

INTRODUCTION

I will never forget how, on my first visit to Mexico City, I saw an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe attached to an electricity pole on the side of the road.¹ The altar consisted of a small statue of the Virgin, adorned with flowers, inside of a small metal cage. Though simple, it was obvious that someone took care of it. A few weeks later, I went to the Basilica dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, at the site of her apparition to an ordinary man, Juan Diego, in December 1531. There I could stand on a moving sidewalk, along with hundreds of her devout followers, and see images of her initial apparition. These ways of expressing devotion to the Virgin were different from the practices of the Catholic people in the neighborhood where I grew up in Ottawa, Canada.

Though Catholicism is present in nearly every country in the world, in each country it has a character of its own. In Mexico, it includes both popular dimensions, in the sense that it is practiced by many people, and orthodox dimensions, in the sense that it is approved by the church hierarchy.² Both dimensions were very evident at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe: the orthodox in the official narrative of the Virgin's apparition, and in the many statues, decorations, and architecture of the Basilica and the buildings that surround it; and the popular in the thousands of people who come, not only as visitors but as pilgrims, kneeling in prayer at various places, and in the many objects containing images of the Virgin that they could purchase. The popular dimension is evident throughout the country, from the altars to the Virgin on many city streets and in people's homes to the crosses that stand prominently on hilltops and mountain ranges. Indeed, the largest Christ statue in North America is at the top of the Cerro de las Noas, in Torreón, in the state of Coahuila.³

Though the Catholic Church in Mexico has far more adherents than any other religion, it is not the only one. According to the 2010 census, approximately 82 percent of the people claimed to be Catholic, but this was significantly less than the almost 97 percent who identified that way in 1940 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [México]; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática 3). Other interpretations of Christianity, such as the Mennonite tradition, which I have written about elsewhere, arrived in Mexico with immigration early in the twentieth century. Baptist and other Protestant and Evangelical forms of Christianity also have a substantial history there; in 2010 they represented around 10 percent of the population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [México]). Mormon missionary work has gained over a million Hispanic followers. Jewish people represent less than 1 percent of the population but their faith has been in Mexico since the colonial period when crypto-Jews, that is, Jewish people who practiced their religion in secret to avoid persecution, arrived in Mexico (Luna 120; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [México]). In addition, Indigenous people practice religious traditions that predate colonization.

These and other religious traditions all have a place in Mexican culture, but in this monograph, I focus primarily on Catholicism. As already noted, it has a large role in popular culture. Its long history, dating back to the Spanish conquest, is evident in the many remarkable colonial-era images of the Virgin, now exhibited in the Museo Nacional de Arte (National Art Museum). It continues to be evident in Mexican popular music, which has countless references to Catholic ideas and religious figures, for example in “Camino de Guanajuato” (“Road to Guanajuato”) by well-known singer José Alfredo Jiménez, and in the recent “Nana Guadalupe” (“Mother Guadalupe”) sung by Natalia Lafourcade, Lila Downs and Lupe Esparza as part of the documentary film *Hecho en México* (*Made in Mexico*) (Duncan Bridgeman, 2012).

In film, religion is represented in various ways, “run[ning] the gamut from devotional praise to a wholesale critique of religion, particularly Roman Catholicism” (Plate 98). Some films, such as the *La virgen de Guadalupe* (*The Virgin of Guadalupe*) (Alfredo Salazar, 1976), which is analyzed by Antonio D. Sison in “Postcolonial Religious Syncretism: Focus on the Philippines, Peru, and Mexico,” encourage religious devotion, in this case to the Virgin of Guadalupe (188–92). The trio of films by Miguel Zacarías, *Jesús el niño Dios* (*Jesus the Christ Child*) (1969),

Jesús, María y José (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) (1969) and *Jesús nuestro Señor (Jesus our Lord)* (1970), also encourage devotion, in this case to the particular Biblical figures on which they focus (García Riera, *Breve historia* 270). Also illustrative of this devotional orientation is a book by Luis García Orso, a Jesuit priest at the ITESO, a Jesuit University in Guadalajara, entitled *Imágenes del espíritu en el cine (Images of the Spirit in Film)*. He holds that films can be used for spiritual improvement, that is, so that people can better follow the Catholic faith (71–73). A fellow Jesuit at the same institution, Raúl H. Mora Lomelí, makes a similar argument, noting that God can be found in a variety of films, even ones that do not have an explicitly religious plot or character (7–12).⁴

My purpose in this monograph, *Unholy Trinity*, is different. It is not to promote religious devotion; rather, it is to examine films that represent some aspect of religion, and how films critically engage with their context through the representation of religious imagery and symbols.⁵ This analysis will add to the understanding of the role of religion in Mexico, the conditions for film production, and the involvement of the state in its extensive support for film production. In pursuing these goals, this monograph builds on the work of other scholars. Craig Detweiler, for example, connects the representation of religion in films to the way these films engage with their context of production. Specifically, Detweiler discusses the 2002 film by Carlos Carrera, *El crimen del padre Amaro (The Crime of Father Amaro)*, which portrays corrupt priests and devout people in a small Mexican town; he then argues that this film alludes to the corruption among Catholic leaders in Mexico (116). I also dialogue with the work of critics of Spanish film like Elizabeth Scarlett and Jorge Pérez who connect religion in film to changes in Spanish history. Scarlett, for example, argues that modernization measures in Spain could not obliterate religion (20). Pérez, for his part, observes that by focusing on religion as seen in film we can gain a more complete understanding of modernization as an incomplete process (14).

I will examine nine films made at various times from the 1930s to the present. The first ones are from 1933 to 1964, sometimes known as the Golden Age of Mexican film. Others are from the 1960s and 1970s, when the state became remarkably active in creating new institutions to train filmmakers and in funding the work of filmmaking. Still other films are from the more “neoliberal” economic conditions of the 1990s and 2000s. The representations of religion that I examine vary considerably: one involves a sex worker worshipping at an altar in her room

in a brothel in Luis Alcoriza's *El oficio más antiguo del mundo* (*The Oldest Profession*) (1970); another involves the title character in Emilio Fernández's 1944 film, *María Candelaria*, who takes an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe from her home altar to a public shrine. Others include fictionalizations of priests in their historical context, as in the case of a Fr. Méndez who rescues sex workers in the 1970 film by José María Fernández Unsáin's *Las chicas malas del padre Méndez* (*Father Méndez's Bad Girls*), and Carlos Carrera's 2002 film *El crimen del padre Amaro*, about Fr. Benito, who colludes with a local drug cartel. In the case of Felipe Cazals's 1976 *Canoa: Memoria de un hecho vergonzoso* (*Canoa: A Shameful Memory*), I suggest that the film criticizes a priest and, by extension, various other leaders in the film's context. I follow critic Ilana Luna who posits that this film draws "a direct parallel between government repression of student movements and pernicious religious discourse" (22). Two other films that I discuss represent explicitly religious spaces, or spaces that become religious when certain rituals take place there. These are Guita Schyfter's 1994 film *Novia que te vea* (*Like a Bride*), about the Hashomer Hatzair, a socialist Zionist youth group for university-age students, and Dana Rotberg's 1992 *Ángel de fuego* (*Angel of Fire*) about a travelling puppet show.

A number of scholars have referred to the presence of religion in Mexican films, but to date there is little by way of a focused analysis. Emilio García Riera commented on religious representations in both his 1969 multi-volume survey of Mexican film, *Historia documental del cine mexicano* (*Mexican Film History in Documents*) (see, for example, vol. 1, 22), and in his shorter *Breve historia del cine mexicano: Primer siglo 1897–1997* (*Brief History of Mexican Film: First Century, 1897–1997*), published in 1998.⁶ García Riera (*Breve historia* 89) also noted that religion was present in Golden Age classics like Juan Bustillo Oro's 1935 *Monja, casada, virgen y mártir* (*Nun, Wife, Virgin, and Martyr*), which portrays the Spanish Inquisition.⁷ He also mentions B-movies of the 1970s like *El oficio más antiguo del mundo*, where sex workers rescue a priest (García Riera *Breve historia* 270).

Also significant is the 1978 thesis of María Luisa López-Vallejo y García, "La religión en el cine mexicano (ensayo)" ("Religion in Mexican Film [An Essay]"), in which she catalogues the presence of religion in Mexican film from 1930 to 1960. She notes three kinds of films that commonly represent religion which, in her case, is synonymous with Catholicism: films that glorify the Catholic Church; films that deal with

priests; and films that are historical-religious melodramas (309–10). López-Vallejo y García concludes that perhaps a quarter of the films produced each year have some religious component (309–10), and adds that as the number of Mexican films produced each year increased, so too did the number of films that dealt with Catholicism in some way.

Some film directors have garnered close analysis on their representation of religion. Alicia Adriana Morán, in her 2007 thesis “La crítica de un irreverente: el catolicismo en diez obra mexicanas de Luis Buñuel (1950–2006)” (“Criticism of an Irreverent: Catholicism in Ten of Luis Buñuel’s Mexican Works [1950–2006]”), examines Catholicism in the multiple films of the famous Mexican-Spanish film director Luis Buñuel (1900–1983). Morán shows how Buñuel’s films presented good and evil in ways that conform somewhat to Catholic doctrine, where good characters go to heaven (47, 132). Bad characters, rather than going to purgatory or hell, are punished on earth (184). Scarlett, whose approach to religion in Spanish film I mentioned earlier, also analyzes the religious and spiritual elements in Buñuel’s oeuvre. She suggests that they criticize the Catholic Church and seek to rescue the mystery inherent in Catholic beliefs (21). The exhibit “Buñuel en México” (“Buñuel in Mexico”) displayed at the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City in the fall of 2019 confirmed these observations, as it dedicated significant space to the prevalence of religious themes in this director’s work. The work of these scholars confirms that religion has been present in Mexican film, in various ways, for many decades, in the work of multiple film directors.

A simple explanation for film directors referring to religion in their films is that often it is helpful for communicating with their intended audiences. John Lyden has stated: “Films may present religious ideas explicitly or implicitly, and in this way express a religious perspective associated with a historic religion” (4). Lyden goes on to say that filmmakers “draw from the religious traditions of their countries even when they have a more secularized perspective themselves” (4). Director Guillermo del Toro has described the influence of religion on his secular perspective, saying that his life is somewhat of a reverse catechism, that he grew up with belief and then left it behind. In a 2010 interview, he said that he has gone backwards and is now agnostic (Ashbrook). Nevertheless, his oeuvre includes various references to religion. For instance, his 2013 film *Pacific Rim* includes a character called Stacker Pentecost, a name that commemorates the important Christian holy day

of Pentecost. Del Toro, like most Mexican filmmakers, refers primarily to the Catholic Church when he represents religion.

Filmmaking, it has been said, is a technology for making meaning and providing structure and form for daily life. Sergio de la Mora has noted that it gives rise to forms of identification, in his case, as they pertain to masculinity (*Cinemachismo* 6). Lyden makes a similar observation about religion, stating that its presence in film can reinforce a specific understanding of gender roles or, he adds, a particular set of prejudices (4–6). I extend these claims and propose that Mexican films, when they make religious references—be it with characters like priests or nuns who have a religious vocation, religious figures like the Virgin of Guadalupe, or religious spaces like churches—can help to either uphold or critique social norms, and likewise to support or critique the government, its leaders, or the Church. The use of such religious references will help the films to communicate, whether subtly or explicitly, with their audiences. This makes it important to understand the relationship of the Mexican state with its filmmaking industry, and the relationship of the state with the Catholic Church, noting the interests at play as both of those relationships changed over the course of the last century.

The relations between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church has been uneven and often tense. Early in the twentieth century there were instances of open conflict. The revolution that led to the 1917 Constitution emphasized secularism and represented a significant repudiation of the Church. Among other things, the Constitution called for secular public education, which led to open conflict between forces that supported the government and those who supported the Church in the 1926–1929 Guerra Cristera (Cristero War). Tensions over public education continued in the 1930s and, at times, broke out in more violence (Kloppe-Santamaría 507–10).

Late in the 1930s, however, a certain mutual accommodation between church and state emerged. Perhaps the government recognized that many of the people remained quite religious. The Church was then allowed to reopen its schools, but the government would have a substantial role in them. The Church would no longer be the exclusive and primary provider of education in the country; also, the state would look after various social concerns (Blancarte, *Historia* 24). Then, in 1940, prior to taking office, president-elect Manuel Ávila Camacho declared himself a *creyente* (believer) in an interview with the journalist José C. Valadés (Monsiváis, *El Estado* 130). He gave the presidential seal

of approval to the thawing relationship between the Church and the state. Although Mexico remained an officially secular country, that is, one without a state religion, after this declaration, cooperation replaced conflict to a significant extent.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the Church gained acceptance as a moral voice in society. There was unrest as people in many places advocated for change both in society and in the Church. In the Church, things changed significantly after the Second Vatican Council convened in Rome in the mid-1960s. This led to a greater role for laypeople and enlarged the concern beyond religious devotion in the Church to justice in wider society. Priests and nuns would no longer be required to wear their traditional garb; they could now dress more like regular people in society. And priests, when presiding at the Eucharist, would no longer have to use Latin; they would now use the language of their society. Further, at mass, priests would now face the people, not away from them, and the people would take both the bread and the wine and were no longer required to kneel at the altar rail (Hughes 148–49). Understandably, some in the Church criticized these and other reforms, but others—those more aligned with the protest movements—suggested that they did not go far enough. In the ensuing decades, the Church made various pronouncements that appealed to a broad spectrum of the people; among other things, it rightly criticized the government's failure to implement policies that would better the lives of Mexican people (Blancarte *Historia* 22). In all likelihood, this general orientation helped the Catholic Church to remain an important presence in Mexican life.

If the relationship of the Mexican state with the Catholic Church changed over time, so too did the state's relationship with the arts, including filmmaking. Funding for filmmaking became significant in the 1930s and 1940s, under the presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) and Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946), in what became known as the Golden Age of Mexican film. Funding continued under many of the subsequent administrations, always with the aim of creating and promoting a coherent vision of what it meant to be Mexican (Fox 143). Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho also drew on other funding sources, such as the Rockefeller Foundation (King 47), resulting in public-private arrangements that helped private companies to produce a large number of films. Most were for popular audiences and portrayed stock characters like *charros* (rural cowboys or cattle rancher figures) and long-suffering mothers; others took the form of variety shows (King 47).

In order to support film, various administrations created new institutions. In 1942, the Ávila Camacho administration created the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico (National Film Reserve) (BNC). The administration then invested heavily in the Banco and, as a result, more Mexican films were produced (King 53, 130; Amador and Ayala Blanco 373–78).⁸ In addition, the government passed laws to ensure that Mexican people would watch Mexican films as opposed to foreign films. Its first film law, passed in 1949 and revised in 1952, ensured that at least half of what was shown on screen in Mexican cinemas was Mexican (Tuñón *Mujeres* 51). Another step in fostering film development was the creation, in 1957, of the Comisión Nacional de Cinematografía (National Film Commission) (Tuñón *Mujeres* 51).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the government moved further; it encouraged educational institutions to train filmmakers. Universities could now expand their programs so as to include filmmaking techniques and the place of Mexican culture in film. In 1963, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Mexican National Autonomous University) (UNAM) established a film school, the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (University Center for Film Studies) (CUEC). Now students, instead of apprenticing in film unions, could train at these educational institutions. This was significant. Many of these institutions taught not only on technical skills but provided a broader intellectual and theoretical knowledge. They encouraged students to consider filmmaking beyond the scope of the nation and gave them an awareness of international trends as well as opportunities to forge relationships with their peers (Thornton 72).

In 1970, when Luis Echeverría became president, he increased support for filmmaking even more. In his case there were particular reasons: he wanted to draw attention away from Mexico's growing social problems, as well as from his own role in orchestrating the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre when he was minister of the interior.⁹ He then strategically appointed his brother, Rodolfo Echeverría, as head of the Mexican Film Bank, which was the main funding arm for film in Mexico. Rodolfo had been a union leader prior to taking this position and so many filmmakers were receptive to his involvement in the industry (Pérez Turrent, "Crises and Renovations" 100–3). His brother's appointment and the general increase in funding provided by President Echeverría showed that culture and the arts, especially the film industry, were "pivotal to his populist project" (Noble 19).

In 1975 the Echeverría government set up the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (Center for Film Training) (CCC) under the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Institute of Fine Arts) (INBA) (Luna 25). This led to the creation, that same year, of two film production companies, the Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica (National Film Corporation) (CONACINE), and Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado (National Film Corporation of Workers and State) (CONACITE) I and II (Lay Arellano 59). These measures helped President Echeverría to tie his presidency to the 1917 Revolution and to the 1930s presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, who was widely seen as carrying the mantle of the Revolution. Echeverría did this even as own administration eroded many revolutionary projects.¹⁰ These various increases in support in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s meant that many low-budget spectacles flooded the Mexican film market.

The trend, however, was not sustainable. This expanding state support for filmmaking could not continue indefinitely. The problems came to a head with the 1982 oil crisis and the 1985 earthquake (Lay Arellano 62–63), but they had been noted earlier. In a 1976 report, at the beginning of the presidency of José López Portillo, the Mexican Film Bank had stated: “Al iniciarse la presente administración, la crisis de la industria cinematográfica mexicana en lo económico era evidente” (When the current administration began, the economic aspect of the Mexican film crisis was evident) (Banco Nacional 27).¹¹ In response to the issue, the government undertook a gradual but extensive restructuring, reflecting both a consolidation and a diversification.

In 1983, as part of this restructuring, the government established the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (Mexican Film Institute) (IMCINE), to encourage film directors and producers to seek funding not only from state sources but also from private companies (Mora 191). Then, in 1988, the new government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) established the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council of Arts and Culture) (CONACULTA). CONACULTA would include IMCINE, the film institute, and would be placed inside the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Education) (SEP), moving it out of the jurisdiction of the Secretaría de Gobernación (Secretary of State) (SEGOB). The CCC gained an additional sub-entity, the Centro de Producción de Cortometraje (Short Film Production Center) (MacLaird 27). Both CONACINE and CONACITE were dissolved (MacLaird 27).

These structural changes were to encourage entrepreneurship in film. This was said to be more feasible, given that by now government and academic programs had trained many filmmakers in a variety of genres. It would also enable more filmmakers to avoid unionized environments and thus enjoy more freedom. Now, grants from CONACULTA required filmmakers to seek a mixture of funding sources (MacLaird 22–23). In spite of these changes, or because of them, many films from this time presented a relatively optimistic view of Mexican culture (MacLaird 47).

In 1994, when NAFTA was passed, there were significant cuts in state support. Mexican films would no longer enjoy subsidized ticket prices or be guaranteed distribution of their films in Mexican movie theaters (Sánchez Prado, *Screening* 79). Quotas for the number of Mexican films that had to be shown in Mexican theaters were eliminated. The law from 1952 to 1992 had stated that 30 percent of films shown in a given theater had to be Mexican. This was lowered by 5 percent per year from 1993 to 1997 and remained at 10 percent thereafter (MacLaird 27–28). The government then sold its chain of movie theaters, COSTA, its television station, Imevisión, as well as its film studio and production company, Estudios América (MacLaird 27). Filmmakers could still get some support from the government, but they now also had to find private investors.

These changes had implications. Producers would now make films that appealed more to audiences that had money to pay the unsubsidized ticket prices. And since the government no longer had its own theaters, people had to go to multiplexes, usually located in wealthier neighborhoods. Because of their locations and the higher prices, theaters were now accessible only to about half the population (MacLaird 34). The primary audiences of films now were the middle and upper classes, but interestingly, one of their preferred genres was the romantic comedy (MacLaird 46; Sánchez Prado, *Screening* 83). Then, in 1996, IMCINE began the Fondo de Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad (Fund for Quality Film Production) (Foprocine). This led to more films being produced in Mexico by the end of the 1990s than at the beginning of the decade (Sánchez Prado, *Screening* 92). Mexican directors like Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón became famous on the world stage, and the three directors won a total of five Academy Awards for best director from 2013 to 2019 (de León).

I have referred to the state's twofold relationship with the Church and the film industry, but the relationship between the Church and the film industry must also be noted. Pérez says that “until the epoch of

the Vatican II Council, more than 130 papal documents discussing the role of film in society had been disseminated” (6). Catholic leaders and faithful Catholics in Mexico would have followed these developments closely. This “embrace” of film as a valid means of education and formation, may, at times, have meant that the Church could use its influence to ensure that it was portrayed in positive ways (Peredo Castro 75). It also allowed people to criticize the Church’s past, particularly its ties to the conquest and the colonial era, while still remaining faithful Catholics (Ramírez Berg 27).

In the middle years of the twentieth century, the relationship between church and state changed significantly. This is when the Catholic Church reclaimed a role as Mexico’s moral authority, and it was helped in this by the administration of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952–1958). As Claire F. Fox explains, in 1953, his government implemented Plan Garduño in order to decrease the influence of US movies in Mexico and to promote a strict moral code (143). Now the Church supported films like Mauricio de la Serna’s 1959 anti-abortion film, *El derecho a la vida*, and Julián Soler’s 1959 anti-divorce film, *Mis padres se divorcian* (García Riera, *Breve historia* 214). In a sense, these were responses to the 1936 criticism of Pope Pius XI of the film industry’s damage to morality and religion (7) and the 1955 exhortation of Pope Pius XII that filmmakers portray the good and beautiful aspects of reality (35).¹²

CHAPTER 1: NEGOTIATING A PLACE FOR RELIGION IN A DEVELOPING ECONOMY: CATHOLICISM IN THE GOLDEN AGE

The first chapter of this monograph examines film from the Golden Age of Mexican film (1933–1964). It argues that films align with the state’s goals for the country as they receive state funding and thus Golden Age films were largely produced by state-supported film companies. They also often supported the state’s vision for creating a new and better Mexico by presenting characters who embodied their vision. Catholic religious beliefs had already influenced these ideals. I analyze three films, Emilio Fernández’s *María Candelaria* (1944) and *Río Escondido* (1948) and Roberto Rodríguez’s *El seminarista* (1949). In this analysis I suggest that the explicit use of Catholic religious spaces, characters, and rituals in films from this period allows them to communicate more effectively, and that part of what they communicate is the state’s understanding of the post-revolutionary nation.

The primary way I think that the films use Catholic symbols and images to further state goals is through the way they present the revolutionary family. Catholic beliefs underpin this schema in the historical context and on screen, and Catholic religious rituals legitimize it. These “representations of family units mirrored the paternalistic structure of the government” (Luna 16). Men would imitate the president, heading up families of new Mexicans, and women would serve their husbands, raising their children for the betterment of the nation (Hershfield 29). Catholicism is a “silent presence” in many films from this period (Ramírez Berg 26). Ana M. López adds that the Mexican nation was defined by Catholicism, particularly because the Virgin of Guadalupe was its patron saint (150). The Virgin of Guadalupe is the Virgin Mary’s most important miraculous appearance in Mexico. People pray to the Virgin mother to intercede on their behalf before God. Catholicism’s “values and precepts—sacrifice, self-abnegation, and passive acceptance of ‘God’s will’—are underlying assumptions of Mexican life” (Ramírez Berg 26).

Catholic religious rituals performed by priests, such as marriage, were the way a legitimate family began (even though Catholic religious rituals did not have any legal weight), and other rituals, like initiating children into the community through baptism, cemented it. On screen, a *charro* becomes a legitimate head of the family through marriage, as in *El seminarista*. Female characters, for their part, uphold the Catholic Church’s vision for women as devoted wives and mothers (Franco xiii; Tuñón, *Mujeres* 185). Films portray female characters in positive ways when they behave like the Virgin. Rosaura in *Río Escondido*, for example, is lauded for her self-sacrifice (Hershfield 49). Similarly, the protagonist of *María Candelaria* is portrayed in a positive light because she is devoted to the Virgin and because she eschews the attentions of men who are not her intended.

CHAPTER 2: CATHOLICISM AT ITS WIT’S END: PRIESTS, MADAMS, AND SEX WORKERS

In the 1960s, there was an influx of popular films in Mexico that continued in the 1970s. In the 70s, thanks to increasing training programs and presidential interest in cinema, the number of art house films also increases. This chapter examines two films aimed at popular audiences, *El oficio más antiguo del mundo* and *Las chicas malas del*

padre Méndez, and a third, *Canoa*, which yielded significant critical acclaim. These films present a critical view of Mexican society. As critic Charles Ramírez Berg observes, Catholicism was one aspect of “the general failure of the system to address real Mexican problems” (35). It follows that imagery associated with Catholic traditions and institutions was part of these films’ social critique.¹³ Films criticized priests more openly and gender norms for men and women on screen were slightly less restrictive. On screen, male characters’ machismo was less powerful and female characters broke away from restrictive roles for women (Ramírez Berg 34–35).

Films align with these changing views, and this chapter focuses on the ways that these three films do this through their representations of Catholic clergy. When they represent priests, explicitly religious characters, they show that some have been able to change with the times, like the priest in *Las chicas malas* who rescues sex workers without condemning them. In other cases, films overtly criticize the Church through their representation of the clergy, as with the false priest character in *El oficio*. They also subtly criticize the state through its representations of the clergy, as in *Canoa*.

CHAPTER 3: COMPLEX RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION WITHOUT REDEMPTION: CATHOLICISM, SYNCRETISM, AND JUDAISM

This chapter looks at films that emerge from a context that emphasizes public-private partnerships. Mexicans sought out romantic comedies at home and certain directors became renowned abroad. While fewer Mexicans identified as Catholic in the 1990s, its imagery continues to be used in Mexican films. Filmmakers also represent other interpretations of Christianity and other religions in films that are widely viewed. This chapter looks at three films, *Ángel de fuego*, *Novia que te vea*, and *El crimen del padre Amaro*. Like the films MacLaird discusses from the 1990s like *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), they are also edgier, with more violence and more sex (101). The films I look at employ religious imagery and present traditional Catholic and Jewish rituals and spaces, as well as unique syncretic religious practices. I propose that they do so in order to critically engage with their context of production, one of uneven economic development, a widening wealth gap, and massive numbers of murdered, disappeared, or missing women in border cities like Ciudad Juárez (Luna 223).