

Article

Christ in Yaqui Garb: Teresa Urrea's Christian Theology and Ethic

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Abstract: A healer, Mexican folk saint, and revolutionary figurehead, Teresa Urrea exhibited a deeply inculturated Christianity. Yet in academic secondary literature and historical fiction that has arisen around Urrea, she is rarely examined as a Christian exemplar. Seen variously as an exemplary feminist, *chicana*, Yaqui, *curandera*, and even religious seeker, Urrea's self-identification with Christ is seldom foregrounded. Yet in a 1900 interview, Urrea makes that relation to Christ explicit. Indeed, in her healing work, she envisioned herself emulating Christ. She understood her abilities to be given by God. She even followed an ethic which she understood to be an emulation of Christ. Closely examining that interview, this essay argues that Urrea's explicit theology and ethic is, indeed, a deeply indigenized Christianity. It is a Christianity that has attended closely to the religion's central figure and sought to emulate him. Yet it is also a theology and ethic that emerged from her own social and geographic location and, in particular, the Yaqui social imaginary. Urrea's theology and ethics—centered on the person of Christ—destabilized the colonial order and forced those who saw her to see Christ in Yaqui, female garb.

Keywords: transregional theologies; World Christianity; Christian theology; *curanderismo*; mysticism; borderlands religion; comparative and transregional history and mission; Porfiriato; decolonial theory

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 1900, a young woman sat for an interview in a foreign land. Just a few years prior, a miraculous event sparked her divinely led mission, and she developed a remarkable and far-reaching ministry that shook her home country with miracles and hope. Her affluent father thought her a religious fanatic, but among the needy, she was seen as God's worker and messenger. Yet she departed that comfortable home for a land where she knew neither language nor customs. Her fame preceded her, and the natives she encountered were enthralled not only by her healings but by her unusual and attractive appearance. By means of this remarkable young woman, it seemed that God had arrived through his healing agent. What had begun upon her father's fashionable estate crossed national boundaries. She was, after all, a kind of healing missionary, forsaking her homeland to share God's love abroad with all whom she encountered.

This young woman was Teresa Urrea, revered among the Yaqui, Mayo, and Tomochitecos in Sonora and Chihuahua as *la Santa de Cabora*. The Mexican government exiled her to the United States for denouncing their oppressive treatment of Amerindians, and many of her Amerindian devotees invoked her name as they violently revolted against the state. As a political exile, she continued her remarkable life and healing work. In this context, reporter Helen Dare interviewed Urrea in San Jose, California. Even though she was herself skeptical of religion, Dare stood in awe of this young woman known widely as a saint. Urrea was, however, no less a "saint" to Dare, a laborer for Amerindian justice in the United States. To Dare, Urrea appeared as an exemplary figure—a "saint"—for Amerindian liberation.

Indeed, Urrea has been widely seen as an exemplar for a wide variety of causes.¹ Nevertheless, this paper contends that Urrea cannot be circumscribed to scholarly hagiographical paradigms. Her epistemic framework was bound to her own geographic and social location and movement. Contemporary scholars are tempted to type her experience as a kind of liminality; Urrea sat on the borders of Amerindian religion and Christianity, Mexico and the US, colonial flourishing and colonial poverty.² Such accounts forget, however, that Urrea experienced the world not from foreign academic categories but from her own epistemic framework. What we might see as liminality was, to her, simply her life. Such an insight—while in fact quite basic—ought to be crucial for methodology in the field of World Christianity. Urrea’s apparent hybridity and marginal religious and social location ought not suggest that she herself was marginal but, instead, ought to reveal the unsteady underpinnings of the categories themselves. The categories, it seems, are largely unhelpful for studying Urrea. Yet this fact should not discourage the field of World Christianity whose scholars study figures who are often, at once, deeply Christian yet difficult for many in the Western Christian world to accept. Instead, the fact reveals that World Christianity scholars need to approach figures like Urrea by way of the figures’ self-understandings.

For Urrea, her self-understanding is difficult to access. This lack of accessibility seems odd—born in the 1870s, there are photographs, newspaper clippings, and a history of popular devotion. The stories are only a few generations old, and those who have investigated her have interviewed her “friends and relatives.”³ Nevertheless, beyond Dare’s record, Urrea’s own words are scant, and she was popularly canonized so quickly that she assumed a legendary status even while still a young girl. Nearly all of the stories about

¹ Gillian E. Newell (2002, pp. 103–28). Sees Urrea as *Chicana* exemplar. Some such as Brett Hendrickson (2014, pp. 86–110) have focused on Urrea’s *curanderismo* and medical expertise. Another example is Jennifer Seman’s (2015) recent SMU dissertation. Alex Nava (2005, pp. 497–519) understands Teresa largely as an apocalyptic figure; his admirable work pairs well with this essay. She has even recently been effectively portrayed as a religious seeker (Bayne 2016).

² Walter Mignolo (2014) has argued persuasively that coloniality functions like a two-sided coin. The benefactors of political and economic regimes—such as *hacendados*—flourish at the expense of the oppressed. Urrea, who lived among poor Amerindians until her father (the *hacendado* Don Tomas Urrea) took her into his home, experienced both sides of the colonial order.

³ William Curry Holden’s (1978, pp. xv–xvi) *Teresita* is the most widely used “biography” of Urrea. Though Holden’s research was extensive, there is hardly any citation, and his portrayal of the narrative clearly reflects his own views of adventurism and masculinity. I agree with Luis León when he says:

Holden... wrote with another cause in mind... *Teresita* is a mix of myth, history, and biography. The text is written as a historical novel, replete with dialogues between Teresa and others, though Holden, a Texan of Anglo descent, maintains that it is a factual story. His reconstruction of Teresa’s life is allegorical, signifying processes of conquest, *mestizaje*, colonization/civilization, and Protestantism... Teresa is a microcosm of the possibilities that *mestizos* can bring to Protestant society... Teresa is transformed into a Protestant saint... Holden romanticizes and attempts to justify don Tomás’s rape of Indian women on his hacienda.” (León 2004, pp. 152–53).

León, nevertheless, utilizes Holden to some extent. He, moreover, claims (León 2004, pp. 41, 295) that the best available history of Teresa in English is Frank Putnam’s (1963, pp. 245–64) article, “The Saint of Cabora”. Oddly enough, Putnam’s work: 1) does not cite any sources explicitly, 2) says it utilized Holden’s resources (p. 245), and 3) was *edited by Holden* since the article was published after Putnam’s death (p. 245). In short, this circuitous citation demonstrates that historians—and a mass of scholars in other disciplines—draw upon the work of a man who wrote a “historical novel” (León 2004, p. 152). There is hardly any escape from Holden’s shadow (not to mention the novelists who intentionally wrote historical fiction), but, I suggest, simply returning to the earliest sources is perhaps a good initial step in untangling the mess of Teresa’s story.

With regard to the intentional fiction writers, Luis Urrea’s two quite recent novels on Teresa were partly products of his own family’s storytelling (she was his distant relative) but also included extensive travel and research (Urrea 2005, 2011). He, of course, wrote fiction and is not interested in precise historical details (though he suggests that his characterizations are “true” in other ways; indeed, his round and memorable characters are remarkable and likely bear significant resemblances to their historical inspirations). Luis Urrea (2005, 2011).

For other works of historical fiction, see the Heriberto Frías’ (1968) classic *Tomóchic* Brianda Domecq’s (1990) more recent *La Insólita Historia de la Santa de Cabora*. Much of the secondary scholarship surrounds the fictional corpus.

Urrea have a hagiographical style—even the accounts in secular newspapers and surely the most influential biography. In a sense, the young woman Teresita and *la Santa de Cabora* are not precisely one and the same. In this paper, I utilize the names Teresita and *la Santa* to distinguish between the woman's terrestrial, embodied existence on the one hand and hagiographical perceptions of her on the other. The latter is replete in both primary and secondary literature, but the former is elusive. The woman Teresita, however, can be found in Dare's 1900 interview.

For these reasons, this essay attends primarily to Dare's interview largely without recourse to other "histories" of Urrea (notably, Holden's "historical novel" *Teresita*).⁴ It is an exploration of how Urrea narrated her own history; in so doing, Teresita presented a theology and ethic drawn from the emulation of Christ and rooted in local culture. It seeks to recover the woman in her own words, and in so doing, the essay seeks to exemplify a way of studying deeply inculturated Christianities beyond the Anglophone Western world that privilege the distinct epistemologies of the religious actors without utterly circumscribing them to foreign categories. It reveals Urrea's sense of divine calling, self-perception, boundary-crossing, and inculturated theology. Even as she goes from South to North promulgating a kind of folk Catholicism indebted to indigenous religious practices and *curanderismo*, she certainly seems akin to a "missionary." Yet she is her own person, unable to be circumscribed by a foreign category, bound to the land and experiences in which Christ has been revealed within her.

2. A Saint in a Cottage

Though one of the best insights into Teresita's own mind, Dare's words are, of course, framed around her own perception of *la Santa*.⁵ Dare introduces her with a measure of bravado:

That self-same Santa Teresa who has been worshiped as a guide from heaven by the Indians of Mexico on our southern borders; who has been credited with miraculous healing powers; who was thrown into prison in Mexico charged with causing an uprising of the Yaqui Indians... that self-same Santa Teresa is now in California. (Dare 1900, p. 213)⁶

She recites Teresita's story twice and, between the two highly decorated narratives, inserts the fact of Teresita's current residence "in a modest, cosy, commonplace, white-painted cottage at 235 North Seventh Street, San Jose." ⁷ The grand has entered the "commonplace"; *la Santa de Cabora* resides in a modest San Jose home. In the former narrative, Dare emphasizes *la Santa's* fame across Mexico and the Southwest United States; and in the latter rendition, she provides more specific details of the charges of the Mexican government against her, the devotedness of the Yaqui and Tomochic peoples, and the "Indians and ignorant Mexicans making a great rejoicing over her."⁸ The young woman is a religious and revolutionary celebrity, but she now speaks humbly and simply to a reporter in San Jose. Dare presents her, in a sense, like the Christ child in the stable; how could someone so grand come to a place like this?

⁴ *La Llorona's Children* (León 2004, p. 151).

⁵ *Santa Teresa* (Dare 1900). The original article is about four columns long and includes three photographs—of her hand, one "clasping" hands with Dare, and a shot of her full figure. About two-thirds of the article are Urrea's words. In the piece, Urrea narrates her childhood, move to her father's hacienda, trance and call, healing practices, theology, ethic, imprisonment, exile to the US, and marriage. In short, the interview deals with most of the salient features of her life—though while likely omitting many details regarding the revolutions where she purportedly played roles. To Dare's credit, the interview itself is largely in one, intact piece with little interpolation. Dare's perceptions are largely evident before and after the interview.

While accessible via online databases such as newspapers.com, the copy to which I refer in the footnotes is an appendix to *Teresita* (Holden 1978, pp. 213–19).

⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 213)

⁷ (Dare 1900, p. 214)

⁸ (Dare 1900, p. 214)

Dare's introduction to *la Santa* seems hagiographical. *La Santa de Cabora* is a magnanimous figure for Dare. Could this just be journalistic or orientalizing rhetoric, or does Dare see in Urrea a figure who is exemplary of something? Is she, to Dare, a kind of saint? Records of Dare's work advocating for Amerindian justice suggest that she likely perceived *la Santa*. Yet this saint was primarily a saint for Amerindian justice.

Twenty-two years after the publication of this article, Dare appeared before the Committee on Indian Affairs in the US House of Representatives. In the proceedings, she states that she reported on meetings between the Indian Board of Cooperation and US government representatives. She received a modest expense stipend from the Board during the months she remained in Washington, D.C. doing her journalism, but she engaged in the work voluntarily, having advocated for California Indians for thirty years. Notably, she contends against an aid bill for the Indians arguing, quoting the wishes of the Board, that the Indians desire and ought to receive *justice* rather than aid. Having had their land annexed by the US government, the aid the Committee wants to give would not rightly reconcile the parties.⁹ While this hearing took place more than twenty years after the interview, it seems clear that Dare politically favored Amerindian communities. That insight perhaps sheds light on why she seems to regard Urrea so highly.

Dare was a kind of hagiographer. In her own description, *La Santa de Cabora* is a "saint" of Amerindian justice. It is no wonder that *La Santa de Cabora*, "who was thrown into prison in Mexico charged with causing an uprising of the Yaqui Indians... [and] banished from Mexico for the same reason..."¹⁰ would appear as such a remarkable—even holy—figure to Dare.

Additionally—perhaps in contradiction to the rhetoric of militarized rebellion—Dare portrays the young woman as the exemplification of femininity. By 1900, such descriptions have become standard for *la Santa*.¹¹ Dare elaborates on image of *la Santa* and yet repeats some of these adjectives word for word. She describes *la Santa's* gait as "soft, swift, gliding," her hands as "long[,] slender," her voice as "soft-spoken," her body as "tall, slender, flat-chested, fragile, dark-skinned." "Tall" and "slender"—even slenderness of hand—became standard, even holy, descriptions of Teresita as she is transformed into a type of saint.¹² Nevertheless, "flat-chested" seems odd in such a feminine description. Dare is perhaps simply describing the woman's appearance, and yet the details she relates are telling. "Flat-chested" may portray the manliness of the woman. That manliness, while contradicting her femininity, corresponds precisely to *la Santa* as the warrior.¹³ She is the saint of Tomochic rebellion and courage against the Mexican military. Thus, this masculine detail should not be overlooked. The young woman appears as a contradiction.¹⁴—the Joan of Arc-esque warrior *Santa* and the "fragile" Teresita. That said, these figures are not *too* distinct. *La Santa de Cabora* is identified with Teresita's body. The descriptors designate one body even as they portray two seemingly distinct Teresas. The two—the saint and young woman—are distinct yet simultaneously self-same. The description both *describes* Teresa's body and *constructs* the distinct Teresas. Through the description of Teresa's body and the replication of the description time and again, the representation of *la Santa* becomes identified with the young woman's very flesh.

⁹ United States House of Representatives, Committee on Indian Affairs (1922, pp. 209–21).

¹⁰ (Dare 1900, p. 213)

¹¹ As mentioned earlier, slightly altered versions of the same piece were published across the US primarily in 1902. It seems that the image stuck due to the circulation of that article. See "Miracles of a Mexican Maiden" (New York Sun 1891, p. 16).

¹² (Dare 1900, p. 215).

¹³ I owe this insight in the text above concerning Dare's masculine language to input from Anna Redhair Wells who furthermore claimed that this masculine language is common in hagiographies of women. One of the most obvious examples of this trope in Christian hagiography is the martyr Perpetua's vision of becoming a man prior in a gladiatorial fight (Tertullian 1887, § 3.2, p. 702).

¹⁴ (Martin 2014).

Dare herself, obviously enchanted by Urrea, remains incredulous to the faith claims about her. “Whether Santa Teresa is a healer or not it is not given to me to know—nature has not endowed me with faith... one cannot deny her respect, even when faith is not convinced.”¹⁵ Dare is simply a reporter, and yet her depiction of Teresita portrayed the woman as holy and other. For Dare, *la Santa* is an icon in the most religious sense: *la Santa* is a window into another world. In one sense, this iconographic sensibility appears to be a kind of orientalizing rhetoric, but, albeit Dare’s sentimentality and (perhaps) miscomprehension, *la Santa* truly reveals an alternate world. She reflects a different social imaginary. In one sense, she reveals the world of Amerindian people, and yet, nevertheless, that world is not simply hers. She reveals, in her interview, the foundations of her social imaginary. Teresita does not conceive of society, theology, ethics, or her very own self in the same manner as Dare. Dare, therefore, is ushered into a world of Amerindians, *Curanderismo*, Catholicism, Mexican oppression, revolution and, certainly, into the distinct theological and ethical notions of this young yet well-traveled woman. In all this, Dare perceives a uniqueness in the young woman. She both perceives and places a paradigm of saintliness upon her—she is *la Santa de Cabora*. And yet Urrea was not merely the conjunction of these identities; she maintained her own distinct epistemology.

Viewing her iconographically, Dare furthermore sees *la Santa* as the ideal Amerindian liberator. She is a saint of Amerindian politics, and thus Dare, herself cognizant of the injustice to which her own government has subjected Californian Amerindians, finds an icon through which Amerindian political revolt has been realized (i.e., brought into existence). That image, however, is rejected by Teresita herself—she is not an Amerindian political liberator but (seemingly) simply a healer.

3. In Her Own Words

3.1. Translation

Obviously, there are serious impediments to hearing Teresita’s own voice in Dare’s account. While Dare’s journalistic integrity is probably trustworthy, the interview is still filtered through Dare. Dare both wrote the words and chose what to emphasize, omit, elaborate upon, and summarize. This interview provides only glimpses into the woman’s inner world and self-understanding. Moreover, it is a translated work:

Santa Teresa speaks only Spanish, and Mrs. A. C. Fessler, whose guest she is and whose daughter’s little child they believe she saved from death, interpreted for me the first full story of her strange life that Santa Teresa has told to be printed.¹⁶

Nevertheless, unlike most sources available, this representation is not the passing down of lore; the icon takes up voice in Dare’s account. Thus, directly after Dare has introduced *la Santa* with a rhetorically rich account of her life and reputation, Teresita begins to speak (perhaps with *so little* rhetorical flair that we should consider faulting the translator or Dare).

3.2. Teresita’s Early Life

Teresita straightforwardly narrates her life: she gives her age (twenty-eight), birthplace (Sinaloa), parentage (confirming her illegitimate birth and parents’ vastly unequal power relations). Then with her education, we begin to glimpse her atypical self-understanding:

I went to school when I was nine years old, but I did not want to study; but later I felt I wanted to know how to read, and I learned my alphabet from a very, very old lady. My writing came to me *of itself*. I wanted to write, and I wrote, but how

¹⁵ (Dare 1900, p. 219)

¹⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 215)

I learned I don't know, for I was not taught. On the floor of my mother's house I first wrote with my *little finger in the dust*.¹⁷

Though remarkable to Teresita, aversion to study is typical for children. She learned to read, but writing, in her perspective, was a skill quite distinct from writing. Nevertheless, she could write, but since she never formally learned writing, she interpreted her writing ability as mysterious, or perhaps even, miraculous. Indeed, she spoke subtly, but she seemed to *allude* to her writing ability as a kind of miracle, suggesting an emerging sense of her own uniqueness.

The inclusion of this story in such a short narrative suggests that it was important for Teresita's self-understanding. She was an unusual young girl who had a gift. Moreover, her account alludes to another figure with an unusual self-understanding. In the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8), Jesus bends down and writes in the dirt. Again, this allusion to Christ suggests that not only *others* perceived her Christ-figuring, but she herself saw the similarity. In retrospect, her ability to write seems to have signified an element of Christ-like uniqueness for herself.

3.3. Migration and Transformation

Immediately following this allusion to Christ, Teresita tells her trance narrative. Fore-shadowing her future life of constant transience, the trance began after her move to her father's hacienda in Cabora at the age of sixteen. As a young girl, she had left the home she knew and traveled far away to a new place with its own customs—as one can see in her description of her new home: "It was adobe, the walls inside white and painted part of the way up as they paint them in Sonora."¹⁸ Why would she include this kind of detail—seemingly of so little importance—in an account of her life? In *The Yaquis: A Cultural History*, Edward Spicer contends that the Yaqui social imaginary holds a kind of binary between *huya aniya* and *pweplo*. In essence, before the coming of Europeans, Yaquis understood the world to be *huya aniya*—what Europeans might call the "natural world." Yet even Yaqui architecture was *natural* in the sense that it fit as part of nature's whole. With the coming of Europeans, towns and European architecture —*pweplo*—entered the Yaqui social imaginary.¹⁹ These buildings and manners of human-made construction contrasted with *huya aniya*. The inclusion of architectural details may reflect Teresita's perceived strangeness of social location—at sixteen, she began crossing borders, and she entered a world with a different social imaginary than the one in which she had previously lived. Her sense of self and place were altered. She was, in her own self-understanding, a strange girl, and, suddenly, she was thrust into a strange place.

"There for three months and eighteen days I was in a trance."²⁰ In a strange place, her own strangeness became all the more pronounced. Here, there seems to be an easy contemporary explanation: in the shock of migration, Teresita broke down psychologically for over three months.²¹

I know nothing of what I did in that time. They tell me, those who saw, that I could move about but that they had to feed me; that I talked strange things about God and religion, and people came to me... and I put my hands on them [and] they got well. Of this I remember nothing, but when I came to myself I saw they were well.²²

¹⁷ (Dare 1900, p. 215) Emphasis added.

¹⁸ (Dare 1900, pp. 215–16)

¹⁹ (Spicer 1980, p. 120)

²⁰ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

²¹ Some suggested to Teresa that her powers were the result of "nerves." (Dare 1900, p. 216).

²² (Dare 1900, p. 216)

Her lack of memory suggests trauma, but it is notable that she presents few details other than the description of the house and what people said about her words and actions.²³ The migration from one world to another—from *huya aniya* to *pweplo*—certainly affected her psychologically; though it is difficult to measure those effects precisely.

Her own narrative reveals that regardless of how her trance was caused, it *transformed* her in a deeply religious sense. One of the most salient comparisons is the deathbed visions of Julian of Norwich. It was not merely a calling or conversion, but, for both women, it was a period of personal *transformation* where she became a saint (though not officially).²⁴ For Julian, she lived the remainder of her life in a cell, reflecting on her visions and aiding the pilgrims who came to her. For Teresita, she received the power to heal, and people then flocked to her and invoked her in prayer.²⁵ The trance, indeed, transformed her into something else—perhaps *la Santa de Cabora*—and she recognized the event’s religious significance even if the cause seemed mysterious.

Teresita therefore interpreted her trance as a religious transformation: “I felt a change in me. I could still if I touched people or rubbed them make them well. I felt in me only the wish to do good in the world. I spoke much to the people about God...”²⁶ The trance indeed altered Teresita, and, here, she transformed into the one whom others recognized as a saint. Teresita entered her father’s strange house as a young girl, and though she may have already been developing a sense of her own uniqueness, the trance *changed* her, and she was enabled to heal, filled with a desire to “do good,” and began talking about God. Analogically, as John the Baptist submerged Jesus in the Jordan, so was Teresita submerged into a culturally new world, and for both figures, they emerged *changed*.

3.4. Teresita’s Theology

At this point, we begin to glimpse Teresita’s theology. Immediately upon telling Dare of her speaking “to the people about God,” she qualifies her sense and gives content to her particular theology:

I spoke much to the people about God—not about the church, or to tell them to go to church, but about God. I told them what I believe: that God is the spirit of love; that we who are in the world must love one another and live in peace; otherwise we offend God.²⁷

Teresita did not see her work and calling as *ecclesial*. She was neither trying to teach nor reform Christianity, and thus her sainthood was always popular rather than official. She was neither an instrument of the Roman Catholic Church nor a figure like Catherine of Siena. She, moreover, did not turn to Protestant Christianity and, it does not seem that she

²³ There is a danger in psychological diagnosis of historical figures. There is a danger in psychological diagnosis of historical figures. Psychology sees the category of trauma to be in flux and associated with a variety of psychological reactions and disorders. PTSD has been recategorized between the publications of DSM-4 and DSM-5. Literature that uses “trauma” as a lens for reading historical documents is growing. E.g., biblical studies uses this approach (Boase and Frechette 2016).

Moreover, considering the difficulty psychologists have in typing trauma among contemporary migrants, the helpfulness of “trauma” for examining Teresa may not seem to extend beyond simply naming her relocation as traumatic. Responses to trauma are not homogenous and therefore difficult to identify and treat (Ventriglio and Bhugra 2015, pp. 69–79).

²⁴ (Julian of Norwich 1998). Of course, like Teresa, Julian was never actually canonized.

²⁵ (Vanderwood 1998). While Vanderwood does utilize Holden’s work, he typically verifies it with his own research in print (newspapers) and material culture (159–61). Though she is not the main focus of it, his work is perhaps the most robust historical research on Teresa available.

²⁶ She goes on to say, “not about the church, or to tell them to go to church, but about God. I told them what I believe: that God is the spirit of love; that we who are in the world must love one another and live in peace; otherwise we offend God.” (Dare 1900, p. 216).

²⁷ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

maintained official Catholic connections during her exile.²⁸ She stood beyond the church's control. Nevertheless, her work and calling were decidedly *theological* in its most basic sense and orientation; she was gifted and called by God. She, moreover, even envisioned herself doing "as Christ did."²⁹ Indeed, as is evident in the coming description of her theology, Christian ideas play pivotal roles.

Yet like the saintly paradigms which fail to adequately describe Teresita, her theology cannot be simply explained by Christian influences. To this end, Yaqui religion and *Curanderismo* can help explain her theology. Yaqui religion of this time period has been called a "new religion" that formed at the conjunction of pre-colonial Yaqui religion and Jesuit Catholicism.³⁰ Furthermore, Teresita's theology reflects *Curanderismo* which "is not so much a discrete religious system as a logical extension of popular Catholicism."³¹ Her theology does not (and need not) fit any of these theologies precisely, but as her theology sits along a continuum of these practices, each of them are helpful dialogue partners in discerning the shape of her theology—though Teresita is circumscribed by none of them.

Regarding her healing powers, she says, "I feel it is given me from God."³² And "God," for Teresita, is most basically "the spirit of love." God's identity as the "spirit of love" produces a corresponding ethic: "we... must love one another and live in peace."³³ Teresita "believe[s]" that God—who is not identified with the church—is love, and humans therefore ought to love one another. She realizes this ethic in two ways through healing and admitting offense and asking forgiveness. This ethic is further framed by her understanding of "God's laws."

3.4.1. Healing: Power, Desire, Action

First, Teresita's healing ability, "the power to do good," was precisely how she realized this ethic of love. She demonstrated her belief in God's love, and the spiritual love became physically realized through her healings.³⁴ Whereas God is love spiritually, "the

²⁸ *contra* Holden's portrayal of Urrea as a kind of Protestant. As one would imagine, American Protestants during her day ranged from ambivalent to denunciatory: "We do not believe in either her healing power or her witchery, but the fact that many people in Mexico believe in one and some in the other only shows the superstition which still exists among Roman Catholics." (Baptist and Reflector 1892)

²⁹ (Dare 1900, p. 217) Though fictional, Luis Urrea may present a great understanding of Teresa's later relationship to the church. When someone asks her why she is not attending the local church, she responds, "I am the church." All this occurs in the context of the stream of sick pilgrims appearing daily on her Arizona doorstep (Urrea 2011, p. 107).

³⁰ (Spicer 1980, p. 60). Early Jesuits did not regard pre-colonial Yaqui rituals and symbols as religiously legitimate and therefore sought to utterly replace them. This attitude led to an extremely slow assimilation of Christianity into the Yaqui world. Thus Yaqui Catholicism became a religion of both synthesis and competing tensions. Spicer sees four aspects of Yaqui religion which preserve—as much as one can interpret—pre-colonial Yaqui religious distinctives:

- (1) A world view which included a conception of interdependence between the natural world and the world of Christian belief;
- (2) a focal concept of total community participation in a ceremony of annual renewal;
- (3) a fundamental working relationship between the whole community as organized through the ceremonial labor of the church and each separate household of ordinary people;
- (4) finally the necessity for full management of their religious affairs by the people of a yaqui community with no administrative interference from outside that community (Spicer 1980, p. 60).

The first distinctive is a shorthand of the *huya aniya* and *pweple* distinction discussed earlier in the paper that may have affected Teresita's move to the home of Don Tomás Urrea (see section 3.3.). The second concerned arenas of communal celebration (namely, the annual Passion) where virtues such as obligation were instilled (see section 3.4.1.). The third concerns an understanding of the church as deeply intertwined with the households of individuals and especially regarding their loyalty to their religious patrons. In Urrea's "protest" against the government and church for their violence and exploitation, she drew upon a well of Yaqui religious understanding (Spicer 1980, p. 89). The fourth can relate to the rejection of Teresita's ethic (see section 3.4.2.).

³¹ (León 2002, pp. 114).

³² (Dare 1900, p. 216)

³³ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

³⁴ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

power to do good” is the physical instantiation of that spiritual love. Teresita, in this way, even had a *Christological* sense of her call. In her words, she was “[h]appy to do as Christ did.”³⁵ Though she imagined her work as outside of the confines and grips of the Christian church, she was not only called by God, but she, indeed, followed the example of Christ. In healing, she *incarnated* divine love. She, quite literally, saw herself as *enfleshing* the divine “spirit of love.”³⁶ In so doing, Teresita saw her own life corresponding to Jesus:

“I have cured many people... sometimes I cured two hundred in a day.”

“And were you happy?” [Dare] asked.

“Si, Señora,” she said, “happy and grateful—but not proud. Happy to do as Christ did.”³⁷

As Christ healed the sick, so did Teresita. These healings correspond to her sense of divine call and even suggest that she saw Christ’s own calling as divine—like she herself, Christ mediated “the spirit of love” through his body. Her Christ, however, did not necessarily correspond to the church’s Christ; nor, though, was it necessarily an alternative depiction of Christ. From the interview, there is simply too little information to know whether she thought Christ himself was divine. What is clear from the interview, however, is that God is “the spirit of love,” Teresita herself did “as Christ did” in her own work as a healer, God had empowered her to heal, she desired to heal, and, of course, her healings were often understood to be effective.³⁸

God, “the spirit of love,” became enfleshed inasmuch as power was mediated through her body.³⁹ Remarkably, Teresita was often (but not always) able to see the location of sickness in individuals’ bodies “as if I was looking through a window.”⁴⁰ From this sight, she transferred power from her own self to the one seeking healing. Admittedly, she was not as explicit in conveying how this worked, but it can be intuited from one of her statements. Concerning those who seek her healing out of “curiosity” rather than “faith” in her,⁴¹ she said, “Sometimes I feel this power that is in me come back when I send it to them, but I try again.” When healing, she extended her divinely given power to the body of the one seeking healing. Notably, this account is also reminiscent of Christ: “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out of me” (Luke 8:46).

Teresita was God’s “instrument,” and, like Jesus, she passed the power within her through *touch*:⁴²

“When I cure with my hands I do like this,” and she took [Dare’s] hands in hers... and placed her thumbs against [Dare’s]...

“Sometimes... I rub; sometimes I give also medicines or lotions that I make from herbs I gather. I pray, too, not with the lips, but I lift up my spirit to God for help to do his will on earth.”⁴³

When healing, Teresita joined hands with the one seeking healing “holding with a close, nervous grasp” (according to Dare).⁴⁴ Along with touching, she utilized different means to actualize the healing. Even as she prayed (though not audibly) she rubbed or administered medicines; even as she administered medicines she prayed. Unlike many of her contemporaries in the Divine Healing Movement in the US, she found the *means* of physical

³⁵ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

³⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

³⁷ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

³⁸ (Dare 1900, p. 217).

³⁹ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

⁴⁰ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁴¹ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

⁴² (Dare 1900, p. 216)

⁴³ (Dare 1900, p. 217) Fascinatingly, the newspaper article includes a photograph of the two women “clasping” hands.

⁴⁴ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

and spiritual healing to not mutually exclude each other. Whereas, many Protestant faith healers utterly rejected the use of medicine or any means besides faith, Teresita utilized both together.⁴⁵ Physical touch, the use of herbs, and non-vocally “lift[ing] up [her] spirit to God” all stewed together in her healing practices.⁴⁶ God is spiritual, but God’s power, it seemed, was made physical through Teresita’s body and material means (medicines, herbs, etc.). Thus was she a type of incarnation.

Luis León’s ethnographic research in “Soy una Curandera y Soy una Católica” provides an example of a mass-going *curandera* whose theology fits neatly with Teresita’s practices. Hortencia, the *curandera*, reasoned thusly for using material things in order to help people: “Take water, for example. Water is a material [*materia*]. Water is made by God. *Man didn’t make water... rocks... are not made by man but are made from nature [la naturaleza].*”⁴⁷ Material things belong to the natural world (perhaps even the *huya aniya*) and are thus from God. How, therefore, could natural things not be used in healing practices? Where Teresita departs from Protestant faith healing notions, she fits neatly with *curanderismo*.

God, Teresita believed, endowed her with a peculiar *power* to heal, and she moreover had the *desire* to heal, and the power and desire were realized through her *action*. In other words, Teresita had the “power to do good” (gift), and, indeed, she “wishe[d] to do good” (desire), and indeed she did the good (action) in her healings.⁴⁸ This too matches neatly with *curanderismo*. The legendary story of being taught *curanderismo* from an old woman was not confirmed in Teresita’s own account,⁴⁹ but she, nevertheless, demonstrated sensibilities which have been reflected in *curanderismo*. Strikingly, Hortencia said, “I do what I can do to help the people [*la gente*]. And, well, perhaps that is why God, he helps me, because he sees my *desire to do the good.*”⁵⁰ Like Teresita, Hortencia imagined her healing powers as a divinely given gift, and she therefore desired to use them “to do good”—even if the church did not want her to do so.⁵¹

3.4.2. Offense and Forgiveness: Living in Peace

Second, this ethic of love requires peaceful co-habitation—unfortunately, an ideal which seems rarely realized in Teresita’s own narrative. When people fail to “love one another and live in peace,” they “offend God.”⁵² She therefore maintained a view of God as spirit capable of being offended by humans. This offense, of course, is caused by humans’ failure to love one another. “[L]iv[ing] in peace” involves a particular response to offense, namely, admitting fault and asking forgiveness: “When I offend I say to the one whom I have pained: ‘Sister or brother, I have offended you. I ask forgiveness.’”⁵³ Offense

⁴⁵ For the US Faith Healing Movement, see (Curtis 2007).

⁴⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁴⁷ (León 2002, p. 110)

⁴⁸ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁴⁹ Putnam (1963, p. 249) claims that after moving to her father’s ranch, Teresa became the apprentice of Maria Sonora, a *curandera*. After spending a few months at the ranch with her father in Sonora, Teresa went into a coma for two weeks (contra Teresa’s own account), and they prepared a coffin for her. During an all-night wake featuring Catholic prayers for Teresa, she awoke suddenly and declared, “The coffin you made for me, we will not need it now, but keep it. Maria will die in three days” (p. 249). This story contradicts Teresa’s own account, has legendary aspects, and Putnam provides no sources. That said, especially given her knowledge of herbs and medicines, Urrea likely was influenced by a *curandera*. For Luis Urrea, that woman is Huila, a significant and masterfully crafted character (*The Hummingbird’s Daughter*).

⁵⁰ León (2002, p. 110) emphasis added. Interestingly, Hortencia features many religious icons in her shop including Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Buddha, and Santeria icons. Notably, she sharply distinguishes her practices from the “rituals” in Santeria (p. 111).

⁵¹ She says that her priest does not approve of her work, but given her ability to help people, how could she not practice *curanderismo*? (León 2002, p. 110)

⁵² (Dare 1900, p. 216)

⁵³ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

comes through the failure to love, but admission of fault and asking forgiveness appears, in this text, as a key tenet of Teresita's theology and corresponding ethic. It was a tenet, however, complicated by the Yaqui revolution.

As Dare noted earlier in the piece, the Mexican government had imprisoned Teresita for her role in the Yaqui revolution,⁵⁴ and therefore Dare, herself concerned with Amerindian justice, asked Teresita to speak on her involvement. Having envisioned Teresita as an Amerindian revolutionary figurehead, Dare may have been disappointed with Teresita's response: "I had nothing to do with the Yaqui revolution... I have cured the Indians and they love me for it, but I do not tell them to make revolutions."⁵⁵ The Yaqui invoked her due to her miraculous healings, but she says she did not provoke violent revolt. Teresita sought to distance herself from "Joan of Arc"-esque perceptions. Furthermore, her self-depiction is reminiscent of Teresita's theology and ethic: "we who are in the world must love one another and live in peace."⁵⁶ Teresita was not necessarily denying the Yaqui's right to their land, but she rejected their means of attaining justice. According to Teresita's ethic, justice begins from the place of the *offender* rather than the *offended*. The primary response to offense is the offender's admission of offense and request for forgiveness. As the Yaqui were the offended party, their revolutionary response could not, by Teresita's ethic, properly restore love and peace. Of course, Teresita's particular ethic is either misunderstood or disregarded by Amerindian revolutionaries. Despite her own admonitions and their reverence for her, her ethic was deemed unsatisfactory for bringing about the justice needed. Nevertheless, Teresita was indeed a leader for these revolutionaries even if in fomenting revolution, they did not follow her ethic. "Because the people followed me I was put in prison in Guaymas when I was eighteen years old."⁵⁷ Because of her healing powers, *la Santa* attained a following among the Yaqui—these same Yaqui who then revolted. Here, there seems to exist a disconnection between Teresita's avowed ethic and the actions of her followers.

There are a few possible ways to understand this disconnect. First, she may have articulated this ethic to her followers, but they simply did not follow it. This is certainly a possibility. Though a leader endowed with miraculous healing ability, Teresa was indeed a teenage girl. Second, she may have failed to adequately articulate this ethic to her followers. Again, as a young leader, though she talked to people about her theology and corresponding ethic, she may have simply not spoken forcefully enough to fully reject the revolution. Third, Teresa may here be publicly underplaying her role in the revolution. She may have indeed aided and even led aspects of the revolution, but now, perhaps fearing the Mexican government—even though she is no longer in Mexico—she refuses to implicate herself in the revolution that led to her imprisonment and exile. To some degree, each of these three possibilities may play a role in directing the explanation as to why she denies a role in the Yaqui revolution. However one might choose among the interpretive

⁵⁴ In the interview, Teresita offers precious little concerning the events of several revolts in her name in northern Mexico. Vanderwood's *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government* (Vanderwood 1998, esp. pp. 205–80) gives an excellent portrayal of the military events surrounding the saint. It seems that Mexican officials traveled to Cabora in late December 1891 to capture Urrea, but she was nowhere to be found. Deadly skirmishes between the Mexican soldiers and Yaqui, Mayo, and—made famous in Frias' novel *Tomochic*—Tomochitecos. Five months and many Amerindian deaths later, Urrea and her father were arrested without resistance and taken the Guaymas. Judging by the context of her story, this seems to be the particular "Yaqui revolution" to which she is referring. Yet, by the time of the interview, there had also been a deadly Yaqui revolt in 1896 carried on in *la Santa's* name. Teresita was in the US during this time, though Lauro Aguirre's writing concerning her (or perhaps even written by her) almost certainly incited the rebellion.

⁵⁵ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁵⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 216)

⁵⁷ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

possibilities, it seems safest to say that Teresita's explicit ethic—in some ways—was unsatisfactory within the conditions to bring about justice.⁵⁸

Regardless of whether she engaged in the revolution, Teresita was imprisoned: "I was put in prison in Guaymas when I was eighteen years old—not in the jail, but in a private place opening on a cattle corral, where the mosquitoes ate me." ⁵⁹ She made sure to explain that she was not simply thrown into jail, but she seems to have been placed away from other prisoners, living near animals. These conditions, though, were poor in a different way; she specifically noted the harming of her body by mosquitoes. Seeing their leader under such conditions, "[t]he people gathered around [her] there and wanted to take [her] out."⁶⁰ The government relented, and her brother-in-law was able to remove her from her imprisonment and, importantly, Mexico itself. After being exiled within her country, her government then deported her. Especially because she denied her role in provoking revolt, she understood her exile to be unjust. But, of course, according to her ethic, the offender is the one who ought to admit the injustice.⁶¹

3.4.3. "God's laws": Teresita's Marriage

Though saints have often had a theological reason for chastity, Teresita had a theological reason for marrying: "[t]o marry... is one of God's laws."⁶² She certainly upset perceptions of her virgin sainthood. Her theological reasoning may be drawn from the Yaqui virtue of obligation.⁶³ Laws appear to have played a key role in her ethical understanding, but what other laws might entail is beyond the given source (though asking forgiveness for offense could be formulated as a law, but, of course, she does not call it a "law" herself). Rather than construing divine laws in the Newtonian sense as modern Westerners often do, it may be better to understand the laws as obligations which an individual takes up for the sake of not offending God and humans. This, it seems, is a Yaqui-drawn sensibility.

Though she married out of love and duty, Teresita's marriage was brief and disappointing. Just the previous month from the time of the interview, on the twenty-second of June, she wed Guadeloupe N. Rodriguez, a Mexican man she had known for eight months and, indeed, loved.⁶⁴ "The next day after we were married he acted strangely; he tore up some things of mine, packed some of my clothes in a bundle, put it over his shoulder, and

⁵⁸ Non-interference from outsiders, it seems, was a distinctive of Yaqui religion. Spicer mostly connects this point to the granting of the Yaquis "full management of their religious affairs," but it is easy to see how this religious concern extends outward to defending against the violence of the Porfiriato (Spicer 1980, p. 60).

⁵⁹ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁶⁰ (Dare 1900, p. 217)

⁶¹ Views differ widely on Teresa's sentiments and actions regarding the revolution. For instance, in just 1896, Albert Cameron wrote an article on Teresa that featured an illustration of Teresa on a white horse leading a group of men armed with spears captioned, "Teresa Urrea's Avowed Purpose is to Overthrow Mexico and Oust President Diaz." While exciting, this article's claims are poorly substantiated. Albert Cameron, "Santa Teresa, the Mexican Girl, a Modern Joan of Arc," (Cameron 1896, p. 15). Less than a week later, Teresa issued a statement saying, "I am not the one encouraging such uprisings, nor one who in any way mixes up with them..." (Urrea 1896). This statement is, of course, consistent with her interview with Dare from 1900. Also in September 1896, John M. Hawkins, through a personal interview with Teresa (unfortunately less detailed than Dare's), confirms her own self-characterization. He admits that her father may have a political agenda, but Teresa herself is simply concerned with an "ardent aim" "to benefit sufferers" by her power (Hawkins 1896, p. 25).

⁶² (Dare 1900, p. 218)

⁶³ (Spicer 1980, p. 85)

⁶⁴ Is it ironic that *la Santa de Cabora*, so reminiscent of Mexico's patron saint, would marry a man named Guadeloupe? (Dare 1900, pp. 217–18)

said to me, ‘Come with me!’”⁶⁵ Against the advice of those seeing this event, Teresita began to follow him “not know[ing] where he wanted to go.”⁶⁶ She was determined to follow her husband despite his strange behavior.⁶⁷ Rodriguez started running and shooting a gun but was soon apprehended—although she only referred to the apprehenders as “they.”⁶⁸ Immediately after their wedding, Teresita’s husband had been declared insane, and he was therefore imprisoned.

4. Conclusions

While this account need not be the final word on the development of Urrea’s theology and ethic—the remaining years of her life, though short, were quite eventful—it reveals how Teresita understood herself to be called by God to heal and in this way model Christ. The analysis of this paper has, furthermore, demonstrated that her Christ modeling was formed within an Amerindian social imaginary which distinguished between natural and humanly crafted worlds, emphasized obligations, and desperately needed healing and hope within the conditions of an oppressive government. Perhaps by means of disruption and dislocation, Urrea experienced a divine call from the “spirit of Love” to “do good” and “live in peace.” Urrea understood herself to be “do[ing] as Christ did.” While her explicit ethic regarding peace making proved unsatisfactory within the horrific conditions of the Porfiriato, *la Santa* was venerated as a kind of Mexican Joan of Arc. Her move to the US certainly did not end her divine mission of healing and following “God’s laws.” Yet ultimately, the duress of this mission may have been the death of her; at the cruciform age of thirty-three, she yielded her body to her maker.⁶⁹

In order to see Teresita as she understood herself, this essay has attended to Helen Dare’s 1900 interview. In so doing, it has become clear that Teresita understood herself to be a specially gifted person with a divine mission. That mission was formed and enacted within the complex social, religious, and geographical world in which she lived and moved, and she furthermore imagined herself to be emulating Christ within that world. Rather than falling back upon paradigms formed within Western scholarship, this essay has suggested that scholars interested in describing indigenized Christianities must begin from the words of the practitioners and the ground from which the movements began. While it cannot be neatly situated within an analytical frame, Urrea’s religion can be seen as a deeply indigenized Christianity. She was, in a way, Christ in Yaqui garb.

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⁶⁵ (Dare 1900, p. 218)

⁶⁶ (Dare 1900, p. 218)

⁶⁷ “I did not know where he wanted to go, but I would follow.” (Dare 1900, p. 218)

⁶⁸ (Dare 1900, p. 218)

⁶⁹ Records attest to her dying at thirty-three. Putnam’s 1963 short biography says it well: “she had often said she would die at the age of thirty-three. Somehow she always associated her own life with that of Christ.” Frank Bishop Putnam, “Teresa Urrea, ‘The Saint of Cabora,’” (Putnam 1963, p. 263). While Putnam’s article provides another lens through which to view Teresa, he, quite unfortunately, cites his sources as little as Holden and, in fact, relies on Holden for much of his information. A newspaper obituary (though seemingly unseen by her family before publication) says her death was reported around January 13, 1906 and that she was twenty-seven years old. (The Oasis 1906, p. 9). There are a couple probate hearing announcements that appear in the Arizona newspapers in the following weeks, but the most interesting clipping is later that August. The article is titled “Disposing of Prophetess Children,” and it briefly reports the custody hearing between Fortunato Atendano (with whom they had been living) and Cayetano Chavez (Teresa’s mother). Atendano won. (Disposing of Prophetess Children 1906, p. 1).

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