its body and cannot defend itself from the wasp. The caterpillar endures moment after moment of pain. All the while, the wasp is benefitting from the caterpillar’s suffering.

It is almost as if two different creators were challenging each other in a contest to determine who created the better species! The caterpillar appears “created” for its surrounding and, furthermore, created for a purpose to sustain the existence of the Ichneumon wasp.



The wasp, on the other hand, appears as if it was created by a higher power than the caterpillar. The wasp was far superior because of its poisonous abilities to entirely dominate the caterpillar. This is simply not the case. It furthermore negates the notion of an all-loving, all-powerful God.

Darwin said, "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created parasitic wasps with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars."

No amount of religious belief could convince me that suffering occurs just to play a role in a "divine plan." I was repulsed by the thought of such a thing. I suppose that there are many other similar caterpillar/wasp scenarios that I am simply not aware of, but this is beside the point. It did not matter to me whether it happens in one incident or one-hundred, the fact that it happens is all I needed to know in order to throw the notion of divinity out the window. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that a loving and all-powerful god could not have any role in this. There was, however, one aspect that could account for this: nature. Nature has no preference. The realization that nature had no preference *was* my epiphany. It was my answer to the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

I now know that when a child is diagnosed with cancer or a woman dies of a deadly disease, it is not part of some divine plan. It is simply nature, and nature does not accommodate to fit one's religious belief; quite the opposite.

The hardest part of embracing atheism was balancing my beliefs with my Latina identity. When I thought about how I wanted to rear my family, I always envisioned a strong Hispanic identity. But how would that be possible, since almost every Hispanic custom is based in religion?

Last year, **Pope Francis** offered somewhat of a bridge between atheists and Catholics. He stated that atheists can still be redeemed through good works. Although many viewed the statement as a step forward for atheists, in my opinion it was a bit demeaning. Pope Francis meant that even if you are at the bottom of the totem pole, Jesus Christ is so understanding that he may let you into Heaven if you perform good acts, implying that atheists don't usually perform good acts.

I do not want to deny my background, but at the same time I am not willing to abandon my new-found fulfillment through the use of logic, reason, and enlightenment. I did not have anyone I could turn to, so I decided to do some research in order to find secular groups in my community. I was pleased to find and connect with "Recovering From Religion."

I began attending Recovering From Religion meetings that focused on those of us still "coming out" as atheists. Some folks at the meetings were still questioning their faith. I also met people whose families had completely rejected them because of their declared atheism. Most important to me was that I was able to meet people who had been "out" for years. They were the people who showed me a light at the end of the tunnel. I will forever be grateful to Recovering From Religion. It serves as a great

resource of support and answers for those of us going through rejection and looking for acceptance. I have returned to those meetings, but now as a member, telling the person next to me, "I know exactly how you feel."

After meeting with other Latinos through groups such as Recovering From Religion and the humanist community in San Diego, I realized that I wasn't alone. There were other Hispanics going through the same philosophical changes as me. Everyone's transition is unique, but there is something extraordinarily distinct about being a Latino humanist. We are torn. We are happy to accept the beautiful reality atheism offers, but at the same time devastated by the thought of abandoning our religious culture. It seems not just abandonment – it feels like betrayal.

To me, the abandonment of religion does not mean that I must give up cultural traditions. That is just a delusion. Instead, I am now working to secularize some important cultural holidays, rituals and traditions. I look forward to announcing these events in San Diego, California and inviting my friends and family to participate. The next opportunity to combine secularism with a Hispanic tradition will be the celebration of life on "The Day of the Dead." Please watch for more exciting details in the Freethought Society's newsletter, on Facebook and through the San Diego Coalition of Reason website.

Knowing that there are many Hispanics like me, atheist, humanist, and secular organizations should develop programs, meetings and events that will appeal to Latinos and secular Hispanics. The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS) has opened its door to the Latino community. RDFRS now sponsors Spanish language websites. This service guarantees that even if we can't be open about our atheist point of view with friends and family, we can at least stay informed about science and secularism from the comfort of our homes using the Internet.

I was very happy to order my mother a Spanish version of *The God Delusion*. Little by little I noticed that her bookmark got further and further towards the end of the book. When I invited her to an event featuring Dr. Dawkins, she took the book with her to get it signed. I was proud to see my mother chatting with Dr. Dawkins when he autographed her book.



My mother and I have wonderful conversations now. I believe it is unique to our relationship. She knows that I want to help Latinas find the same freedom of expression that I found. My mother is communicating with me about the concerns older generations of Latinas still have.

My mother and I are enjoying open communication when it comes to our culture and secularism. She is the first family member I told about my atheism. At the time, she was genuinely sad, and also a little scared. Knowing the culture in which she lived and her past experience as a nun, her reaction was no surprise to me. What did surprise me was her interest in my conclusions. She was interested in why I had changed and what I did to get to that point. She was proud of me for asking questions. She was never allowed to question anything.

My mother still believes in some higher power, but she has let go of any ties to the Catholic Church and Christianity. She is going through the motions just as I did, hoping that there is some possibility of a higher power. Ultimately, my mother may become an atheist as she is intelligent and willing to listen and learn more about science, philosophy and Humanism.

Turns out that my mother's acceptance was not setting a standard. I was ostracized by my religious community and shunned by family members. I was rejected because of my supposed infidelity to both my Christian community as well as my Hispanic community. It was clear that they went hand-in-hand, but every Latino humanist is proof that it doesn't need to be so.

A major issue facing the Latino population here in the United States is the constant battle that often takes place between generations. The relationship between first-generation Latinos and second-generation Latinos makes the acceptance of secularism difficult, not to mention being an atheist.

Second-generation Latinos are faced with overwhelming and amazing opportunities that living in the United States provides. They also are acutely aware of the previous generation's expectations of maintaining their customs and traditions. Conflicts arise when attempting to go through a transition. Combating an oppressive culture is difficult. Even though we might want to escape, most of us, at the same time, are willing to forego opportunities of becoming secular for the sake of the family. We have a strong desire to appease our parents, who fought so hard to make a successful life in this country. We have a desire to hold on to our culture, even if that culture comes with strings.

I am hoping that this article reaches the eyes of other Hispanics. I look forward to the day when "Latino" and "Catholic" are not considered as one category. Someday, nontheist Hispanics will not feel as though they are abandoning their culture. In becoming atheists, we are instead lifting our families into the light of reason.

I know now that I am not abandoning my culture. I am instead simply changing it. We are part of something bigger now, and it is time that the Hispanic community embrace secularism and lift us all up.

My goal is to not only share my experiences but to also reach out to those Latinos who feel alone, scared, and torn.

Through secularism we can achieve the American dream, because the beauty of humanism presents to us the affirmation of our true potential through logic, reasoning, and human understanding. It is only through a secular sexual education that we can combat the increasingly damaging misinformation that almost every church advocates. It is only through humanism that Latinas can reclaim their place in society, establishing not only a name for themselves but a legacy to follow. □



Victoria de la Torre attended the University of San Diego in 2007, studying Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies. She is the current Community Outreach Coordinator for the Humanist Association of San Diego, organizing the association's involvement in local parades, fundraisers, and homeless outreach. De la Torre is the newest member of the Freethought Society's Diversity Outreach Committee creating programs, Hispanic materials and events.