Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America

Fans of the 1950s sitcom “I Love Lucy” will remember Ricky Ricardo’s signature song, “Babalu-Aye,” accompanied by a Latin beat from actor Desi Arnaz’s conga drum. What most viewers didn’t realize, says author Miguel De La Torre, is that the song’s title referred to a deity of an Afro-Cuban religion called Santeria.

De La Torre, a regular columnist for EthicsDaily.com and assistant professor of religion at Hope College in Holland, Mich., is author of a recent book exploring the history, beliefs, rituals and culture of Santeria—a religious tradition that, despite persecution, suppression and its own secretive nature, has close to a million adherents in the United States alone.

Apart from vague notions that it somehow involves animal sacrifice and is a “syncretistic” religion blending Catholic and African beliefs, most Americans know little of anything about Santeria, yet it is probably the most-practiced religion in Cuba and is growing in the United States, De La Torre argues in Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America by Eerdmans.

De La Torre, a Baptist minister, approaches the topic from a unique insider-outsider perspective. Born in Cuba, he grew up in a home where both of his parents were santeros, or priests of Santeria.

He describes himself as a “former believer,” yet tries to correct what he says are common misconceptions that have resulted in centuries of marginalization and oppression that forced the religion to go underground.

De La Torre traces the roots of Santeria to the Yoruba people of Africa, who were brought from Africa to colonial Cuba as slaves and forced to embrace Catholicism. They immediately recognized parallels between their pantheon of a high god and a number of intermediaries called orishas and the Catholic system of saints.
Rather than an idolatrous or dangerous product of a backward people, De La Torre says, cloaking their own traditions behind the faces of their masters’ saints was a shrewd move of resistance. Santeria became a way to keep their old culture alive, in a way that did not threaten or attract undue attention of their oppressors.

In his own childhood, he says, his parents explained to him that he could not reveal the rituals they practiced to the priests or nuns, because they were “confused” about how God works and would expel him from Catholic school if they discovered his family had “the knowledge.”

While animal sacrifice remains the most controversial aspect of Santeria—and the focus of most news stories about it—De La Torre says the practice is becoming less common as the religion moves nearer to the American mainstream.

“Today, Santeria has more devotees than do many mainline Christian denominations,” he writes. “In effect, it may be considered a mainstream American faith along with Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”

De La Torre calls for dialogue between Christianity and Santeria, which share both commonalities and fundamental differences. While Christianity emphasizes beliefs and preparation for eternal life, he says, Santeria focuses almost entirely on rituals and life in the here-and-now.

Santeria, which came out in October, is one of three recent books by De La Torre, whose earlier works include the 2002 Reading the Bible from the Margins by Orbis Press.

A companion book that came out last November, Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins, explores a broad range of ethical issues from the perspective of marginalized peoples. It explores marginalized views of global issues like poverty, war and the environment, as well as business issues such as corporate accountability and affirmative action.

De La Torre also edited Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation, examining
Christian concepts and the interrelationship between religion, community and culture from the perspective of U.S. marginalized communities. The book, by Chalice Press, also distinguishes the differences and similarities between the U.S. theologies and their Latin American counterparts.

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