Bóvedas Espirituales: A Theological Study of Cuban Family Religions

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Divinity, Trinity College and the Theology Department of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael's College.

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Abstract

Cuban family religions are sets of religious practices often found in Cuban homes. In their cultural comprehensiveness and ritual, narrative and symbolic depths, Cuban family religions deserve and promise to be a fruitful topic of theological analysis, in light of elementary Christian incarnational demands. That is, family religions are understood as legitimate Christian theological loci. My proposed dissertation will be specifically concerned with theological analysis of the way sacred space is conceived and enacted in spiritual shrines, assumed here as archetypical enactment of Cuban family religions. This analysis will result in the enhanced ability of the Cuban churches to engage, in an informed and creative fashion, elements of the local culture that both carry social religious currency and display theological patterns with which Christian theology is able and missiologically bound to engage.
Acknowledgements

Thanks and praises be to God, forever merciful and loving.

My entire course of study, research and reflection has only been made possible by God’s generosity and love. These I have learned about through friends and loved ones, who have held me and loved me just as God would. In many ways, I also owe my friends for this thesis.

Special, heartfelt thanks to Don Wiebe, my thesis supervisor; Ibrahim Khan, Advanced Degree Programme Director, David Neelands, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College and Marsha Hewitt, Professor of Ethics and Contemporary Theology in the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College. In them, I am by extension also thanking all the University of Toronto professors and staff persons who, one way or another, have made my studies and research leading to this thesis, not only possible, but efficient and academically profitable.

I am forever indebted to the persistent support and commitment to my studies from the Archbishop Michael Peers Cuba-Malaita Theological Education Fund, made possible by the forethought and generosity of Archbishop Peers as well as by offerings of many individuals, parishes, dioceses and other church groups, and administered by the Department of Partners in Mission of the Anglican Church of Canada, staffed by Andrea Mann and Claudia Alvarez.

My heart goes to Michael and Dorothy Peers. You have been friends, family and angels.

My thanks also to the many individuals and communities who have supported, one way or another, my life and work during these years of study. Special thanks to the Bishops and people in the diocese of Toronto as well as among the General Synod staff in the Anglican Church of
Canada; the Community of Saint John the Evangelist in the Episcopal Church USA; *Iglesia Episcopal* and *Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba*.

My work and its results are indebted to every person who has shared with me his or her understanding and practice of family religions, every person who has welcomed and taught me and encouraged my curiosity and passion. Special thanks to my friends and colleagues from the Cuban communities of *Seminario Evangélico de Teología* in Matanzas and the *Instituto de Estudios Bíblicos y Teológicos*, in La Habana. To the parishes where I carried on my field research for my studies: *Catedral de la Santísima Trinidad*, La Habana; *Todos los Santos*, Guantánamo; *El Buen Pastor*, Esmeralda; *Cristo Rey* in Cuatro Esquinas; *Santísima Trinidad* in Los Arabos and *La Santa Cruz*, in Santa Cruz del Norte. Also, to the communities of *Holy Trinity Anglican Church*, *Parroquia San Esteban* and *St. Thomas’s Anglican Church*, as well as *Massey College* and *Trinity College*, all in Toronto, Canada, my extended families throughout these years of study and work.

Tina Park, while fighting -and excelling in- her own battles, has been a loyal, loving friend and partner whose support, work and commitment have made this thesis, to say the least, readable.

감사합니다 박지원.

And, last -because this whole story begins with her, at the foot of her bóveda espiritual- my thanks and love to my mother. *Mami, de no haber sido por ti, yo no estaría aquí.* Without her, I would have never had a chance to be here. In many more ways than one.

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*A Dios gracias.*
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Chapter One

1. Introduction

Cuban family religions are sets of religious rituals, narratives, beliefs and practices adopted by individuals and families, usually organized around the home and the life of the family. They are a very specific form of Cuban folk religions, both in regards to their geographical location, the home, and their strong concern for the ritualization of links between the living and the dead. These family religions are also deeply embedded in Cuban culture, with particular importance given to the practice of bóvedas espirituales, or spiritual shrines. These shrines, or household altars, widely found in ordinary Cuban homes, are used for the remembrance of the dead as well as the practice of other elementary domestic religious ritual.  

Despite the prevalence of bóvedas espirituales in Cuban homes, as well as in the religious traditions embedded in the wider Cuban culture, established churches in Cuba have generally not capitalized in their own theological discourse or practice upon the narrative and ritual resources of Cuban family religions. My dissertation seeks to address this gap, arguing that Cuban family religious practices, as archetypically represented by bóvedas espirituales or spiritual shrines, are promising grounds for Christian theological reflection.

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1 *Bóveda*, in Spanish, literally translates as the noun ‘vault’ and, in Cuba and other Latin American countries, it names the individual niches conforming a family mausoleum or cemetery tomb.
2 “…. the bóveda espiritual (spiritual altar) that many Cubans keep in their homes, which functions as a portal for communication with deceased family members”, Kenneth Routon, “Open the Roads: Religious Sensibilities of Power and History in Havana, Cuba.” *Ph.D dissertation*, (Illinois: Department of Anthropology, Graduate School Southern Illinois University, 2006), 82. Routon’s work was solely concerned with domestic forms of Spiritist religious practice, which I will be describing as distinctive from what I am identifying as Cuban family religions.
This Introduction to the thesis will begin by contextualizing the history of bóvedas espirituales. I will then provide an overview of my thesis, which will be followed by a review of the concerned historiography. After highlighting my research background, I will elaborate on my research methodology, describe the thematic structure and, finally, suggest some practical implications of my thesis.

1.1 Historical Context of Bóvedas Espirituales

In their strict historical genesis within Cuban religious traditions, bóvedas espirituales originated in the Espiritista tradition, and became popularized after being adopted by Cuban followers of Santeria (the Cuban iteration of Yoruba religion) by the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, the teachings and practices of European (Kardecian) Spiritism enjoyed wide appeal among Cuban whites, who associated it with modern, liberal ideas, seeing it as un tarnished by the political influence of Spanish colonialism or the doctrinal control of Roman Catholicism. Some Spiritist ceremonies, initially adopted for the sake of local social conventions, quickly became the religious equivalent of hall games. The simple nature of Spiritism’s narratives and rituals, the absence of professional clergy, as well as the explicit invitation for anyone to communicate with the dead, contributed to the popularization of Spiritist practices.

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3 Spiritism [Espiritismo] is one of the most influential Cuban religious systems, with roots in the Spiritualism from the XIX-XX c. United States of America. Mainly focused on enabling communication with the dead, Cuban Espiritismo flourished in a time of civil war, political instability and social conflict, and has remained ever since a religious force in Cuba. See Mario Dos Ventos, Sea al Santisimo: A Manual for Misa Espiritual & Mediumship Development. (Miami: Nzo Quimbanda Exu Ventania, 2008), 14.

4 Dodson places it in the decade of the 1860s. See Jualynne E. Dodson, Sacred Spaces and Religious Traditions in Oriente Cuba. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 125.

At the same time, an increasing number of symbolic and narrative elements of Spiritism found their way into the religious practices of both free and enslaved Africans of Yoruba origin.\(^6\) This was partially motivated by the loss suffered by enslaved Africans and their descendants (emblematically so, those belonging to the Yoruba ethnic group) of systematic religious resources for dealing with issues of life and death.\(^7\) In the background, folk Catholicism exerted an overall, systemic influence on most of the culturally-ingrained religious and ritual traditions, even those regarding the dead.\(^8\)

Since then, multiple, persistent mutual borrowings have taken place between practitioners of Santeria, Spiritism and folk Catholicism, as well as in their respective narrative, symbolic and ritual traditions. Gradually, the use of bóvedas espirituales was sought by growing numbers of Cuban religious practitioners who, while not necessarily attached to institutional forms of Spiritism, Catholicism or Santeria, still adopted bóvedas espirituales as domestic altars, devised and used for seeking spiritual communion with ancestors, within a wider narrative and set of ritual patterns provided by conflating religious traditions. In this, so to speak, post-confessional form, bóvedas espirituales are commonly found in homes throughout Cuba as well as among its diaspora communities, constituting an emblematic form of Cuban family religions.

\(^6\) The Yoruba culture, located in what is now Nigeria and Benin, at one point developed a sophisticated political and administrative system. The kingdom of Benin lasted for 12 centuries and until 1896, at which point the Yoruba culture was defeated by internal conflict and wars with neighbouring ethnic groups. Between 1817 and 1860, Yorubas made up to thirty percent of Africans enslaved and sent to Cuba. Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 116.

\(^7\) In their forced migration to the Americas, enslaved Africans saw their holy places, objects and rules left behind. For example, enslaved Yoruba lost access to their funeral priesthood (Egunguns) and, with them, many valuable traditions concerned with the dead and the ancestors. That vacuum was filled at least partially with certain Spiritist practices –prominent among which is that of bóvedas espirituales. Mary Ann Clark, Santeria: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion. (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 85.

\(^8\) Many enslaved Africans and their descendants had acquired from the Spaniards the Christian tradition of keeping a lit candle and a cup of water as offerings to the dead. In an almost natural borrowing, these practices were eventually attached to the keeping of bóvedas espirituales and remain as one of its main elements to this day.
It would be, however, quite challenging to determine with any precision the demographic prevalence of bóvedas espirituales or Cuban family religious practices in the past or the present. Family religion, by its very nature, escapes public scrutiny. In the pre-1959 Cuba, family religion practices were kept behind formalized, socially accepted religious practices, and specifically throughout the first half of the twentieth century, when they established themselves as viable, intimate alternatives to more institutional forms of religious affiliation. In post-1959 Cuba, family religion eventually became a private solution to the political challenges inherent in public displays of religious affiliation and practice.

At times, social recognition of Cuban family religion has come in unexpected guises. For example, since the mid-1970s, it has been common during national epidemiological media campaigns for health authorities to warn the citizenry against a list of factors allowing for long-standing water accumulations, given its potential for the reproduction of mosquitoes. Prominent in this list have been and remain what is known as vaso espirituales or spiritual vessels, a central feature of bóvedas espirituales.

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9 “The country people of Cuba, as well as the other inhabitants, are not very religious (…) this does not prevent, however, images of the Virgins and saints in every home,” Demoticus Philalethes, Yankee Travels through the Island of Cuba. (New York: Appleton, 1856), 52, as quoted in George Brandon, Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 63.

10 “Even when this did not surface in the 1954 survey—perhaps because it was conducted by a Catholic organization—domestic and shrine religion, both Catholicism and Santeria, were vigorous,” in Thomas A. Tweed, Our Lady of the Exile. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

11 Interestingly enough, in these epidemiological media advisories, vaso espirituales are routinely grouped with rather common elements of the home like flower vases and ornamental plants. “Factors deemed conducive to multiplication of mosquitoes are: uncovered water reservoirs, water leaks, water accumulation in bushes, open containers out in the open, old tires, plants in water, flower vases and vaso espirituales…” Asuncion Gonzalez Morales & Ana Maria Ibarra Sala, “Nivel de Conocimientos, Actitudes y Prácticas sobre la Prevención del Mosquito Aedes Aegypti en Comunidades del Municipio Diez de Octubre,” Revista Cubana Higiene Epidemiologia 49:2 (2011): 247-259.

12 In nearly every description we have come across of bóvedas espiritualas, the first element to be recited is usually that of vaso espirituales. See Mario Dos Ventos, Sea al Santisimo: A Manual for Misa Espiritual & Mediumship Development, Miami: Nzo Quimbanda Exu Ventania, 2008.
As I will argue in my thesis, tending of bóvedas espirituales does not constitute a specific tradition that can be discerned in a hierarchical or structural fashion. Instead, they are the products, in perpetual transformation, of gradual, cumulative amalgamations of culturally conditioned elements, adapted to local and even individual patterns of religious practice.

The pastoral practice of Cuban churches has tended to ignore the subject altogether, de facto endorsing a dichotomy between the temple and the home as separate entities for religious behaviour and, therefore, also for enactments of sacred space. The pastoral agents of churches, when they interact with Cuban family and folk religions, usually adopt a verificationist stance, more concerned with discerning what elements can be more directly identified or at least subordinated to specific Christian doctrines and narratives. There is little credit given to practitioners of folk religions or to their abilities to enact rituals and symbolically and discursively narrate their religious life and discernment of the divine.

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13 Nestor Garcia Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity,” in Gerardo Mosquera, Oriana Baddeley eds. Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 38-39. In Cuba there is a growing attempt to call the religions discussed here ‘non-institutionalized religions’. While this term is preferable to the more common label “magical practices” and related terms, these religions are in fact institutionalized, with rules, hierarchies, legitimate histories, genealogies and so on. The phrase “non-institutionalized” therefore serves only to distinguish them from other well-known established religions.

14 Further into this chapter, I will elaborate on this concept.

15 The final document of the Puebla Conference, held in Mexico in 1979, states: "The Latin American peoples' religion, in its most characteristic cultural form, is an expression of the Catholic faith. It is a popular Catholicism". Conclusiones, Documento de Puebla. (Madrid: Editoriales Paulinas, 1978), 443.

16 An example is Msg. Garcia-Menocal’s lecture “Pluralismo religioso en increencia en Cuba Republicana” (Religious Pluralism and Unbelief in Republican Cuba) which can be used as a marker for the rest of the Cuban Roman Catholic narrative in this regard: “I understand that, minus some exceptions, people who are involved in these syncretic practices are in fact displaying signs of a reality which is very far from anything we could call ‘religion’ in the full sense of the term, and entail the breaching of cultural norms of negative consequences for the national culture and identity, already in a precarious state.” Carlos Manuel de Cespedes Garcia-Menocal, Pluralismo Religioso en Increencia en Cuba Republicana. (La Habana: Conferencia Cubana de Obispos Católicos, 2002), 52.
1.2 Overview and Historiography

I argue that bóvedas espirituales constitute a specific practice in Cuban family religions, offering the ritual stage for religious practices concerned with ancestors. In its persistent symbolic relevance and cultural resilience, the practice of bóvedas espirituales has acquired religious autonomy, relevance, and a cultural life of its own. This practice has been embraced by Cuban religious practitioners who are geographically, socially and ethnically diverse. Some are not formally linked to any specific form of Spiritism, or any other organized, socially discernible form of religious identity. Some are associated with one among many Cuban Christian denominations, including the Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba.

My thesis argues that the practice of spiritual shrines can be assessed from a Christian theological perspective, if studied in their enacted perceptions of sacred space. This is an intentional distancing from Christian theological approaches to folk religions grounded on verificationist perspectives, according to which the theological validity of folk religions depends on their ability to echo fundamental elements of Christianity.

While the academic work on historically established Cuban religious traditions is quite copious, far less the attention has been given to domestic, family forms of religion. The academic literature concerned with bóvedas espirituales as such is extremely limited. When bóvedas espirituales are mentioned at all, it is part of a consideration of the wider spectrum of ritual and symbolic codes of either Santería or Spiritist traditions. To date, there exists no concrete

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17 Eduardo Espinosa points to bóvedas espirituales as one of four common places for the santero (Santería priest) to work: that of the Orishas, of the Roman Catholic saints, of the spiritual shrine and that of the Conga tradition. “En compañía de los espíritus,” Alteridades 6:12 (1996): 83. “Sometimes the altar honoring the Orishas is referred to as bóveda espiritual, or spiritual altar, literally a spiritual vault.” Maria Herrera-Sobek, ed. Celebrating Latino folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions. (California: ABC-CLIO,1997),42.
academic research on the role that bóvedas play in Cuban family religion. A similar situation exists within the Cuban Christian theological academy.

In line with humanities scholarship, theologians concerned with non-Christian forms of Cuban religious belief and practice have usually favored the analysis of historically discernible religious traditions, such as Santeria or Espiritismo. As a result, not enough attention has been paid to less hierarchical or systemic forms of religious practice and belief, such as family religions, let alone their specific forms of enactment of sacred space, as in the case of bóvedas espirituales.

The one example of intentional, sustained research and reflection about sacred spaces enacted by domestic forms of religious practice is the book Sacred Spaces and Religious traditions in Oriente Cuba, by Jualynne Dodson. This is a work addressing local and home places of religious practice originating in organized, socially recognizable Cuban religious traditions, specifically those of African origin (Palo Monte, Vodu, and Muertera Bembe de Sao), and Spiritism. It represents a healthy focus on religious practice within geographically (and hence, culturally) distinct locations in Cuba as well as an encouraging concern for spatial analysis in the study of religions. However, on the one hand, Jualynne’s work is only focused in domestic extensions of socially wider and more embedded religious traditions and forms of religious practice and belief, and not domestically-created or re-created forms of religious belief and practice, or Cuban family religions, as it is the concern of my thesis work. On the other hand, Dodson consistently appeals to verificationist arguments for rationalizing some of the aesthetic, affective themes found in these religious practices, for example, when appealing to the persisting “Africa-based ‘cosmic orientation’” found in these spatial practices, or their preservation of an

“African sense of time.” These are argument traits I am intentionally disregarding in my own analysis, because of their verificationist essence, with the accompanying anthropological impoverishment of practitioners -which alone makes such ethnographies rather unattractive for the goals of this thesis.

1.3 Verificationist and Emic Approaches to Religious Practice

Verificationist theological approaches to contemporary religious practices are methodologies purporting to analyze contemporary forms of religious practice through direct hermeneutical appeals to their discernible historical sources. They are at least partly grounded on the Western preference for time-oriented over space-based analyses of cultures, as well as in academic works of early twentieth century, which sought to challenge the then prevailing notion that slavery had obliterated any remains of Africanness in the identities of black peoples in the United States. Still often found in Cuban studies of folk religions, verificationist methodologies claim to produce accurate ethnographic analysis while, in fact, they dissect allegedly distinctive elements found in contemporary folk religious practices and seek to rationalize their presence therein by making a direct hermeneutical appeal to their apparent historical origins.

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20 Ibid. 40.
The subject of verificationist methodologies is developed at length in the volume *Africas of the Americas*, specifically in regards to the contested Africanness, or ‘African index’ reading of Cuban folk religious practices. Stephen Palmie argues that verificationist approaches assume “the possibility “to untangle the European, African, African and European ‘elements’ that went into the making of hybrid forms, as if these were stable and homogeneous.” This academic tendency, he adds, “belongs to a genre of anthropological inquiry aiming to identify and authenticate historical continuities between African and New World cultural forms that has always been driven not just by explicitly announced theoretical concerns, but by political ones as well.” Palmie chronicles the critical responses to verificationism by pointing, firstly, to an essay by Walter B. Michaels, *Race Into Culture* which, in its last section, challenges essentialist accounts of human identity and further rejects the proposition that cultural identity might ever replace racial identity. Secondly, the work of David Scott, who in a 1991 essay pointed out and contested “an epistemologically naive and ideologically dubious ‘verificationist orientation’ in Americanist anthropology”. In a subsequent, 1999 volume, Scott went on to argue that religious studies and, specifically, the study of syncretism in the cultures of the Caribbean has often adopted a verificationist approach, a ‘verificationist epistemology’ “which, to this day, has

23 Ibid.
tended to dominate historical and anthropological studies of African-American cultures.”

The point of Scott’s critique is to challenge such verificationist epistemologies with a tradition of inquiry that defines the central task of African-Americanist research as providing answers to question such as ‘whether or not or to what extent Caribbean culture [or other African-American cultures, for that matter] is authentically African; and whether or not or to what extent Caribbean peoples have retained an authentic memory of their past, in particular a memory of slavery.’

One of the most methodologically problematic aspects of verificationist approaches is their maybe unintended effect of enabling the unwarranted qualification of the authenticity of contemporary religious practices, whether these have managed to ‘preserve’ the ‘true essence’ of their alleged origins. Too often, the contemporary operational characteristics of a specific form of religious practice are sought, not after the emic approach, which capitalizes upon the experience and self-awareness of the practitioners, through careful and subject-centered ethnographic research, accounting for their own rationale for their religious every-day. Rather, these descriptions of contemporary religious practice rely on their alleged ability to adequately preserve supposedly vital elements from preceding religious traditions. As Comaroff wrote, a verificationist approach would annul “the endogenous historicity” of “the local worlds brought into being through, and reproduced in the ritual instantiation of precisely that past in contemporary New World space-time.” Lastly, verificationist methodologies are, in essence, anthropologically impoverishing. By leading to etic-driven methodologies, they disregard the necessary emic character of scholarly analyses of agency in religious practices, that is, the

methodological acknowledgment of the rationale which practitioners may hold about those practices and, consequently, prevent accurate ethnographic analysis of the evidence at hand.

This anthropologically impoverishing quality of verificationist methodologies also translates into assuming readings of the category of ‘culture,’ heavily invested in Modernity archetypes of differentiated technological and human progress and dominated by ideals of uniformity, commonality and comprehensiveness.³⁴ These perspectives have been challenged by subsequent cultural methodologies emphasizing plurality, difference and ambiguity, addressing culture instead as “a ground of contest in relations”³⁵, thereby engaging issues of power as directly related to cultural notions and practices. However, verificationist methodologies insist in attaching cognitive and ethnographic value, and of a determining nature, to factors at times beyond the agency, individual or social, of contemporary subjects. These verificationist methodologies and their associated, anthropologically impoverishing rationale have contributed to the study of religion, and more specifically Cuban folk religions, to be often attached to mostly synchronic concerns about creation, reception and re-interpretation of previously foreign unrelated beliefs and practices, while disregarding the spatial components and overall the role of space and place in the religious practices being analyzed. This has also meant that the essence of contemporary, localized, space-embedded forms of religious practice has been looked for, more often than not, in and almost exclusively in the long gone historical particularities of earlier, preceding forms of religion, and the cultural contexts in which they were to be found. Lastly: while the preceding literature on this subject has mostly referred to the African-American impasse for verificationist arguments, I will be extending my appeal to this term to include those

methodological instances in which the validity of a Cuban contemporary form of religious practice is qualified on account of its alleged ability to have preserved this or that element of the historical, doctrinal traditions of Christian churches, Spiritism, or any other preceding religious system.

1.4 The Spatial Turn

Since the decade of the 1990s, a ‘spatial turn’ has challenged synchronic-based assumptions of ethnographic value and analysis, and the categories of ‘space’ and ‘place’ have enjoyed a thematic resurgence in both interest and research. The publication of La production de l’space by Henri Lefebvre, and its translation into English in 1991, can be seen as a starting point for the ‘spatial turn’ in humanities.36 Among scientists of religion, as Kim Knott puts it, ‘space’ is no longer perceived as a passive container, inert stage for human activities, a spatial frame of support. Instead, space is “thoroughly enmeshed in embodiment and everyday practice, knowledge and discourse, and in processes of production and reproduction, and consequently it is enmeshed in religion and ritual no less than in other areas of social and cultural life.”37 Based on this theoretical perspective, and drawing on the works of Lefebvre, de Certeau and Foucault, Knott has proposed a group of taxonomies for the assessment of a place as well as its religious significance, by means of its spatial attributes. This has led to the development of taxonomies

which address the human body as the source of space as well as the dimensions, properties, aspects and dynamics of space.\(^{38}\)

Christian Theology followed in the steps of social sciences and modern Western culture. While also grounded in long standing scriptural, sacramental and missiological commitments to obviously spatial concerns (the land, Jerusalem, spatial conceptions of the divine economy of salvation), Christian theologies eventually adopted contemporary philosophical assumptions, systematically disregarding the conceptual and narrative potential of spatiality over time-oriented types of analysis. However, the ‘spatial turn’ among the social sciences eventually impacted theological studies and, since the last few decades of the last century, there has been a veritable influx of authors addressing the intersection of Theology and spatial studies. Emblematically among them, Philip Sheldrake makes an argument in which place is addressed as “a human construct (...) culturally created through historical meanings, narratives and events, but also in contexts of crisis and as an object for belonging.”\(^{39}\) He reclaims an early Christian tradition that “regarded people as places, especially as places, loci, of the sacred”\(^{40}\) in an approach that he asserts is not focused “on spirituality as an inward experience but as a practice of living.”\(^{41}\)

In my thesis, I describe spiritual shrines, specifically as these can be shown to be places of quotidian episodes of enactment of sacred space, and how these enactments can be interpreted as theological arguments. By applying the methodology proposed by Knott and the theological reflections of Sheldrake, I will describe and analyze the practices of sacred space common to Cuban forms of family religions, specifically as they relate to bóvedas espirituales. Ultimately, I

\(^{38}\) Ibid.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 361.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
will conclude that the practice of *bóvedas espirituales* has theological potential for the Episcopal Church of Cuba to engage with, given both its ability to convey the religious worldview of marginalized groups and individuals as well as its ability to enact distinct, theologically coherent understandings of sacred space.

### 1.5 My Research Background

I first studied the subject of family religions in 2002 for my Baccalaureate of Theology thesis to the Faculty of Theology of the *Seminario Evangélico de Teología*, in Matanzas, Cuba. This thesis consisted of an account of the place of prayers for the dead, specifically the masses for the dead throughout the history of the Western Christian Church, as well as their re-evaluation within the current theological and liturgical life of the *Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba*. It was precisely because of the perceived relevance that these liturgies play in the lives of so many of the faithful that I became interested in home-centered religious practices, particularly those concerning the dead. Some of these themes were further developed during my Master of Theology studies, also at the *Seminario Evangélico de Teología*. My thesis then was aimed at developing hermeneutical links between those Cuban domestic religious practices concerned with the dead and the main tenets of the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints. It proposed a theological analysis of religious practices which take place in the home and are enacted by people who also participate regularly in the life of their local Episcopal (Anglican) Church community. Specifically, I considered the religious practices of the home pertaining to the

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dead and to ancestors. Ultimately, I argued that bóvedas espirituales were among the most prevalent forms of domestic religious practices, rich in both narrative and religious elements. My thesis underscored the versatility and adaptability of bóvedas espirituales for different personal, social, discursive and ritual circumstances.

1.6 Goals and Research Methodology

In this thesis, I intend to develop theological language and narrative capable of describing the material and dynamic aspects of the practice of bóvedas espirituales in Cuba, as well as some of the bodily responses they evoke, resulting in enactments of sacred space. Furthermore, I hope that such theological narrative could be made available to practitioners of family religion. Ultimately, these theological language and narratives will be applied in enriching how institutional churches understand issues of folk religion, specifically family religion. This would further enable the theory, practice and message of Cuban churches to be more sensible and relatable to what actually takes place, both ritually and narratively, in the lives of many among its membership.

In order to accomplish these goals, I will apply the results of observations I made in 2005 during the fieldwork research for my Master in Theology thesis. This research was not intended to comprehend all the available evidence in regards to either ritual practices or objects found in family religious practices in Cuba. It did, however, seek to provide enough elements to

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objectively describe the domestic religious practices and beliefs regarding death and the dead espoused or evidenced by the people with whom I interacted during that field research. I had the opportunity to both witness and inquire about specific disciplines of the body, ritual practices and hermeneutical strategies deployed in the practice of bóvedas espirituales. These observations have been considered when both describing and interpreting what these practitioners do with their bóvedas.

My thesis will take a multi-disciplinary and integrative approach, drawing from various theological works, anthropological commentaries, as well as the results of interviews with Cuban practitioners of family religions. With this, I seek to produce a theological proposal based on an inter-disciplinary understanding of the phenomenon. My thesis adopts the descriptive and analytical methodologies, and eventually proposes a strategy for theologizing about family religions.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The following sequence provides a roadmap for my dissertation, which I will develop in five parts. Chapter Two provides an ethnographic description of bóvedas espirituales within the wider Cuban religious spectrum, more specifically in regards to their sources and syncretic processes at work. Chapter Three accounts for preceding theological approaches to folk religions, specifically those in the Latin American liberationist traditions. Chapter Four describes ‘the spatial turn’ both in social sciences and theological scholarship. It returns to a previous argument about religious experience and presents examples of how this scholarship has already engaged issues of sacred space in other areas of sciences of religion and theology, specifically
through the works of Kim Knott and Philip Sheldrake. Chapter Five, a theological, hermeneutical exercise of the practice of bóvedas espirituales, is centered on their being both domestic enactments of Cuban folk religious practices and characterised by ritual, narrative and symbolic investments on sacred spaces within the home. Chapter Six addresses the conclusions of my analysis and offers suggestions on how it might be of use both for theological reflection about folk religions and family religions but also for the pastoral practice of Churches in their interaction with and engagement of these practices, their subjects and their particular contexts.

1.8 Implications

In line with the attention paid to issues concerning sacred space, I will argue that there is a need for a renewed, diachronically-bent frame of analysis for material enactments of religious interpretation, especially in the context of family religions. Theological clues will be offered for an appreciation of religious, ritual work which values emic accounts of religious experiences accounted for practitioners of family religions. That is, I will seek to emphasize the value, both ethnographic and theological, of emic concerned methodologies, or theoretical approaches which focus on the analysis of religious practices by assuming as much as possible from the conceptual and practical point of view of the practitioner. Consequently, special attention will be given to the implications of this dissertation on theological scholarship and the impact this might have in the pastoral practice of Churches, specifically in Cuba.
Chapter Two

2. Bóvedas Espirituales in Cuban Homes

My interest in the subject of folk, family religious practice dates back to my early childhood. Often enough, my mother would briefly walk away from the family dining room, carrying with her a small portion of the best dish from the table, to return empty handed a few minutes later. I soon learned that she was, in fact, taking this dinner portion to her bóveda spiritual\(^{44}\) and placing it before the pictures of her mother and grandmother. Her simple ritual of food offering was accompanied by some endearing and personal words: “Mira mami, yo sé que a tí te gusta mucho esto.”\(^{45}\) or “Abuela Nana, esto es para tí.”\(^{46}\)

For many children raised in Cuba within the last century, witnessing such type of ritual would have been a very common experience. Bóvedas espirituales have been, and still remain, inescapable presences in many Cuban homes. They have remained prevalent even after the Republican periods of social stagnation as well as cultural and political stigmatization of non-orthodox Christian religious practices. Their predominance in Cuban families continued in the post-1959 period, which saw the rise of institutional agnosticism and ideological disparaging of much of religious narrative and ritual they represent. In their enduring appeal to individuals and families seeking for communion with their ancestors, bóvedas espirituales embody the juxtaposition of intimacy and prayer, home and memory, hope and future in the Cuban culture.

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\(^{44}\) Literally, spiritual vaults; better translated as spiritual shrines  
\(^{45}\) Translation: “Mommy, I know you like this dish very much.”  
\(^{46}\) Translation: “Grandma, this is for you.”
This second chapter aims to describe bóvedas espirituales, specifically regarding their sources, syncretic processes at work and ethnographic foundations in the current practice of Cuban family religions. Firstly, I will provide a comprehensive ethnographic description of bóvedas espirituales. Secondly, I will highlight the category of syncretism and emphasize its non-verificationist qualities, how it refers more to processes of interpretation and enactment than to finished symbols, narrative and practices, resulting from genealogical borrowings found in both Cuban folk religions and family religions. Thirdly, I will describe essential elements from the preceding religious systems which have influenced Cuban folk religions, specifically the practices of Cuban family religions. Ultimately, I will argue that bóvedas espirituales are emblematic forms of Cuban family religions.

2.1 Definition and Description

The field research supporting my observations about bóvedas espirituales dates back to my Master of Theology studies, as I researched home-based forms of religious practice concerned with ancestors.47 Throughout the interviews informing that research, respondents consistently referred to their spiritual shrines as being central to their religious practice in the home as well as a focal point of prayer for, and communion with, their ancestors.

At that point, I was methodologically more concerned for establishing hermeneutical links between these forms of family religions and established forms of religious practice within the

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Episcopal Church of Cuba, and this verificationist approach is reflected in both the methodology employed and the results obtained after this research. Despite such methodological shortcomings, my research then did reflect the prevalence of the practice of bóvedas espirituales among members of different parishes of the Episcopal Church of Cuba who also sustained regular religious practices in the home. It also described some of the ritual strategies adopted by practitioners as well as some of the spatial, bodily disciplines adopted by those keeping spiritual shrines. Because of the seeming sufficiency of these two lines of analysis, at least for the goals established for this thesis paper, my appeal to the results obtained out of that field research will be circumscribed to providing, firstly, a comprehensive description of spiritual shrines and, secondly, an accompanying analysis of the bodily and spatial disciplines thereby adopted by practitioners.

For the purpose of collecting data, I adopted the method of closed interview, as a substitute for a continued observation of family religious practices. An identical line of questioning was presented to each of nine individuals, all members of the Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba and residing in four distinct parts of the country. As result of these interviews, certain practices or patterns of practice were identified, among which was prominent the frequent use of bóvedas espirituales. A majority of the bóvedas espirituales observed were not part of a committed practice of Folk Catholicism, Santería or Espiritismo, despite the fact that they embodied the influence of narrative and ritual interplays between all these forms of Cuban folk religions. Bóvedas are emblematic forms of Cuban family religions and, similar to Cuban folk religions, they can be better discerned by appealing to the category of syncretism. That is, the most common religious practices of Cubans is not strictly Roman Catholic, Santería or Spiritist, although they include elements popularized by, and interrelated to, all of these traditions. Cuban folk religions express
themselves with relative autonomy of these more or less systematically and hierarchically organized forms of religion, and continually provide opportunities for resolving practical problems. These practices are externalized through prayers (either spontaneous or read), devotional cards or printouts, containers with holy water and spatial enactments of religious concerns and rituals. Most notably, Cuban family religions are archetypically enacted through bóvedas espirituales.

In the life of the home, bóvedas espirituales serve as domestic loci of religious, mythical and biographical representations, as tools of embodying the memory of the family ancestors and other mythical ancestral figures. In both their design and use, bóvedas espirituales are concerned with storing and displaying objects and artefacts of religious meaning and ritual usage, existentially and experientially relevant to those who own and care for each shrine. Bóvedas espirituales are intimate physical enactments of religious interpretations and practices, and can be best accounted for when approached as religious practices for the everyday life in the family home, the quotidian and domestic. The location of a bóveda espiritual can vary and generally falls to the quietest and cleanest rooms of the house, with the exception of bedrooms. While the ideal practice is to dedicate a whole room to a bóveda, the realities of the overall Cuban housing situation usually make it that a bóveda is instead kept in a corner of a quiet and clean room. The members of the family are expected to recognize and display care towards a bóveda, by never touching or moving it, avoiding loud conversations in its vicinity, as well as refraining from eating, engaging in sexual or business-like activities.

From a physical point of view bóveda espiritual resembles a vertical, altar-like structure, usually divided into two or more shelves, or planes of representation. Because of this shape, a bóveda might resemble a group of randomly placed glasses filled with water (known as asistencias),

pictures, flowers and other religious objects, often found in any corner of just about any room in a house. Nevertheless, the disposition and concentration of objects in a bóveda symbolize the personal and emotional connections which have been re-presented through the means of iconography, offerings and prayer.

In most cases, a bóveda rests on a rectangular, wooden table of variable sizes, covered with a white cloth, usually understood to represent the different planes of existence of both mythical and hereditary ancestors. On this white cloth, there are placed usually six glasses filled with water, which are equally distributed on either side of the table with one larger wine glass placed at the centre, also filled with water. While each glass is meant to represent and honour a different supernatural entity, be it an orisha, a mythical, dead character or or deceased relatives or friends, the larger wine glass filled with water stands for, essentially, the Godhead, el Santísimo, or the Holy of Holies. There is usually a candle by this larger glass, which is lit whenever the practitioner interacts with the bóveda. Other elements, usually located in a balanced disposition at either side, include photographs of ancestors, Roman Catholic prayer cards as well as one or more vases with flowers in white colour whenever possible. Depending on the circumstances, there might be more personal items, from cigars, eyeglasses and rosaries to a wrist watch. At the top of most bóvedas espirituales, a crucifix can be found, serving as spatial focus for the rest of the elements. In some cases, the crucifix is surrounded by smaller adornments with origins in folk Catholicism, as in the case of Passion Sunday palms, shaped into symbols of religious meaning.

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48 Both the number, disposition and use of these glasses is subject to factors of context and purpose of the religious action.
Bóvedas espirituales can also be described through the process of discursive and symbolic exchange in which its practitioners engage, borrowing fragments of preceding religious systems as well as from their wider culture. In what follows I will first inform my appeal to the category of syncretism, to then provide a brief genealogy of these preceding religious systems, describing how they travelled and eventually found themselves embedded in the Cuban culture. The combined appeal to these two descriptions seeks to further contextualize the historical background of bóvedas espirituales within the Cuban religious panorama.

2.2 Syncretism and Religious Practice in Cuba

Based on a Cuban government survey, carried out throughout the past decade, there are more than seventy religious groups or denominations found in Cuba, Christian or otherwise.\textsuperscript{50} These are, of course, groups or traditions which have developed to a certain point of structural organization and social visibility. Such accounting, however, prevents the consideration of any of the local, less structurally developed or socially visible religious traditions which can be found throughout the country – the grassroots of Cuban folk religion. This falls in line with the most recurring description of Cuban folk religious practice as being predominantly diffused.\textsuperscript{51} An average practitioner of Cuban folk religions, while engaged in religious discourse and rituals which draw from preceding religious traditions (even non-religious elements and culture) would attach himself or herself to none. Rather, a typical practitioner would combine various elements from different traditions in search for what is religiously meaningful and locally sensible in

his/her own circumstances. These types of religious speech, ritual and belief have been regularly referred to as ‘syncretic,’ with relative success in conveying the complexity of the cultural processes involved in each case.

The term ‘syncretism’ is by all accounts first registered in Plutarch’s *Moralia* under a rather positive light.\(^{52}\) However, the term was eventually brought into embodying negative connotations as early as the seventeenth century, for example during “the syncretistic controversies”\(^{53}\) to describe the upcoming theological chaos resulting from the proposed reunion of Reformed churches. Such dismissive perceptions of syncretism were to remain in full force throughout the already ongoing colonialist expansion into the New World and to one or another degree, extend into our present time, to eventually outgrow the theological debates of the seventeenth century and go on to influence the field of Anthropologies as well.

The genealogies of syncretism and alternative categories (*creole*, melting pot, hybridization) have been frequently challenged by scholars from different angles and historical periods.\(^{54}\) I have chosen to refer to syncretism as a comprehensive category of processes for cultural mixture, as it is the least ideologically charged of all the available categories and the most helpful operational term for representing and speaking to these processes.\(^{55}\) In this thesis, I will be using the term in the original double-meaning found in Greek, *sincretismós*, referring to dynamics of fusion, and strategic alliance. These two processes describe the dialogical nature of practices undertaken by

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\(^{55}\) Cultures are by their very definition historically determined and instinctively inclined towards inter-mixture with other cultures. In this same line of reasoning, cultures in fact require syncretism for their very being and subsistence: syncretism enables cultures, or subjects and communities within those cultures, to assert themselves, almost always within the constraints and possibilities of historical, geographical circumstances.
the folk religion practitioners as they combine dissimilar (to one or another degree) elements from two or more religious traditions. In turn, these borrowings are enacted through visual representation, textual and symbolic narratives and ritual performance.

Syncretism, however, speaks more to the nature of cultural processes, rather than just to a moment in time; it points to changes pertaining discernment, engagement and mixture, rather than just the materially ephemeral ritual evidences. Religious syncretism can be best seen as describing a double-process for selecting those elements which integrate the symbolic and discursive world of folk religions (from either established religious systems or family traditions) and shaping how these elements interact with, and complement, those already present. Syncretism refers to the dynamics involved in continual cultural processes of re-interpretation, by which old meanings are ascribed to new elements, thereby changing the cultural meaning of the old forms and updating them through contemporary narrative and practice.

Don Fernando Ortiz, eminent Cuban ethnologist, made a distinct contribution to global scholarship concerned with processes of cultural blending. Seeking to emphasize the gradual nature of the syncretic processes at work in the shaping of the Cuban culture, Ortiz developed the concept of transculturation.\(^{56}\) This concept entails the consideration of both the processes of cultural acquisition and loss, of acculturation (Malinowski) and de-culturation, “… to apprehend at once the destructive and constructive moments in histories affected by colonialism and imperialism.”\(^{57}\) For contexts in which are missing any signs of aboriginal culture and heritage,

\(^{57}\) Fernando Coronil, *Introduction* in Ortiz, Fernando, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Trans. Harriet de Onis, 1995), xv. The conceptual framework around ‘transculturation’ has been further developed in contexts beyond that of Cuba, and in consequence it has been criticized, for example, in its seeming homogenizing assumptions about regional and local forms of culture, religion, and language. For a different take on transculturation, see Mauricio A. Font, Alfonso W. Quiroz, eds., *Cuban Counterpoints: The Legacy of Fernando Ortiz*, Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005, specifically sections 5, Rafael Rojas’ *Transculturation and Nationalism* (61-72); Fernando Coronil’s *Transcultural Anthropology in the Americas (with an accent)* The Uses of
the question of either historical or cultural originality can only refer to historically determined processes of cultural mixture. Ortiz established this conceptual ground as a cultural equalizer for traditions which are hierarchically unequal. His interpretation was a highly positive, even celebratory, perception of syncretism, a means of affirmation for both the uniqueness and universality of Cuban cultural traits.

2.3 Preceding Religious Traditions in Cuba

In Cuban family religions, and emblematically so in bóvedas espirituales, there is evidence of at least three distinct, autonomous religious traditions which have been subjected by practitioners to concrete, persistent processes of interpretation, mutual exchange and re-formulation. In this section, I will provide, first, a brief genealogy of Cuban folk Catholicism, which finds its earliest origin in the Spanish folk Christian practices first arrived with the ‘discoverers of the New World’ in late fifteenth century. Secondly, I will highlight relevant religious systems of African origin, emblematically Regla Ocha. Thirdly, I will discuss Espiritismo, a Cuban iteration of the legacy of nineteenth century Frenchman Allan Kardec and the Spiritist traditions of the twentieth century United States of America.

The study of the contents of these religious systems sheds light on why and how some of the elements commonly found in Cuban folk religions came to be so. This study alone, however, could not claim to engage the whole ethnological or even theological import of the actuality of Cuban family religions. To ground either analysis of folk religions solely on the contents of these

_Fernando Ortiz,_ 139-154, and 14, Patricia Catoira’s _Transculturation a la Ajiaco: A Recipe for Modernity_ (181-192).
systems would risk the adoption of verificationist strategies, with corresponding disruption in content and methodology to follow. Hence, these descriptions will be organized around historical examples illustrating the syncretic dynamics at work, the mutual borrowings that have taken place between these religious systems and the wider Cuban culture at specific points in Cuban history. Specifically, I will also emphasize those syncretic dynamics contesting imposed religious symbols and discourses with hermeneutical creativity which engenders ritual subversion.

While archeological and ethnographic studies have revealed many details of the religions of the pre-Columbian aboriginal peoples of Cuba, there is only so much current material evidence of their enduring presence within the Cuban religious panorama. More relevant to my argument, however, is the discerned patterns of cultural exchange, the multiple and multi-layered cultural give-and-take between different ethnic groups populating the Antilles:

(...) the ancient history of the Caribbean begins with early inhabitants consisting of hunting-gathering groups, probably from multiple origins. Later, groups from South America with ceramic and horticultural skills began to migrate to the Lesser Antilles and Puerto Rico, possibly interacting biologically, socially, and culturally with the previous Archaic populations. although it is poorly understood, this interaction was probably intense and continuous, leading eventually to a process of creolization and an increase in cultural diversity throughout the Caribbean archipelago and even within single islands. Many of these processes and cultural characteristics were also present in the late pre-Columbian times.

Though Columbus touched on Cuban shores as early as October 28, 1492, it was not until 1511 that Diego Velazquez, commissioned by Christopher’s brother, Diego Columbus, began in earnest the Spanish colonization of the Cuban archipelago. At this point, the native populations

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there had endured almost two decades of colonial presence, and at a high price. European illnesses, for some of which the natives had no adequate genetic or clinical responses, as well as sub-human treatment at the hands of the conquerors along with self-immolation, decimated the Cuban native populations almost to the point of demographic disappearance. To this day, there are persistent assertions, even within scholarly circles and the general historical literature, that the Cuban native populations had effectively been wiped out by the end of the *Conquista* period.\(^{60}\) There remained, however, identifiable, quantitatively significant native communities which went on to coexist and completely integrate with Cuban black and white *criollos*, eventually to remain mostly in rural areas and eventually giving way to the *guajiro* culture.\(^{61}\)

The first religious tradition then present in Cuba and which still persists as a discernible whole is Roman Catholicism, brought by the Spanish colonizers beginning in late 15\(^{th}\) century. Their forms of religious narrative, ritual and worldview were, on the one hand, essentially consistent with the institutional versions of Christianity of the time and on the other, merged with culturally-embedded religious perceptions and practices.\(^{62}\) If the European commercial enterprise of discovery and colonization was firmly rooted in the early modern spirit that would precede the Renaissance, the Roman Catholicism brought to the Americas was medieval throughout. It was filled with local canons of narrative and ritual, mythical recreations of the traditions fostered by Christian churches, and plain deviations from even the most generous Christian orthodoxy of the time. Among these, it is worth emphasizing the widespread systems in place for the devotion to

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\(^{60}\) While the continued existence of several Cuban Native populations appears in the deep scientific record, the assertion of complete extinction of Caribbean natives became commonplace in the academy throughout the twentieth century. See Hugh Thomas. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press), 14.


saints and other supernatural beings, coupled with a sophisticated understanding of the cult of relics and of their place within the economy of salvation as expounded by Christian churches.

However, and perhaps more importantly, this was a form of Christianity which had just undergone the *Reconquista* years, and now found itself at the end of nearly a millennium of the *Al-Andalus* domination of the Iberian Peninsula, marking thus a significant point in the ongoing and otherwise unavoidable fusion between the Iberian and *Al-Andalus* cultures of the time. As a consequence, the forms of folk Catholicism brought to the Americas by both missionaries and colonizers were neither impervious to external religious and cultural influences nor devoid of strategies for actively engaging in cultural and religious syncretism. However, the experiences of the *Reconquista* also provided the triumphant Spaniards with very dysfunctional cultural instincts, out of which the colonizers, more often than not, engaged the people they found in ‘the New World’: the ‘Other’ was to be feared, deceived, submitted and, whenever possible, made into the subject of a profitable contest.

Cuban native populations lasted little more than half a century after the arrival of 1492, before their destruction as cultures and peoples and eventual near-disappearance from the Cuban ethnographic panorama. Likely as a consequence of this phenomenon, there is very little evidence of any colonial borrowings from the Cuban native cultures and religions, except for geographical names, gastronomic traditions and very specific linguistic terms. This fast-paced disappearance of Cuban indigenous peoples also meant that the colonial enterprise would have to find slave labor force elsewhere. The arguments for resorting to enslaved Africans instead were so persuasive then that even Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, otherwise a zealous protector of
aboriginal peoples, acquiesced to the new design.\(^6^3\) The African slave trade into the Americas, and specifically Cuba, also brought about multi-layered, persistent cultural exchanges between the cultures and even religions of Spanish colonizers and enslaved Africans. These exchanges first took place and saw their main dynamics tested and developed shortly after the onset of the slave trade, when the populations of enslaved Africans in Cuba had not reached the peaks they would during the sugar bonanza of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Some of these exchanges, however, occurred under rather unexpected circumstances. For example, in the case of the Cuban *cabildos de nación*,\(^6^4\) or associations of mutual help for enslaved Africans, each integrated by members of one specific ethnic group, which began to appear by the end of the 1570s, duly tolerated and even encouraged by the Spanish authorities. This colonial strategy may have been at least partly determined by the fact that slaves owners were mandated by law to baptize and educate the enslaved Africans in the (Roman Catholic) Christian faith. Cuban *cabildos* were essentially modelled after the *cofradias* or confraternities found in Seville since the fourteenth century, and both were organized around the devotion to specific Christian saints within the Western, Roman Catholic tradition. Just as the *cofradias* from Seville, Cuban *cabildos* retained a remarkable degree of autonomy and, while originally meant to serve as a form of controlling the cultural penetration of the African slave populations in Cuba, *cabildos* soon became extraordinary reserves of cultural wealth, language, religion and overall a safe space for enslaved Africans to affirm their identities and, in the process, contest and subvert

\(^{63}\) After seeing this enterprise at work, he would remove his support and in fact adopt a very critical attitude of slavery: Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, *Bartolome de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work*, Dekaib, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971, 62.

the regime of power responsible for their loss of physical freedoms and uprooting from their respective lands of origin.

*Cabildos* also provided public, legally-sanctioned spaces for some of the most festive and ritually powerful elements of the cultures and religions of enslaved African, thus helping to preserve, nurture and pass down their cultural heritage to their descendants and eventually blend into the wider Cuban culture. They constituted a public and evolving platform for the enslaved Africans’ borrowings of multiple elements of the Spanish culture and forms of religious belief and practice. One of the most public privileges enjoyed by the *cabildos* involved the right to host festivities and even reasonably spectacular processions, as long as these coincided with important feasts on the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church and most emblematically that of the Christian saint naming each individual *cabildo*.

It is perhaps at this point that enslaved Africans in Cuba further developed hermeneutical methodologies which have been categorized under the “Principle of Multiple Representation.” Proposed by Cuban ethnographer James Figarola, it originally referred to “the acceptation of the *orisha* in its totality, whether by its external manifestation (…) or its name, narrative patterns and objective embodiments.”65 This principle describes the hermeneutic devices adopted by populations of enslaved Africans in Cuba, who accepted and appealed to Christian, Roman Catholic narratives and symbols in order to publicly identify their own, ethnically distinctive religious discourses and rituals.66 They eventually adopted cosmologies in which narratives, rituals and supernatural beings originating in both their own religious traditions and in the Roman Catholicism of their white owners were culturally and narratively collapsed into one distinct ritual, symbol or supernatural being. While its external features deemed it acceptable by

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66 Ibid.
the established religious authorities, the resulting symbiotic religious devices also concealed deeply dialogically invested extensions into beliefs and practices originating in their own African contexts, which in fact contested the essence of those same authorities. ‘Multiple representation’ refers to and describes the processes of cultural translation, for example, accomplished by the fusion and convergence of hagiographies of Christian saints and Yoruba patakies, or mythical narratives about the orishas, as well as by the combined use of images, objects and colours which would signify either the Christian saint and/or the Yoruba orisha and thus create a dual appeal to otherwise competing narrative and ritual canons. The essential elements to Lachatañeré’s ‘Principle of Multiple Representation’ still describe ongoing, every-day events of religious practice in which Cuban religious practitioners discern and organize a plurality of distinct religious forms into more or less permanent systems of narrative and ritual. This is certainly the case with Cuban family religions and specifically with the practice of bóvedas espirituales. For example, a practitioner’s identification and appeal to characters represented in the bóveda is usually elastic enough to switch at will from Regla Ocha to folk Catholicism canons: a statue or devotional printout depicting the Virgen de la Caridad, Roman Catholic patroness of Cuba, might also be identified by the practitioner as Oshun, Yoruba orisha alleged to symbolize love and beauty and traditionally syncretised by practitioners of Cuban folk religions with Virgen de la Caridad.  

The Regla Ocha or Santería, terms most often used for describing the Lucumí religious cult of Yoruba origin arrived in Cuba in the early times of African slavery in the country and is the most extensively practised of the African religious systems in Cuba. The meaning of the term varies depending on the work, author and historical period involved. Lachatañeré, with obvious

68 Alberto Cutié Bressler, Psiquiatría y Religiosidad Popular. (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2001), 32
enthusiasm, describes it as the “religious system of the Afro Cubans.”
Rafael López describes Santeria as “generally speaking, made up of two great, inter-related liturgical sectors, the so-called Regla de Ocha and that relative to the Oracle of Ifá, hence its being appealed to as the religious complex of Ocha-Ifá.” According to Alberto Cutié,

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\text{Regla de Ocha establishes the cult of the Orishas (…) and entails the affirmation of one supreme, uncreated divinity (…) Olordumare, which at the same time gives origin to the numerous orishas (…) with which it is not possible to communicate directly, but through the orishas, ‘roads of Olordumare’}.^{71}
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The central purpose of Yoruba religion is to worship orishas, created by Olordumare to the end of making known in creation his will and essence. Orishas are anthropomorphic personifications of the Ashe, that is, the blood of the life of the cosmos, the power of Olordumare for life, strength and justice, as well as mythical guides and protectors of humankind. It is from Olordumare that everything proceeds, and everything returns to him. He expresses himself in the created world through the strength of Ashe, the absolute ground of reality. Yoruba religion also entails a strong narrative and ritual elaboration around ancestors, and it is possible to detect a twin approach, linguistic and conceptual, in the consulted sources. On the one hand, there are the Egun, ancestors of each family who are venerated in their own altars. It also extends to the local community and more generally to the spirits of the dead. On the other hand, there are the Ikues, or the dead, who are revered and cared for like the orishas, as they are believed to “either protect

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71 Alberto Cutié Bressler, Psiquiatría y Religiosidad Popular. (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2001), 33.
72 Ibid, 21.
73 An earlier iteration of ikues is that of the Iyamis. As opposed to the egun or ancestors, iyamis were thought to be responsible for any breach in the smooth flow of life as commanded by Oloddumare. The equivalent of witches, the cult of Iyamis did not establish itself among enslaved Yorubas and their descendants brought to Cuba.
or bring about misfortune to human beings.”

Although it is common to see the terms *Egun* and *Iku* used indistinctively to refer to the dead, what becomes apparent is an ancestral hierarchical dynamic in which ‘memorable individuals’ of the family or religiously defined, cross-family group, are honoured as *egun*, ancestors, in a precarious hierarchical balance with *orishas* (many of whom evidence their origin in some legendary ancestor) and then the rest of the dead as *ikues*, *los muertos*.

Another perspective particularly pertinent to my thesis has been highlighted by Clara Ajo, concerning at least one worldview which is possible to verify in *Santería*, as symbolized by the *orun* or total universe of the material and spiritual existence, which asserts that “divinities, *orishas* and their *ancestrales* are all in the *òrun*.” But the *òrun* is not a place apart in the great beyond but rather a space that is accessible to all, in a quotidian fashion, rounding up the edges of the historical reality in which their intervention is sought out. Thus, the spatial relations between the living and the dead do not require the overcoming of any dualist frontier but, instead, the participation from the full being and existence is “symbolized by a pumpkin” in which two halves are actually complementary rather than contradictory -- *aiyé*, the space of earthly life, manifesting the physical world, and the *òrun*, space of spiritual life, of ancestors and *orishas*.

These discussions, however, are only confessional expositions of certain aspects of *Yoruba* religion as it evolved in Cuba. Any account of the syncretic processes found in Cuban folk

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75 The disregard of such a nuance is the most likely origin of the otherwise generalized (and mistaken) tendency to consider *orishas* as gods in the strictest theological sense and *Santería*, therefore, as a polytheist religious system.
religious practices and specifically related to family religions and bóvedas espirituales must also consider the borrowings from Roman Catholicism and specifically folk Catholicism, as well as Spiritism. More importantly, it should underscore the processes through which these borrowings have evolved and continue to evolve, specifically those which I have been referring to as of a syncretic nature. Syncretism as a cultural process is characterised by the ability of religious practitioners to reproduce their culture even in conditions of subordination and dependence. This is exemplified in the way bóvedas espirituales were assumed as part of the Santeria practices, borrowed from the incipient Spiritist practice in Cuba.

Espiritismo, a Cuban variation of the Spiritist wave of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, is in fact the religious tradition with the most influence on the practices of Cuban family religions evidenced in the interviews conducted.⁷⁹ Also the most philosophically-invested of these Cuban religious traditions, Espiritismo has greatly contributed to overall Cuban cultural notions about death and the dead. In Spiritism, the categories of existence pre-and post-mortem are fluid and set within a complementary relation, making conceptual room for a very peculiar form of belief in re-incarnation, understood as the only means of overcoming the imperfections of earthly life so the dead might transform into an enlightened spirit. In this sense, and different from other religious expressions, death is interpreted as the way toward spiritual purification and perfection, rather than in terms of eternal, unchangeable post mortem fate. Practitioners of Spiritism assert that, after death, the soul does not dissolve but rather, the perispirit (or astral body) returns to its original state, the world of the spiritual while preserving its individual and unique identity. It is within these conceptions that Spiritism affirms a belief in the possibility of communication between the worlds of the living and the dead, the earthly with the spiritual. In its

⁷⁹ While Santeria is among these traditions the most influent one on Cuba domestic religious practices, the evidence found in my research showed otherwise.
most conventional form, this communication takes place through a medium. However, in most Cuban forms of Spiritism, or Espiritismo, some of this communication is accomplished by means of the bóveda espiritual, or ‘altar espiritista’. After Spiritism was brought to Cuba from Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century, it spread first among white Cuban criollos (eighteenth and nineteenth century-descendants of the colonial ethnic blend) who identified it with modern, liberal thinking, uncommitted to Spanish colonialism, in contrast with Roman Catholicism ideological support of the metropolis, and slavery as its economic foundation.

But there were other ensuing links between slavery and Espiritismo. Even before enslaved Africans began arriving on Cuban shores, having been forced to travel in the bottom of sail ships across the Atlantic in inhumane conditions, they had also been robbed of their freedom to fully act upon their cultural and religious identities. In the case of enslaved Yorubas, a loss with enduring consequences would be that of funeral priests and the rituals only they were traditionally allowed to perform. Their funeral rituals, presided over by a very exclusive caste of priests, were carefully elaborated and informed by arcane, orally transmitted canons. In its original Yoruba form, Egungun, or the set of ritual objects and orders for the cult of the egun, or legendary ancestors, was strictly limited to male ritual celebrants, just as the cult of the Iyamis, or supernatural forces or agents of disruption, was exclusively reserved for women. After having been forced to leave behind their rituals and objects and upon the effective disappearance of their ancestral cults, many Yoruba and their descendants in ‘the New World’ set themselves to find alternatives that would enable the ritual honoring of ancestors. Uprooted, enslaved Africans, even as they approached the Americas, were already struggling with the full implications of these

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losses as many of them died in high seas because of illness, mistreatment, hunger or even suicide, only for the slave masters to have them thrown overboard and into the ocean by their surviving companions of misfortune, who were furthermore unable to provide what their cultural and social assumptions deemed to be the most elementary ritual attention for the dead. Enslaved Africans in Cuba may have later reconstituted, to one or another degree, some of these traditions. However, there has never been a coherent, socially recognized and culturally re-ingrained recovery of Yoruba ritual devices or traditions concerned with death and the dead. This may help to explain the borrowings that some enslaved Yorubas made from the not-so-orthodox religious practices of not a few of their white owners, specifically Espiritismo. The rich, powerful ritual discourse of the Spiritist liturgies, its philosophical provision for existential categories of continuity, return and rebirth, resonated very deeply with enslaved Africans and their descendants. When some Cuban criollos hosted the equivalents of Spiritist séances in their homes, the most colorful practices of their traditions were eventually appropriated by the enslaved Africans serving in the master’s house.

While analysing syncretic processes involved in the conformation of Cuban folk religious practices, I have largely concentrated on the agency of enslaved Africans and their descendants. However, this implies no intentional disregard of the syncretic agency of other social actors (e.g. Spanish colonialists, freed slaves and criollos) who, indeed, participated actively from these syncretic processes, albeit in different capacities. My concern has been, first, to describe these processes in their earliest stages and, second, to argue that, even then, these syncretic processes came to be in contexts where submission was contested with hermeneutical creativity and narrative and ritual subversion. Also, and as I will argue next, drastic social and political changes of the last half of the nineteenth century in Cuba also contributed to both accelerate and diversify
even further these syncretic dynamics, eventually extending them into the wider, ethnically diverse spectrum of the Cuban society of the time and culture as a whole.

The Cuban wars of independence against Spanish colonialism, besides monumental changes and challenges to Cuban economy and political landscape, also brought about a generation of displaced and dismembered families, with many dead to mourn and remember. All of this took place within a wider religious environment marked by both the cultural and political retreat of the Roman Catholic Church and its fast-paced loss of relevance within the Cuban criollo population. This also appears to be the point at which Espiritismo blended more fully into what we now know as Santería. It marked a significant point in the appropriation by Santería practitioners of Spiritist bóvedas espirituales and their eventual iteration as a fundamental element of Cuban folk religious practice. Eventually, bóvedas espirituales would acquire enough phenomenological autonomy to be adopted by religious practitioners even without formal affiliation with Espiritismo or any other religious system or institution, in most if not all cases for the express purpose of cultivating ritual links with ancestors.

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81 It is not too far-fetched to suggest that this fusion owed much to the horrible events of “La Reconcentración de Weyler” (The Reconcentration of Weyler), a military campaign ordered by Valeriano Weyler, then the colonial Spanish authority in Cuba, against campesinos -Cuban farmers- and their families, who had become the lifeline to the mambises or Cuban freedom fighters. Hundreds of thousands were forcibly put into the equivalent of concentration camps and as much as half of them died before the end of the century, when this policy was discontinued. See Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Cuba–España, España–Cuba. Historia común (Barcelona: Grijalbo Mondadori, 1995), 338–339.
2.4 Preliminary Conclusions

The acquisition of, and attention to, a bóveda espiritual is often marked by the implications of the Santeria maxim “el muerto parió al santo”82 which is indistinctively alternated by practitioners with “the dead gave birth to the orisha.” While the ritual attention shown towards saints and other higher supernatural figures is always emphasized, the raison d'être for a bóveda is the ritual attention to the dead. This may also be directed to a deceased person known to the practitioner who had lived, died and worshiped in a way similar to that which the practitioner hopes for himself or herself. For these practitioners the dead are believed to have an enhanced material grasp of the realities of their lives and their challenges.

The folk practice of bóvedas espirituales displays the Yoruba distinction between the mythical dead and the historical dead, although both categories have been extended to characters and people well outside the Yoruba ethnic and even cultural lineages. These processes might account for the seemingly disparate nature of the assortment of pictures of dead relatives, prayer cards showing either saints or one of the several local invocations of the Virgin Mary, and illustrations of legendary dead, as found in different places of hierarchical distinction within the bóveda. Furthermore, the ritual practices involving these visual elements do not take place in a sensory vacuum. They are generally accompanied by the burning of incense, the use of candles, the ringing of bells and, in some cases, puffing of a cigar. These are elements and practices with roots from prior religious traditions. They have been added to bóvedas espirituales not out of some ecumenical sense of syncretistic balance, somehow choosing and picking comparable

82 Translation, “The dead gave birth to the saint.”
amounts of religious content from each tradition, but rather adopted by practitioners in need of aesthetic realisation and ritual complement, usually on a case-by-case basis.

_Bóvedas espirituales_ exemplify on-going syncretic processes involving elements from a variety of religious traditions, specifically from _Santeria, Espiritismo_ and folk Catholicism. I have accounted for some of the elements in these traditions which could have contributed to the shaping and ritual use of _bóvedas espirituales_, as well as for the ways in which the category of syncretism can be applied to discerning the dynamics which have recreated the fusion between elements from these different traditions into the practice of _bóvedas_.

If _bóvedas espirituales_ can be assumed as an emblematic form of Cuban family religious practices, it is possible to establish an _ad hoc_ historiography for the relationship between Christian theologies and folk religious practice. Ultimately, I intend to provide an analytical framework for different forms of folk religious practices, which can be applied to engage in a theological analysis of _bóvedas espirituales_.
Chapter Three

3. Christian Theologies and *Bóvedas Espirituales*

Folk religions have flourished in households throughout Cuba, yet they remain largely overlooked or ignored by the traditional, institutional Christian religion.\(^{83}\) This is not to say that no attention has been given to folk religions but rather that they generally have not been considered as religiously or theologically legitimate or compatible with the dominant religious traditions in Cuba. In this chapter, I begin with a preliminary definition of *folk religions* as those socialized religious expressions which, while essentially independent from prior religious traditions, still reflect elements from preceding, multiple traditions of narrative and ritual. Folk religions are culturally dense in that they gather and give witness to traits and features of the larger cultural and social milieu. Practitioners of folk religions seek to discern the presences, actions and wills of the divine through a mix of culturally-embedded media and support for ritual discourse and action. I have adopted the category of ‘folk religion’ among a plethora of terms available in the existing literature, as it enables both an academically operational description of the general phenomena at hand as well as an implicit affirmation of their cultural embeddedness, multiplicity, diversity and plasticity of form and discourses, including the essentially non-institutional character of their genesis and development as religious phenomena.

\(^{83}\) In what follows, ‘institutional religion’ is meant to refer to the generality of institutionalized Christian churches. Christian Parker, for example, defines ‘official religion’ as “the religion of the elite, or priestly religion” in his *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996. This chapter will elaborate on both popular and official notions of religious practice in the works of Latin American liberation theologians.
In her *Literary Review* of the subject of ‘popular religion’, published in the *Journal of Iberian and American Studies* in 2001, Maria Teresa Dawson develops a very helpful taxonomic discussion around the ‘popular’ and ‘official’ dualistic constructs that have permeated approaches to non institutional forms of religious expression, a two-tier system that she qualifies as having been “one of [the] most important traditions” in religious studies, overall. Dawson also points out the lack of operational ethnographic discussions of the specificity of that context in which that which is being spoken of or written about as either ‘religion’, ‘popular’ or (even less) ‘official’ religion -or religions- can be verified. In the background, she also reports as missing the sense that, in Isambert’s words, the issue is not “what *is* popular religion, but what conceptualization is more fruitful for empirical research.” Addressing this prevalent lack of attention to the specific contextual realities within which popular religions are found in academic discourse, Dawson writes:

> It is important to moderate these descriptions and characterizations of popular religion. Either referring to it in the context of the structural distribution of power at a determinate time in history, or relating to it to superstitions of the illiterate, these definitions include many different phenomena in one category without placing them in a cultural context (…) Popular religion should no more be assumed to consist of a ragbag collection of discrete beliefs and practices than as a diluted or impoverished version of erudite religion. Rather, it should be at least considered that popular religion is a set of perceptions and practices representing the sacred that lies at the heart of a coherent culture –the latter being understood in terms made familiar by Clifford Geertz”.

Also, Eloisa Martin, in the process of historically reviewing the literature on the subject of popular religion, classifies the diverse theoretical constructs of the ‘popular’ in popular religion

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85 Ibid.
86 “The concept of culture I espouse (…) is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after”. (Geertz 973: 4-5)
87 Ibid., 112.
within three distinct groups or argumentative tendencies (a *Roman* Catholic matrix, a *social/economic deprivation* matrix, and an *alternative epistemology* matrix). Martin’s analysis, although addressing the Argentinean scholarship on the subject, is deemed here as comprehensively representative of the dynamics of the academic argument (theological argument, even) about non-institutional forms of religion in the whole of Latin America. In advancing this classification, Martin also makes the very valuable caveat that:

> Despite the fact the varied perspectives mentioned were important at different moments, this is not an ‘evolutionary’ classification of the knowledge tradition –not because all of them coexist today, but because, especially in ethnographic works, the contributions of the authors are often fundamental to our understanding of the contemporary situation.

One other element that Eloisa Martin brings afresh to this argument, and the reason why her reflections are deemed so relevant to my research, is her offer of a conceptually critical approach to the issue by means of problematizing the use of the term ‘religion’ itself, when speaking / arguing about ‘popular religions’. Martin’s ‘fourth perspective’ seeks to incorporate the analytical, critical currency of anthropological disciplines of study and research by, precisely, capitalizing on the operational ability of these disciplines for addressing the actual, present reality (expressed in a multiplicity of realities) of religions –for intentionally engaging an emic-gear approach to religious events, narratives and objects. But, first and foremost, this ‘fourth perspective’ enables the discernment of what is the form of religious life, speech, action, habits and patterns to be found in each context and, more specifically, that of ‘working class men and women’ (Ibid. 281), whose religious practices, when acknowledged as a form of specificity of

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89 Ibid., 275.
90 Ibid., 281.
‘the sacred’, reveal the coexistence (and flexibility) of what traditional (‘former’) scholarship has separated as ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’.

Echoing the main methodological motivations for Dawson’s insistence on a proper conceptualization of ‘religion’, Martin employs this argument to return our attention to the need for taxonomic precision, specifically in her detailing of a contextualized understanding of the ‘sacred’, which she here defines also as “a differential texture of the inhabited world”91, which is activated by circumstances external to its own being ‘sacred.

In our particular case, what is sought is a theologically comprehensive way to engage forms of domestic religion, specifically as they have been and can be observed in Cuba, by deploying both theological and anthropological tools of research and argument. There are no known precedents to this line of inquiry, with ‘domestic religion’ barely appearing on the radar of Cuban sociological, ethnological, anthropological or even theological scholarly interest. The very issue of domestic religion is, if at all, only briefly, casually referenced by scholarly works that focus concerned with non-institutional religious forms in Cuba, focusing instead on either Cuban systemic forms of religious belief and practice or forms of Roman Catholic devotionalism that have found echoes in these systemic forms. Because of the novelty of an approach to domestic religiosities in Cuba, our goal is to engage their reality with a renewed understanding of the categories of religious experience and sacred space, grounded in contemporary scholarship in both Anthropology of Religion and Systematic Theology, with the purposes of discerning a coherent theological approach that theological elucidation in sight. In this chapter, I discuss thematic lines of argument on folk religions developed by Latin American theologians. I will then briefly describe three theoretical developments relevant to my thesis. The first theme

91 Ibid.
emphasizes the role of the margins as primordial Christian theological loci. The second theme focuses on the ‘official vs. folk’ debate in religious practice. The final theme focuses on alternative strategies for the construction of knowledge among practitioners of folk religions, specifically in regards to ritual agency and narrative framework. Ultimately, I seek to provide systematic theological content to the methodology of studying bóvedas espirituales which will be later developed in my thesis, as well as clarification of key taxonomies for my research methodology.

3.1 Existing Scholarship on Folk Religions

While there is no shortage of academic literature that focuses on folk religions, its theological portion remains comparatively slim and persistently verificationist in its approach. Some studies, statements and pastoral responses produced by institutional churches have often presented folk religions with demands of confessional and dogmatic compliance, as I have argued in the Introduction to this thesis when informing my appeal to the category and perpetual temptation of studies of religion which are verificationist methodologies. Other academic works have fallen prey to either dismissing or reifying folk religions, disregarding the overall cultural realities and processes which contribute to both their shaping and interpretation. Both of these two approaches essentially impoverish the theological subjects of folk religions and their strategies for religious practice and discourse.

The general Cuban bibliography on folk religions illustrates the struggle of Cuban scholarship

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92 For a brief and comprehensive review of the general scholarly literature on folk religions, also see Paul Vanderwood, “Religion: Official, Popular and otherwise,” Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos 16:2 (Summer 2000).
with challenges commonly found in other academic circles—briefly put, the tension between the anthropological impoverishment of the subjects of folk religions and the ethnographically-supported reification of these folk religions. The Cuban theological scholarship on this topic (aside from that which can be attributed to the discursive dynamics of power embraced by institutional Churches there) is very sparse and at a very early stage of engagement with the post-colonial demands presented to theological methodology. My own previous studies, which focused on ancestors and related family forms of religious practice, were limited because they lacked critical and cross-disciplinary approaches. My Master’s thesis attempted to reconcile folk religious practices and beliefs with established doctrines and liturgies of the institutional churches. Specifically, it focused on practices concerning the dead and the doctrinal and liturgical expressions of the Communion of Saints, as held by the Episcopal Church of Cuba. While my previous incursions on this subject have not been comprehensive, they have encouraged me to pursue alternative strands for a more contextualized and coherent methodology and resulting reflection about folk religions. To this date, a fair number of theologians and other researchers have taken more progressive stances regarding folk religions. Specifically, liberation theologies in Latin America constitute a theological tradition with the closest ethnographic, historical and cultural proximity to those of Cuban folk religious practice. Also, as a distinctive group of theological scholars, liberation theologians have approached the subject of folk religions with the most imagination and a generous recognition of the cultural agency of its practitioners.

If religions can be said to be specific moments of culture, religious practices can be then

understood as specific forms of cultural practice.\(^{95}\) In this same vein of reasoning, folk religions, or folk religious practices, could be described as specific, marginal forms of religious cultural practice, provided that the category and contents of culture are being discerned as elaborated and acted upon from the perspective of the margins and marginalized cultural subjects. Folk religions are culturally relevant and independent expressions of socialized religious desires. Their specificity goes beyond the claims of political legitimacy and representativeness of socially sanctioned forms of culture. In fact, folk religions are better addressed within the wider context of the popular culture of Latin America.\(^{96}\) Popular culture is only such when distinguished from “the transnational or imperial culture, from the national culture, the culture of dominant classes, the culture of the masses.”\(^{97}\) Rather than showing a dominating pattern or a compulsive paradigm, Latin American folk religions are contextually specific moments of popular cultures, meant to address the ultimate meaning of existence. Folk religions are, then, moments of popular cultures which can be studied through a theoretical lens, mainly for the sake of the incarnational imperatives necessary to any Christian theological methodology.

### 3.2 Three Themes of Analysis of Folk Religions

By the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, Latin American liberation theologies were visibly established in the regional academia and further recognized as a discernible theological

\(^{95}\) Orlando Espín argues that there is no such thing as a “cultural Christianity”. He further argues that “the way a people experientially perceive the love of God, and the way they respond to it, will always be cultural”. Roberto Goizueta ed. *We are people! Initiatives in Hispanic American theology.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 145.

\(^{96}\) Enrique Dussel, “Hipótesis fundamentales,” in Karl Kohut and Albert Meyers eds. *Religiosidad Popular en América Latina.* (Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 1988), 13. He proceeds to discuss the category of culture: “We do not understand ‘culture’ as a supra-structural or ideological level (…) culture indicates a system of practices (…) that determine the subjectivity (individual or social) (…) Culture is both the totality of objects (material culture) in the world as well as totality of meaning (spiritual culture) being carried on by subjects (individuals, groups.)

\(^{97}\) *Ibid.* 17.
tradition. Their claims and methodologies have been determined by the realities of secularism, urbanization, concentration of wealth, the Westernization of the economy and, consequently, have influenced the culture and social capital as a whole. Liberation theologians have responded to these realities with dynamic re-conceptualization of their theological methodologies. They have also challenged their own traditions to be up to date with postcolonial realities, actualizing concepts and frameworks of analysis that have proven viable with the changing times. Most importantly, liberation theologians have been at the forefront in the theological engagement with folk religions. Such engagement stemmed mainly from their vocational interest. In their attempt to discern what the faith of the people could offer to the struggle for liberation, the liberation theologians had a limited methodological selection except for folk religions in terms of holders and developers of the language and symbolic worlds relevant to the people.98

Nevertheless, for many years, it was an accepted theological wisdom to denigrate folk religions, specifically by implying that these were rudimentary forms of religious behaviour to be soon replaced by the more enlightened understandings of the Gospel.99 Retrieving a popular story as a source for theological reflection may not be universally accepted – has it been generally uncommon for theologians to assume any kind of normalcy, let alone attributing theological pertinence to an expression of popular faith.100 Partly as a consequence of this, some of the early interest on folk religions among liberation theologians leaned towards a negative and critical

98 Gustavo Gutiérrez, Teología de la Liberación (Salamanca:Sigueme,1974), 102. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Prologue” in Diego Irarrázaval, Religión del Pobre y Liberación en Chimbote, Lima: CEP, 1978. Gutiérrez asserts that “folk religion and Liberation Theology converge in their ‘capacity to humanize and to liberate social and cultural conditions.’ This claim was challenged some twenty years later by Orlando Espín: “Theologians have usually avoided the study of Popular Religion, preferring to leave the field to anthropologists and other social scientists. Even liberation theologies have tended to downplay Popular Religion’s role in the church” in Orlando Espín, “Tradition and Popular Religion,” in Arturo J. Bañuelas ed. Mestizo Christianity. (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 148.
understanding, perhaps inspired by the preceding liberal and contemporary Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to the question of religion itself. The character and channels of expression for folk religions were thus perceived as articulations of superstitions and as faith manipulated by oppressive powers as a means of mass control. Hence, in the early times of liberation theologies, there were obviously critical, almost antagonistic attitudes, held by liberation theologians towards folk religions, along with a dismissive stand towards any potential liberation value to be found in them. In fact, some even felt that folk religions were to be surpassed in order for their practitioners to embrace a more ‘adult’ faith. 101 There are, however, specific thematic traits which can be discerned in the works of several of these liberation theologians. As part of the constructive engagement of Latin American liberation theologies with folk religions, these are analytical, methodological clues which can further clarify my own analysis of Cuban folk religions and, specifically, family religions.

3.3 Margins as Centers

The concept of margins is fundamental to all aspects of the work of Latin American liberation theologians, who have generally argued that the subject of folk religions is to be found, more

101 Roberto Goizueta succinctly explains the philosophical argument in point: “insofar as it adopted the specifically Marxian, modern notion of praxis, liberation theology assimilated Marx’s instrumentalist anthropology, wherein the human person is viewed as homo faber; to be a human being is to be engaged in the transformation of society, to become an agent of change. Since popular religion and, much less, play or celebration do not involve direct action for change, these were, to some extent, ignored in early liberation theology literature (with some notable exceptions). At the very least, these forms of action were given comparatively little attention,” as seen in Roberto S. Goizueta, “Fiesta: life in the subjunctive,” in Orlando O. Espin and Miguel H. Diaz, From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 88.
often than not, in the oppressed and the poor. As liberation theologians contend, these are primordial subjects of theological reflection which speak to the redeeming presence of Christ, now and in each of their ‘here and nows.’ Some liberation theologians, however, while recognizing the importance of folk religions as frequently identifiable with the poor, actually regretted how these religions pose obstacles to the poor’s own liberation, a form of “substitute satisfaction” in the place of historical change. In this view, folk religions have absorbed whole elements of the narratives and dynamics –even in a ritual fashion- of inequality and dehumanization, making themselves available for manipulation by ruling classes, intent on perpetuating this unjust state of affairs. Other theologians of this same tradition have instead engaged the complexity of forms, discourses and social impact of folk religions, discerning them as both determined by the context of oppression and dehumanization and promising discourses and practices that speak to liberation. It is in the reality of those practices, in their quotidian, interweaved character to ordinary life, that this approach serves as an effective source of theological reflection and action -- however ‘confined’ to the realm of the ritual and the private. Folk religion, as seen from this perspective, could either be “alienating or liberating” based on the historical context and the role played by the popular sectors.

104 “The poor, in Latin American reality, constitute an oppressed and believing people. In being oppressed, in its religiosity there are alienating elements that impede the way to liberty. The powers of domination penetrate and mold its religious vitality. But in the Christianity of the oppressed there are also dimensions of resistance and protest”. Diego Irarrázaval, *Religión del Pobre y Liberación en Chimbote*, Lima: CEP, 1978.
105 Candelaria, *op. cit*. Segundo Galilea summarized the issue thus: The second challenge I see at the level of... popular Catholicism. The question is how to recuperate Christian values which are in the depths of popular Catholicism wrapped up in alienating attitudes, feelings, customs, and rites. How to purify what is Christian so that it may come to be a liberating force which will take its place with authenticity in the process of liberation. A grave challenge, because of the difficulty of the task and because of its utter importance for the Latin American Church, given the great proportion of Christians who are in this popular Catholicism. Segundo Galilea, “Crisis y renovación de la fe,” *Misión abierta* 89 (Fall 1972): 486-87. The first challenge is the problem of enabling the churches in
Enrique Dussel, in his careful analysis of Latin American folk religions, employs a similar approach. However, when describing the ‘ethos’ of folk religions, he uses rather broad argumental strokes to show that its practitioners tend to have a passive and tragic attitude on the issues of existence, as well as personal, historical and social matters. He notes that “a certain theology of submission and resignation tints it all (…) everything makes sense for folk religion but (…) sometimes it is also the product of the introjection of the dominating ideology over the dominated.” In this same article, Dussel explicitly addresses the conundrum of the liberation/oppressive potentialities of folk religions. He points out that, on the one hand, everything is sacred for the oppressed peoples of Latin America and, with this, their histories (personal, national, community) are pushed to the sidelines of such a sacred cosmos, making these histories, in fact, socially irrelevant. This dismissal of the historical character of people’s existences only asserts religiously socialized instincts and narratives to be manipulated by oppressing groups and individuals. As for the liberationist potential of folk religions, Dussel only hesitantly advances that, just as folk religion could be, on the one hand, “the introjection in the oppressed of the ideology of the oppressor,” it can also be “the motivation for acts of liberation, of change, propelling a heroic, collective enthusiasm.” Furthermore, it must be emphasized that, more often than not, folk religions can be shown to be characterised by a double marginalization process. Firstly, they are marginalized in their subjects, who are more often than not within the least affluent social sectors. Secondly, they are marginalized in their phenomenological reality – reformulating the faith so that it will serve a reality of rapid social transformations, so that the faith will have what to contribute to the wider society.

108 Dussel identifies those interested in manipulating folk religions as, first, shamans, ancient priests who ‘handle’ the divinatory art; secondly, the political ruling classes – populist politicians who try to invoke some form of religious charismatism and, third, the official Catholic church – separated by the ‘romanization’ process which that church has undergone since the XIX century. (*Ibid.*)
which is ignored when not plainly demonized by the discourse of institutional Churches. Thus, there is a high demand for an approach that will encompass a phenomenological appreciation of folk religions which are encouraged and enabled among [institutionally] theological audiences. In the meanwhile, such approach will give proper attention to the socio-political structures which have provided the general atmosphere under which many of these folks religions are shaped and become culturally relevant.

3.4 Folk and Official Religions

However, the distinction between folk and official religions, which is seemingly clear in theoretical debates, is not so evident when applied to specific social groups. Specifically, the debate in Latin America about what is ‘official’ and what is ‘popular’ -and why- dates back to the early 1960s, when the theories of modernization began expanding and gave rise to arguments based on the dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern society.’ This perspective was further affirmed by the contributions of contemporary cultural anthropologists and their key hermeneutical categories that defined the “traditional versus modern” framework that was later generalized and expressed in ‘folk versus urban’ taxonomies. Among the works consulted, I focused on those essentially asserting a two-tier system in which it is possible to set ‘folk’ (popular, non-institutional, fluid, spontaneous) apart from (or, in some instances, in opposition to) ‘official’ (also described as institutional, rigid, authorized) elements of religious discourse or

111 For more detailed considerations of the sociological implications of these claims, see Juan F Marzal, Dependencia e Independencia. Las alternativas de la sociología latinoamericana en el siglo XX, Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1979.
practice.\textsuperscript{112} In some cases, this dichotomization of the argument takes less obvious routes, as it is the case with the widespread, and none-the-less, mistaken assumption that Latin American folk religions are essentially ‘popular [Roman] Catholicism.’\textsuperscript{113} In his critique of this trend, Pedro Ribeiro has pointed out the propensity of the term ‘popular Catholicism’ to imply a duality of the phenomena which were not necessarily part of its narrative or ritual deployment.\textsuperscript{114} Ribeiro questions the very use of this concept on the basis that it was defined by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and offers instead offered the term ‘Catholicism of the people,’ described as a form of [Roman] Catholicism practised by considerable pockets of the general population, un-churched, as well as among what Ribeiro refers to ‘non-romanized’ Catholics. This is a form of Catholicism which he sees as in the hands of the people, which is what sets it apart and makes it radically different from the structured hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{115}

While acknowledging that these taxonomies of ‘official’ and ‘popular’ might appear self-evident in the abstract, it is also important to recognize that they are bound to be ambiguous when applied to

\textsuperscript{112} This seemingly unavoidable dichotomy of terms owes at least some of its cultural appeal to David Hume’s \textit{The Natural History of Religion}, where the duality of vulgar vs. literate was established, influencing European historiographies from 1757 to the present time. In Hume’s view, the vulgar groups, inspired by natural fears, produce a religion that is also natural. On its part, those in the elite of the literate are drawn to true religion, the truth in form of enlightened revelation. David Hume, \textit{The Natural History of Religion}. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), 95.

\textsuperscript{113} Enrique Dussel, \textit{A History of the Church in Latin America}, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 and more emblematically, see Enrique Dussel, \textit{History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American perspective}, Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1976, where he applies his critique of Eurocentric scholar methodologies from previous works towards renewed appreciations of the history of Christianity in the Latin American region. However, Dussell still identifies ‘popular religion’ in Latin America predominantly with ‘popular Catholicism,’ thereby reinforcing Eurocentric perceptions about the origins and dynamics of folk religions. Dussel finds room for assessments of non-institutional forms of religion as “temporary”, “manifestations of a conscience not yet entirely Christian” doomed to disappear and awaiting their completion and wholeness from organized Christianity, more specifically that represented by the Roman Catholic Church.


\textsuperscript{115} Years later, however, Ribeiro reassumed the ‘popular Catholicism’ category, defining it as ‘the whole of religious practices and representations developed by the popular imaginary. It begins with the religious symbols introduced by the missionaries and colonizers, to which some indigenous and African religious symbols were later added, see Ribeiro de Oliveira, \textit{Op.Cit.}
specific contexts or communities. Christian Parker, when addressing this issue from the angle of *popular culture*, goes a step further, based on the assumption that the relationships between folk and official religions are reflections of the nature of class relations in a stratified society. He further asserts that they reflect the real and symbolic relationships between cultures and ethnic communities, their trans-national encounter and ensuing trans-cultural crossovers. Parker perceives folk or popular religions as “collective manifestations that express, after their own fashion, in particular and spontaneous ways, the needs, anguishes, hopes and longings that find no adequate response in the official religion or in the religious expressions of the elites and dominant classes.”¹¹⁶ He calls to pay attention to the transformation of relationship between official and popular religious forms and practices, so as to enable us to speak about two distinct types -official and popular- of religious *practices* instead.

This debate has been emblematically developed by Eloisa Martin who, in her review of the general literature on the subject of popular religions, concludes her discussion of bibliographical works by asserting that the unsatisfactory nature of the discursive alternatives offered to the ‘popular-official’ debate are consequences of assuming “a modern notion of religion implicitly defined as an autonomous dominion with specific functions and rules.”¹¹⁷ Martin argues that postcolonial hermeneutics, exemplified in the work of Talal Asad,¹¹⁸ call for a contextual deconstruction of universalizing (imprecise) taxonomies of religion and renew the theological discourses. Martin asserts that these processes should focus “on the practices designated as ‘religious’ in specific

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¹¹⁸ Martin writes that, “following [Talal] Asad, it is impossible for us to use a previous and universal definition of religion ‘not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but also because its definition is in itself the historical product of a discursive process’, as seen in her *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.
places”\textsuperscript{119} and potentially on historical and social circumstances. She refers to Fabian\textsuperscript{120} who has asserted that attempting to define what is ‘popular’ will lead to antagonizing arguments, a confrontation of worldviews, “hence the difficulty of avoiding dualist descriptions.”\textsuperscript{121} Because of this essential difficulty, Martin therefore maintains that it is more methodologically profitable instead to focus our attention on “constructing a concept that is abstract enough to make it a useful tool”\textsuperscript{122} even though she adds the following qualification:

\ldots the use of operational definitions adapted to specific research objects does not resolve the problems arising from the concept. On the contrary, the problems are only worsened by a sort of “academic common sense” that obscures the variability of practices present in each empirical context, or by making each case so unique that the use of the concept becomes superfluous.\textsuperscript{123}

Consequently, Martin proposes a solution to the ‘popular-official’ conundrum “by focusing on the second term, that is, on the way religion is, implicitly or explicitly, defined within the working classes.”\textsuperscript{124} In the case of Latin America, Martin continues, authors like Giménez and Esquivel have argued that ‘marginalization’ and ‘dissatisfied basic needs’ are two factors which contribute to inciting the interest in the sacred among the working classes.\textsuperscript{125} On the other hand, it is also necessary to point out the positive contributions of two-tier discernments\textsuperscript{126} of the relationship between ‘official’ and ‘non-official’ forms of religious belief and practice. For example, by establishing clear distinctions between these two, the theologians I have referred to have also maintained that folk religious belief and practice can be seen as religious phenomena in

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 283.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 277
\textsuperscript{126} I am appealing to the ‘two-tier’ language since it implies a power differential.
their own right and not just cultural mimicry, superstitious deformations of preceding ‘higher’, forms of [institutional] religion. They have also underlined the need for reflecting upon the meaning of ‘official’ or ‘institutional,’ and have challenged preceding assumptions about the character of socially dominant religions, in specific, Christendom-like, Eurocentric forms of Christianity.

3.5 Alternative Epistemes in Folk Religions

In a challenge to the notion of ‘common sense’ in folk religions as an uncritical approach to the complexities of belief, and without the benefits of postcolonial elaborations, Julio de Santa Ana appeals to historical and contextually committed discernments of wisdom. “Change is brought about in symbolic terms,” de Santa Ana argues, and proceeds to contrast this assessment with Gramsci’s concept of “good sense.” In underlining the primacy of critical thought, he adds that such common wisdom “leads people to critical action. Then, liberation is not only a wish, a dream (expressed symbolically) but becomes the guiding motivation for praxis.”

On the relationship between folk religion and symbolism, Diego Irarrázaval, points to what he describes as “a symbiotic reality,” a product of the people’s efforts in gathering and interpreting seemingly disparate elements from their context with the purpose of enabling their “survival and enjoyment of their human condition.” Irarrázaval argues that in the midst of a reality that witnesses to marginalization, people engage in this type of creativity in order to face the most basic challenges presented to them by hostile social, economic and political conditions. In the process, they engage

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127 Ibid., 106.
128 Ibid.
in the re-imagining and re-design of their world while reaching out to others in collective
reckonings of the need for survival and community, re-interpreting and re-shaping crucial elements
of their worldview.

Other theologians have sought ways to ensure that their language is reflective of strategies for
socialized imagination, and have subsequently extended the concept of *sensus fidelium* to include
them. Writing from the context of Hispanic Catholic cultures in the United States of America,
Orlando Espín asserts that “popular religion can be theologically understood as a cultural
expression of the *sensus fidelium*.” This dictum describes an analytic standpoint for Espín:
expressions of popular religion are to be ideally correlated to institutionalized, and Roman
Catholic, in the expressions of the Christian faith. Christian Parker asserts that “all popular
religion is generated in a dialogue with official religion and culture”. "Popular religion," he
affirms, "is the religion of life, rather than the religion of ethics or reason.... It is an alternative to
Enlightenment rationality and the kind of rationalized faith that is the product of rationality."

And while no precise historical coordinates are available for the origin of the multiplicity of
current religious beliefs and practices in the popular cultures and subcultures of our continent, it
is indeed possible to assume that this origin was “tied to the process of syncretisation” or, as
Parker puts it:

(…) a dynamic of religious creativity through which, from their own
linguistic and symbolic universe, they invented new religious expressions in

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131 This is an approach emblematically treated by Dom Odo Casel who “along with others in the liturgical
movement, began a movement to remake popular religion in the image of the (church) liturgy.” Patrick L. Malloy,
*Op.Cit.* As Malloy forcefully argues, this “was a strategic mistake” and remains so in Espín’s approach, if nothing
else, given the wide divergences between the patterns of ritual and ceremonial to be found in folk religions and the
prescribed liturgy in a highly hierarchical institution like the Roman Catholic Church.
order to confront their new situation. The people sought to account ‘in their own way’ for the traumatic experience of domination and subjection.¹³³

Parker’s concern with syncretism in folk religions arose from his reflections on the agentic nature of their practitioners, specifically as folk religions empowered them to not just survive but to engage in a creative fashion with the challenges of ever-expanding, globalizing processes. That is, he affirmed the hemidernal (semi-modern) quality of “the processes of modernity owned by subaltern peoples,” a quality which “coexists and profits from the modern, but resists and criticizes the modern as well.”¹³⁴ Parker approaches syncretism as that which happens culturally and is produced by the realities of the persistent and culturally-opportunistic on-and-off religious exercise of la otra lógica. For Parker, the category of syncretism is a full constituent of culture, engaging not only what is religious in either essence or appearance, but also those strategies for the construction of knowledge that are prevalent among socially and politically distinctive demographic groups. Syncretism is better understood when witnessed in those behaviours and narratives in and through which individuals and communities engage in events where the common language -their own social currency- is of a religious nature. In this respect, Parker claims that folk religions are “characterized by a symbolic cultural protest that could only be discerned in specific historical contexts.”¹³⁵ In this way, he argues against fixed interpretations of practices and beliefs from folk religions: the nuances are to be found in the way these beliefs and practices interact and fertilize the context where they occur.

3.6 Theological Clues for *Bóvedas Espirituales*

I have argued in the previous chapter against the adoption of verificationist strategies for the ethnographic study of Cuban folk religions, and in this chapter I extend that approach to the theological assessment of folk religions in general. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the generality of previous theological approaches to folk religions have also been of a verificationist nature, seemingly seeking to validate the religious character of folk religions through their alleged Christian contents. Since I argue that folk religions are essentially determined by their context, I appealed to theological themes which have been developed in connection with Latin American folk religions, reflecting methodologies which challenge those previous verificationist approaches. I will now elaborate on how these themes contribute to enhancing our theological understanding and fruitful engagement with folk religions and notably, Cuban family religions, specifically as they can be verified in the practice of *bóvedas espirituales*.

In Cuba, *bóvedas espirituales* can be identified as emblematically marginal religious practices. Not only do they occur outside the boundaries of structurally organized or ‘official’ religious traditions in Cuba, but they are further marginalized by some of those religious structures, as it is the case with both conservative Yoruba practitioners and officials and representatives of Christian churches. The presence of *bóvedas espirituales* in the Cuban religious spectrum is that of domestic enactments of the ongoing dialogue and exchange between folk and official forms of religious practice. *Bóvedas espirituales* were among the most porous of the Spiritist practices arrived in Cuba, to be subsequently adopted by enslaved Africans and their descendants, therefore infiltrating locally adapted forms of African religions. From this first iteration, *bóvedas espirituales* were adopted by geographically prevalent and ethnographically current forms of
Cuban folk religions. Not just the practice, but the processes of semantic borrowing and subsequent aggregation which give shape to the practice of bóvedas espirituales are of marginal nature. These processes of aggregation do not take place in a methodological vacuum, but are rather informed by ways of narrative and religious exchange which can be comprehensively described as syncretic, therein reflecting a distinctive logic in the way this aggregation takes place.

These theological clues, however, remain circumscribed in their conceptual usefulness to theologians and specifically those with a methodological concern for the analysis of folk religions. The theological themes I have discerned are operational inasmuch they provide scholars with methodological prompters for addressing folk religious practices from perspectives and with emphases which are theologically significant. They do not perform nearly as well, however, if meant to be experientially meaningful to the subjects of folk religions and, specifically, those who engage in the concrete practice of bóvedas espirituales among Cuban family religions. The task then appears to discern a more emic approach to these religious practices, specifically if it is being sought to identify and address those theological elements already present to and discerned by those same subjects of family religions, as expressed and encountered in their religious experiences. The following chapter seeks to identify space, and specifically sacred space, as one of the theological categories through which these forms of family religious practice can be optimally described and interpreted.
Chapter Four

4. Space and Spatial Analysis

This chapter outlines the key elements for a methodology of spatial analysis for bóvedas espirituales, which I will use to test the claim that Cuban family religions, emblematically represented in bóvedas espirituales, are amenable to theological analysis, as their practitioners discern and enact sacred space. As I have argued before, I am intentionally appealing to methodologies alternative to the traditional verificationist approaches to folk religions. The possibilities opened up by spatial analysis, and more specifically after the ‘spatial turn’, hold a promise for renewed theological analysis of Cuban folk religions.

I will first clarify the categories of ‘place’ and ‘space’ as they will be used in my argument. Secondly, I will examine how theological reflection relates to issues of religious experience. Thirdly, I will discuss what is known as ‘the spatial turn,’ both within the scientific studies of religion, where I will make a review of its methodological aspects which are closer to my analytical concerns with Cuban family religions, and in Christian theological studies, with special attention to the works of Philip Sheldrake on this subject. Finally, I will review the methodological pointers contributed by these expressions of ‘spatial turn’, more concretely as they appear to further enable my argument for the viability of discerning theological agency in practices of Cuban family religions and specifically in bóvedas espirituales.

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136 These processes of discernment and enactment are due not just to the location of the bóvedas in the home but also, and particularly so, because of the rituals, domestic religious practices performed in connection to bóvedas espirituales. As it will be shown later on, this is in fact a foundational argument from ‘the spatial turn’.
4.1 Place, Space

Our being in the world at any given time is, short of conditioned, certainly informed by our spatial location. ‘Place’ and ‘space’ are categories which name and inform our spatial orientation and analysis. They were first brought to academic literature by geographers and ethnographers, and from there eventually reached the disciplines of Christian theology. In earlier and since then largely discarded philosophical formulations, these categories were consistently placed in uncontested roles. ‘Space’ was assumed to be a formless, meaning-empty entity and, at the same time, ‘natural’ support for all reality, a mere invisible frame which only thanks to its endless material pervasiveness can sustain those elements of reality actually worthy of sustained analysis. ‘Place’, on the other hand, was understood to describe local, contextual concretizations of space and, at the same time, to be throughout inhabited by space and therefore determined by it. Later philosophical developments subverted this inherited hierarchy, pointing to the concreteness and physicality of locations, rather than the allegedly absolute nature of space, what in fact constitutes ‘place’ as experientially meaningful category. That is, ‘space’ is not, as of itself, a historical category, but it is conceptually produced, or shown to be relevant, by the historical character, the physical concreteness and location of places. Walter Brueggemann developed this concern as follows:

Place is a space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation and

137 In the fourth chapter (Religion and Space: the Scholarly Legacy) of The Location of Religion, 95-123, Kim Knott provides a concise but detailed review of the preceding scholarship on religion and spatial issues.
envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued.138

Space, both as a mental and a material category, is never absolute but always generated and qualified by the contextual, historical concreteness of places. The historicity of spatial issues points to the consideration of not just the geographical concreteness of a certain location but, almost by necessity, also the further concreteness of the wider identity of persons who ‘make places happen’ and, with it, enact qualified, specific, meaningful space. By engaging the issue of human agency, our spatial considerations address ‘places’ also as enactments of contested and subverted space, and this as performed by means of the bodily agency of each historically ‘placed’ subject and community.

‘Sacred space’ is a notation of ritual geography. That is, sacred space is produced by ritual, which at the same time is the combination of embodied practice, spatial enactment and religious belief. Therefore, because of the determining influence that relationships have in any conception or practice of space, sacred space can be further defined as that material or mental space or sense of spatiality which results from the ritual enactment of relationships, whether these are between practitioners and God and other intangible agencies, with other practitioners, other human beings, the locality of the practitioner and its cultural frameworks of meaning and discourse.

“Sacred spaces”, writes Jualynne Dodson,

(are) locations or geographies of sacrality- are visual representations of a common, collective body of knowledge that has been accumulated and transmitted by religious practitioners over several, if not hundreds or thousands of years. Sacred spaces are constructed assemblages of shared awareness that articulate a three-dimensional symbolic expression of the body of knowledge that undergirds practitioners’ comprehensions about life and being in the world. This is a pool of cultural information, produced

through commonly understood interactions with beings, ideas, things, entities, and activities of the historical and cosmic world...\textsuperscript{139}

A preceding work in the area of spatiality of Cuban folk religions and from a spatially concerned, ethnographic perspective is \textit{Sacred Spaces and Religious traditions in Oriente Cuba} by Jualynne Dodson, to which I have referred before. The description and analysis is at least partly concerned with issues of human agency, and their physical enactments and, early in her argument, Dodson describes some of the dynamics in which these sacred spaces participate. Briefly stated, sacred spaces in eastern Cuba, firstly, contribute to delineating the social boundaries of a community.\textsuperscript{140} Secondly, this communitarian ownership of the sacred space both evokes and promotes regular communication, and communion with other people, by means of ritual participation and exchange.\textsuperscript{141} Third, the personal connections and the impersonal character of ritual contribute to actualizing the original past, engaging in the social production of meaning and memory.\textsuperscript{142} Finally, sacred spaces operate as aesthetic points of reference: these sacred spaces both repeat themselves in and create new sacred spaces both in the home and beyond its limits.\textsuperscript{143}

However, in her analysis, Dodson does not address places of Cuban domestic religious practice beyond the clearly identifiable ritual, narrative and symbols of specific religious traditions. That is, the practices she analyzed were not, in fact, forms of Cuban family religions, but rather domestic extensions of socially overarching religious traditions, narratives and ritual orders. Nevertheless, her observations about the spatial dynamics, on the other hand, contribute to shaping a language that might be used for better addressing and analysing domestic, family

\textsuperscript{139} Jualynne E. Dodson, \textit{Sacred Spaces and religious traditions in Oriente Cuba}. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 62.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid. 66.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. 67.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. 71.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. 72.
forms of religious practice, as I described them earlier in this thesis: “sets of religious rituals, narratives, beliefs and practices… adopted by individuals and families… organized around the home and the life of the family… a very specific form of Cuban folk religions… deeply embedded in Cuban cultural and religious social referents.”

In Cuban family religions, the issues of human agency involved in the enactment of sacred space need to be addressed as also informed by the dynamics and politics of each household family. That is, to speak about human agency also demands the consideration of those instances in which the life of the home colors what happens religiously. The dynamics fostered by that specific set of practices of family religions also need to be addressed within a wider ethical framework. The traditionally positive and idealized social imaginary about ‘the life of the home’ must be problematized to make analytical room for, essentially, human sin and its relational consequences. More specifically, the traditional consideration of the dynamics of the family home must be challenged in order to address those instances in which religious practice, even that of family religions, also reveals the presence and persistence of however well-veiled patterns of oppression, manipulation and disempowerment.

4.2 Spatial Dynamics in Bóvedas Espirituales

Space is, in fact, a decisive qualifier for acknowledging Cuban family religions as a geographic specificity of Cuban folk religions. As I have argued in Chapter Two of this thesis, bóvedas espirituales are the product of, among other factors, the mutual borrowings of originally disconnected Cuban religious traditions as well as the syncretic processes carried on by...
practitioners, involving these and other culturally framed borrowings. Bóvedas have been shaped through these ongoing syncretic processes in which received or borrowed religious themes are re-interpreted in a context determined by locality and hermeneutical plasticity.

Family religious practices, and specifically those of bóvedas espirituales, are distinguished above all by the fact that they are confined to the home. Furthermore, they evoke an organization of both the space of the home and the people who live there, where specific ritual, purity and otherwise behavioural regulations and commitments apply, where inherited patterns of family organization are either legitimized or contested. It is precisely in these intentional enactments and interactions with what is recognized as sacred space that I intend to seek clues for forms of theological discernment more concerned with issues of religious experience.

During the course of the interviews for my previous research of Cuban family religions, I found that the family altar or bóveda espiritual was the only place in the home completely reserved for religious affairs. It is because of this encompassed intentionality that I refer to the family altar or bóveda espiritual as archetypical of the ritual processes giving shape to Cuban family religions. The reciprocal quality of the relationships enacted in these family religious practices demands that practitioners engage in these ritual processes on a regular basis: this might also account for the dedication of a specific space in the home for the performance of these practices. These spaces are invested with the cultural signals of religiously significant locations, such as the regular performance of religious rituals and the abiding by bodily and overall behavioral disciplines. The sacred space so discerned is a direct consequence of the practitioner’s acknowledgment of the sacred nature of the activities performed. In other words, a specific area of the home is not sacred per se, but rather that space is made sacred through religious, ritual
practices, but also by means of the depth of cognitive ownership that the practitioners may claim for it.

4.3 Methodological Clues

In the past, Christian theologians have generally approached folk religions by discerning and extricating those elements in them which might be more or less positively identified with specific aspects of Christian doctrinal, narrative and liturgical traditions. Such verificationist strategies appear to echo similar approaches to folk religions from among secular studies of religion, and they can be both ascribed, at least in principle, to the seeming Western cultural preference for time-concerned, rather than space-concerned approaches to cultural mixture. When engaging my research on Cuban family religions with theological arguments regarding sacred space, I am intentionally distancing myself from such verificationist methodologies, seeking instead to find already existing evidences of quotidian, emplaced theological work, by means of enacting sacred space. My analysis will be concerned instead with discerning the types of theological agency that

145 George Tinker has challenged liberationist theologies on their seeming endorsement of a historical vision in which the human content of a given society is very much determined by time breaks from one historical setting to the next. As remedy, Tinker argues for a methodological complementarity of space and place to that which time and history already reveal about the vision of liberation. Tinker’s critique of liberationist theologies, as well as his appeal to the image of a circle as symbol of common life, establish a direct link with discourses challenging Modernity’s uninterested, when not dismissive stance towards concerns about space, privileging instead the claims to historical and phenomenological accuracy of chronologically-determined analysis. G.E. Tinker, ‘The Full Circle of Liberation: An American Indian Theology of Place’ in D.G. Hallman (ed.), Ecotheology: Voices from South and North. (Geneva: WCC, 1994), 218–24.

146 Stephen Palmié has addressed this issue at length. Specifically, in his edited volume Africas of the Americas: beyond the search for origins in the study of Afro-Atlantic religions, Boston: Brill, 2008.

147 A lack of interest to concerns about space and place among Western social narratives and theories can be located in Leibniz’s proposition of the superiority of time over space – and this approach still appears to dominate Western thinking. Although Einstein is credited with having successfully challenged this seeming dominance of ‘void space’ in social and scientific theories, still our most basic cultural devices insist in implementing Newton’s perspective, which separates mental from physical spaces and in which ‘space’ cannot be perceived by other than the seeing sense, a perspective in which places are understood just as containers for a time-wise organized reality. Michio Kaku, Einstein’s Cosmos, New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
can be recognized in folk religious practices, specifically through the spatial evidence produced by these practices.

In the following chapter, I will address specifically the practice of bóvedas espirituales, in order to analyze their resulting enactments of sacred space and the way practitioners interact with those enactments. However, it is necessary first to establish which parameters I will use for this spatial description of bóvedas espirituales, as well as the methodology to apply when establishing their spatial qualities and the associated dynamics of ritual and representation. Ultimately, I will argue that these enactments and interactions, commonly established by ritual means, are further narrative and symbolic elaborations, quotidian and domestic hermeneutical exercises of religious experiences. Given the concerns of my research and the objectives of this thesis, the category of religious experience itself requires a minimum of conceptual tuning.

4.4 Religious Experience and Theological Reflection

Briefly put, religious experience is understood as the subjective, even mystical element of a quotidian relationship with narrative, symbolic and ritual actualizations of transcendence that an individual enacts in ritual work and accompanying narrative accounts. Both the content and the ethnographic concreteness of the category of ‘religious experience’ appeal to a language that can only be accounted for through the mediating role that the culture plays in the development of both personal and religious identities as well as socialized religious expressions. The category of ‘religious experience’, as an object of reflection and ethnographic record, originated among the anti-Enlightenment arguments about individual authority and autonomy, during the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries, which sought to affirm notions of ‘pure religion’, supposedly immune from the epistemological challenges of the Age of Reason. When the category of ‘religious experience’ became established in academic discourse, it went on to play a vital role in the development of what became known as the comparative study of world religions.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James asserts that, while religions in the world are notorious for their diversity, it was nevertheless appropriate to speak of something common to all religious experience, a sort of ‘universal’ form of religious experience, a set of features akin to most known forms of religious experience. They are experiential, like perception, and while they do not necessarily follow the same path of rational theological or doctrinal argument, nevertheless these experiences betray and result from an immediate, intensely personal awareness of an agency of transcendence, ‘the utterly Other’: this awareness can displace any other object of reflection from the rational field in the mind of the subject, in what would be understood, from the religious point of view, as a mystical experience. The experiential character of religious experience does not preclude, however, their confinement within the boundaries of a particular physical sense perception: senses actually give way to a deep, subjective sense of the concreteness of an agency of trascendence, what is, for James, the ‘nucleus’ of any religious experience.

However, typologies and conceptualisations, our account of attempts to interpret and understand these religious experiences, are hermeneutical enterprises that can only be understood within the epistemological paradigms under which the subject of the religious experience might be

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149 Ibid. 205.
151 Ibid. 52.
operating. The study of religious experience is ultimately an ethnographic exercise. Even within a theological framework, religious experiences can be best examined by engaging in a careful, informed, and flexible ethnographic study that includes those elements of the experiences as enacted in ritual and symbol by practitioners, along with a careful study of the context in which these experiences are taking place.

It is precisely this intentional engagement of the emic, the subjective experiences of believers and the experiences of ethnographers themselves, which shows the application of the category of religion as extending to “all experience associated with religion, including communication about religious experiences, are religious experiences,”\(^{152}\) thus including the “relatively accessible and mundane experiences.”\(^{153}\) These religious experiences, when imposed on the specific ritual practices sustaining them, can be seen as the substance of practised religion, a core that is not susceptible to complete submission or reduction to the particular traditions. In the communities where these traditions are enacted, into which this substance is culturally translated, even recent culturally sensitive studies of religious experience reflect very clearly the specificities of, and distinctions between the religious experience and the account of that religious experience.\(^{154}\) The overwhelming diversity we find among religious ritual systems and narratives, combined with the ever changing nature of the believer’s context, collectively challenge the notion of one ‘core’ religious experience. Instead, what is needed are more dynamic conceptualizations which might better account for the ever-changing character of religious traditions and practices, particularly those beyond the conservative influence of religious institutions and structures. These demands extend, to be sure, into the theological disciplines.


\(^{153}\) Ibid.

The theological task can be defined as “the study which, through participation in and reflection (logia) upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith (theos) in the clearest and most coherent language available”, but also as “a formal reflection, description and account of religious experience”. In the Judeo-Christian traditions and, more specifically, among Western Christian theologies, this ‘content’ of the faith is understood as revelation, God’s self-revealing of the divine will and agency. This experience of revelation is always unique, and its account is also “concrete, belonging to a particular person, at a particular place, in a particular situation, employing particular symbols,” which allows for speaking about theology as the “study … participation in and reflection upon that which is revealed, that which is ‘divinely shown’ and ‘humanly perceived and acted upon’, pointing towards ‘the cognitive element in the (religious) experience.” The theological reflection about this subject demands more than a descriptive definition of religious experience. It further requires that religious scholars and theologians move the study of religion closer to precisely the subjects of those religious experiences and practices. Doing so will enable us to view religious experiences as sites of the religious imaginary of both religious history and theology. It will allow us to understand how experiences are constructed and lived out through multiple expressions: “While the elementary power of religion comes first through the imagination, it is the nature of human beings to reflect on their experience… Religious experience… leads to reflection, theology, philosophy and creed.”

One consequence of disregarding verificationist strategies for the discernment of the contents of family religions, the ‘stuffing’ of the religious experiences of those who practice these family

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religions, is the resulting demand for an alternative phenomenological methodology for the study of the practice in question—a move from an etic to an emic approach to the phenomenon being reflected upon. In terms of theological methodology, it may further require discernment in the practices of family religions of patterns of ritual, speech and behaviour beyond the anthropologically impoverishing effects of verificationist approaches. This, I argue, is possible by means of spatial analysis.

4.5 The Spatial Turn and Studies of Religion

Space and spatial analysis are not, as such, new subjects for scholars of religion. Geography has been frequently appealed to in order to inform the study of religious phenomena, from our early ancestors who looked at the stars, seeking to discern the will of supernatural beings, to the bold and mistaken assumptions of the Age of Discovery, to the more recent debates of globalization and Diaspora. Until the 1950s, however, ‘space’ was, for all purposes, generally understood as a passive geographical and discursive element, a purely circumstantial backdrop. On the one hand, scholars of religion relied on a wealth of geographical information for studying religious phenomena, as in the case of contextual geographies for pilgrimage routes, regional shrines and other forms of socialized religious practice. On the other hand, this geographical, spatial data was used mostly for supporting the analysis of other factors and seldom given any sustained attention as an element of value in itself. Space was assumed, by all accounts, as a container, a mere provider of random geographical frameworks for the sake of all that was found it and which was actually worthy of systematic research.
More recent studies in cultural and social theory have re-interpreted ‘space’ as a dynamic category, as it can be connected to issues of power, time and agency. There has been an emphasis on the diverse ways in which space is represented and addressed, as fully embedded and embodied in quotidian speech and practice, both in religion and other areas of everyday life. Sacred spatiality is now understood as expressed through geographical and local concretions of the sacred, constructed out of cultural information, history and knowledge, both enactments of lived religious practice and repositories of contextual information deriving from historically placed exchanges of persons, ideas, objects, symbols and actions.

The works of Gerardus van der Leeuw represent the first conscious attempt to bring phenomenological scholarship to the specific analysis of space. In his maybe best known work, *Religion In Essence and Manifestation*, van der Leeuw dedicated a whole chapter to develop his poetics of sacred spaces.\(^{161}\) When addressing sacred space as found in built environments, he listed archetypical sacred places as they can be found throughout the historical unfolding of religions in the world. These spatial archetypes translate into “a basic series of homologies, through which he asserted the metaphoric equivalence of home, temple, settlement, pilgrimage site, and human body.”\(^{162}\) However, the first author to intentionally address the nature and meaning of sacred space was Mircea Eliade when he constructed his paradigm for the study of religion in *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (1959). For Eliade, the sacred was defined by space, time and cosmology.\(^{163}\) Eliade pioneered the consideration at length of the


\(^{163}\) “Although Eliade drew on Émile Durkheim’s identification of the bipolar distinction between the sacred and the profane as characteristic of all religious beliefs, it is worth noting that both scholars, in using a distinction derived from the Latin, *sacer* and *profanus*, were using words which originally had a primarily spatial meaning. *Sacer* denoted that which was sacred, and could be used of both objects and places. *Profanus*, on the other hand, referred to the area outside the *sacrum*, the sacred place, that is the temple, but came to mean the opposite to *sacer*, that
agency of practitioners\textsuperscript{164} both in religious rituals and their resulting material evidence, in the process of coining categories which have remained useful for subsequent reflections on religious geography, such as hierophany, or manifestation of ‘the real,’ profane space and sacred space, or the axis mundi which enables communications between different realms.\textsuperscript{165} While Eliade appeared to propose a rather static view in terms of spatial agency of practitioners, subsequent scholars have objected to it and proposed instead a hermeneutical transference from a mental conception of space into more or less organized sets of cosmological ‘directions’, cultic premises, and resulting spatial transformations.

Postmodernity has marked a turning point in how ‘space’ is understood, or how it is perceived to participate in the phenomenon being analyzed. ‘The spatial turn’ alludes to the way in which the study of space has, since the late 1970s,\textsuperscript{166} undergone a profound and sustained transformation: space, place, mapping, and geographical imaginations have become commonplace topics in a variety of analytical fields, in part because globalization has accentuated the significance of location. Conceptually, and analytically, ‘place’ and ‘space’ are not understood as neutral phenomena: rather, the spatial turn reveals these categories as qualifiers and descriptors of the hermeneutical strategies by means of which our presence of any specific concrete space is fraught with meaning.

\[\text{which was not sacred.” in Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Paul Spicer, }\textit{Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval And Early Modern Europe.} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 22.\]
\[\text{Ibid. 26.}\]
\[\text{In his 1989 }\textit{Postmodern Geographies}, \text{ Edward W. Soja proposes the paradigm of space as a due substitute for that of time. In 1991, Fredric Jameson rounded up the concept by defining the spatialization of the temporal as running theme of the new paradigm: “a certain spatial turn has often seemed to offer one or more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper” See Fredric Jameson, }\textit{Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991 ), 154.\]
While this spatial turn has led to a renaissance in human geography, it also has acquired relevance in the social sciences.\textsuperscript{167} Specifically in the studies of religion, it has meant that ‘space’ is no longer perceived as a passive container, merely an inert stage for human activities, used as mere frame of spatial support. Instead, space is seen as emerging into being by means of “embodiment and everyday practice, knowledge and discourse, in processes of production and reproduction (...) enmeshed in religion and ritual no less than in other areas of social and cultural life.”\textsuperscript{168} But, of more significance to my research, the spatial turn in studies of religion has also challenged what I have described before as verificationist assumptions in the analysis of syncretic dynamics found in folk religious practices. The agency of religious practitioners is recognized not only through their occupancy and interaction with spaces, and specifically spaces deemed to be sacred, but even by means of their actual designing and construction of those sacred places:

Mircea Eliade held that the sacred interrupted, manifested or appeared in certain places, causing them to become powerful centers of meaningful worlds. On the contrary, Jonathan Z Smith has shown how place is sacralized as the result of the cultural labor of ritual, in specific historical situations, involving the hard work of attention, memory, design, construction, and control of place.\textsuperscript{169}

Jonathan Z. Smith spearheaded this perspective on sacred space by, firstly, reframing the conceptual tools for spatial analysis, until then taken for granted and, secondly, by enunciating the social and cultural origin of sacred places\textsuperscript{170}:

\textsuperscript{167} The publication of \textit{La production de l’space} by Henri Lefebvre, and its translation into English in 1991, can be seen as a starting point for the ‘spatial turn’ in humanities. Henry Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991.


\textsuperscript{170} Jonathan Z. Smith, \textit{To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual} (1987) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 26: “What if space were not the recipient but rather the creation of the human project? What if space were an active product of intellection rather than its passive receptacle”
(...) place is more than a natural or material space. It is lived first and foremost in hearts and minds, and is socially organised. Physical spaces, whether ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’ may follow; they take shape on the basis of cosmologically and socially constructed maps of the world.\textsuperscript{171}

For Smith, this gestation is effected by means of ritual, a process of creation of narratives and negotiation of meaning which “is not... a response to the sacred; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual.”\textsuperscript{172} Ritual can be seen as a creative dynamic whereby any religious believer is able to re-address his/her location in the world, while at the same time witnessing to people and things becoming sacred by virtue of being associated with sacralising ritual.\textsuperscript{173} Such a perspective represents a turn from what Mircea Eliade had previously enunciated as the central characteristic of sacred space. When assessing the theoretical value of ‘place’ for reflections about ritual, Smith moves beyond humanist and Kantian geographical perspectives, concluding that “place is not best conceived as a particular location with an idiosyncratic physiognomy or as a uniquely individualistic node of sentiment, but rather as a social position within a hierarchical system,” recalling the dynamic clarity of the expression “to take place.”\textsuperscript{174} There remains, however, the need to somehow ‘locate’ the occurrence of these enactments of the sacred. Kim Knott has proposed a dedicated terminology to resource the research and analysis of space as “the medium in which religion is situated,”\textsuperscript{175} with the purpose of providing analytical tools for studying spaces produced by religious practice in present-day Western societies. It is a methodology which seeks to enable “the analysis of a place, object, body or group, and the

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid. 105.
\textsuperscript{173} “...emerging as reactions to the absolute or ‘empiric-physical conception of spatiality that informed most geographical inquiry at that time. This suggested that the world was essentially a blank canvas, and, rather than playing an active role in shaping social life, formed a surface on which social relations were played out”, Hubbard P. Kitchen & G. Valentine, eds. \textit{Key Thinkers on Space and Place.} (London: Sage, 2004), 42.
\textsuperscript{175} Kim Knott, \textit{The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis.} London, UK; Equinox, 2005.
location of religion therein, by means of its spatial attributes." Inspired in works by Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and several postmodern geographers, Knott establishes five stages for the location of religion by means of its spatial markers: the body as the source of space, the dimensions of space, the properties of space, the aspects of space, and the dynamics of space.

The first principle in the spatial approach proposed by Knott is that of the role of the body within what is both experienced and represented as space. “Because spatial metaphors are central for cognition and representation,” this extends to our contextual discourse, “the nature of our society and relationships, time and progress, and the sacred.” Our bodies enable our physical and intellectual experience of empirical connections, serving as platforms for metaphorical devices of social orientation and self-speech, ever-present points of encounter between the most minute and local social practices and the large scale organisation of power. Even if only appealing to the starkest social value of our bodies, they remain as determining factors for “the conditions for the possibility of experience which prefigures the structures of knowledge.” In fact, both the very act of locating religion and the means of referencing the location of the sacred are only possible by means of ourselves having bodily acquired a sense of spatial integrity in the object of our concern, and even in the methodologies we display for their study. As Knott concludes, paraphrasing Lefebvre, “The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely the order of the body.” The body is, also, both measure and scale of what Knott describes as the dimensions of space. Kim Knott

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177 Ibid.
179 Ibid. 156.
enunciates these dimensions as leading towards a unified view of space, in which “physical or material space, mental and social spaces are brought together.”182 That is, while the notion of ‘space’ may suggest spatial, geographical location, in fact it also operates and is perceived within a mental framework, as a mental, conceptual notion. On the one hand, this notion obliterates the essential demands of physicality but, on the other, it also appeals to the concept of space in order to facilitate the discernment and enactment of “human possibility, cultural difference, the imagination itself, as well as social relations.”183 In order both to exist and express itself, religious practice requires the dimensions of space. In that dynamic relation, space is both produced and reproduced. Discerned, enacted space, Knott argues, “is constituted by synchronic relations, diachronic extensions and power.” Each specific place incorporates in itself physical, social and cultural shreds of history, developing at differing speeds and depths, at times interacting with each other. Knott lists “this kind of multidimensional configuration,” together with simultaneity, extension and power, as ‘properties of space’. She proceeds to argue that power is never absent from any of these spatial properties, as it would otherwise render them “ephemeral and ungrounded.”184

Once again borrowing from Lefebvre, as well as from Bourdieu and de Certeau,185 Knott underscores three otherwise disjointed aspects of spaces, distinguishing them in each case as perceived space, conceived space and space lived by people.186 Perceived space, also described by Lefebvre as ‘spatial practice’, refers to how people perceive, generate and use space in their everyday life. This is indeed a spatial practice which has become normalized, behaviourally

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182 Ibid., 159.
183 Ibid.
185 De Certeau: The Practice of Everyday Life; P. Bourdieu: The Logic of Practice.
instinctive, developing its own logical paradigms and organized around the body. Therefore, spatial practice deploys the body in motion, gesture and behavioural patterns, evidencing the social and physical localities and spaces where they can be verified. Religion, Knott writes, “is a consequence of spatial practice, though it is the attribution of meaning that gives such practice its character as ‘religious’.  

The aspects of ‘conceived space’ and ‘spaces lived by people’ further the discussion from the ways space is perceived from the way it is represented and inhabited. Conceived space has its limits, dimensions, use, and relation to other spaces having been determined by the interaction of societally shared narratives and individual or family habits and politics. Lived spaces, on the other hand, are the result of the inhabiting of those conceived spaces not only with people, but stories and the resulting subversion of the received or predominant regime. Conceived space is often subverted by ‘spaces of representation’, or those spaces which have been custom-built (often enough, built-in into a previous, greater physical and often mental space) are directly inhabited by its images and symbols. These are intentional spaces, both explaining and organizing spatial and historical data relevant to those who inhabit them. Conceived space can evoke ‘moments of presence’, which at the same time “punctuate the banality of everyday life.”

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188 Knott makes a terminological caveat here: “Lefebvre distinguished what some of his English-speaking commentators have referred to as ‘representations of space’ from ‘spaces of representation’. By the former he meant conceived space, those dominant, theoretical, often technical representations of space that are produced by planners, architects, engineers and scholars. Such spaces are expressions of ideology, in particular, of the dominant order, Lefebvre’s main example being the ‘abstract space’ of modernism with its geometric, visual and phallic ‘formants.” Ibid, 54.
Finally, the dynamics of space, or the reassertion of space as dynamically related to issues “of power, history and time” refer to space no more as a static, inert background for otherwise unrelated activities of individuals or groups, but fully involved in and reflective of (“thoroughly enmeshed”) processes of “embodiment and everyday practice, knowledge and discourse, and in processes of production and reproduction”. Consequently, and very much to the concern of my own reflections, the subject is “enmeshed in religion and ritual no less than in other areas of social and cultural life.”

4.6 The Spatial Turn in Christian Theologies

Christian theology, even as it was influenced from its Jewish roots, has consistently acknowledged the relevance of spatial issues, from the vetero-testamentary themes of land, pilgrimage and territorial autonomies, to the apocalyptic promises of the New Testament, proclaiming a new heaven and a new earth, a renewed vital space for Creation. Foundational narrative and doctrinal issues for Christian theologies, like the Incarnation, Catholicity, Missiology, and Sacrament theologies have also drawn heavily on contemporary geographical and spatial conceptions and practices.

However, throughout and since the historical period commonly known as Modernity, the discipline of Theology, together with other areas of scholarship of the studies of humanity, witnessed and at times fostered replacement of these spatial concerns with methodologies

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190 Ibid. 57.
191 Ibid. 59.
emphasizing historical, literary, textual, and rational concerns instead. Hence, theologies of space and place remained dormant, with very few contributions to the spatial enterprise in Theology, at least until ‘the spatial turn’ began affecting theological reflection and giving way to methodological alternatives. ¹⁹³

Even then, and until very recently, spatial concerns remained outside any mainstream theological discourse and conversation. For example, Andrew Rumsey argues that “there have been few studies which address the impact of place on contemporary western religious experience.”¹⁹⁴ In a similar critique, Philip Sheldrake has noted that “in current debates about the future of place, the Christian theological voice contributes very little apart from occasional reference to specifically environmental issues.”¹⁹⁵ In this sense, the spatial turn has meant that theologians are methodologically encouraged to address issues of space and place on a more frequent basis and apply such analyses to a wider range of theological concerns, from a geographical but also deeply political alternative perspective. Furthermore, the spatial turn in Christian theology has also meant that the reflections of the latter become available and disciplinarily interesting to scholars from other fields of human knowledge.

Theological works concerning the spatial turn are very diverse in their concerns, methodologies as well as the relevance they grant to spatial issues.¹⁹⁶ However, at least two theological approaches to space can be identified: one concerned with the implications that issues of space

¹⁹³ The ensuing areas of theological reflection have included “themes such as the space of Creation, God’s spatiality, the loss of place, and spiritual practices, as well as justice, redemption and aesth/ethics in the built environment and the ecological city”; Bergmann, *Ibid*. 353.


¹⁹⁶ Sigurd Bergmann wrote a very comprehensive essay in which she goes to great lengths in describing the very diverse directions taken by the spatial turn in the theological field. I will benefit here from her insights in order to properly discern the most productive theological tradition of the spatial turn with which to address regular forms of religious practice and in particular that of bóvedas espirituales.
have for the classical questions of Theology, and another that seeks to make theological contributions to other disciplines and discourses also concerned with issues of space. This second group is well represented in the works by John Inge, who extends his consideration of the ethnographic urgency of the lived experience of religious believers in the here-and-now. I will focus on the Philip Sheldrake monograph *Spaces for the Sacred*, in which he delivers a creative, carefully organized analysis of the role of place in Christian spirituality, as well as its role in discourses about human memory and identity. In what follows I will highlight a few of his main theoretical and methodological points, specifically as they appear to shed light on my spatial analysis of Cuban home religious practices, specifically *bóvedas espirituales*.

Sheldrake addresses place as “a human construct... culturally created through historical meanings, narratives and events, but also in contexts of crisis and as an object for belonging.” This quotidian experiencing of the religious, explicitly place-centric, has also been developed by pastoral theologians, appealing to it as a “departure point to revise [their] interpretation of Christian practices among the believers.” Inspired by Duns Scotus, Michel de Certeau, and the Ignatian Exercises, Sheldrake reclaims an early Christian tradition that regarded people as places, *loci*, of the sacred, in an approach that he asserts is not focused on spirituality as an inward experience but as a practice of living.

Sheldrake is also concerned with returning the category of place to healthy use in theological studies and reflections. He seeks to reclaim ‘space’ as a crucial Christian category, as the space which God makes in His coming to us at a particular time but also in a particular place.

Sheldrake approaches space as related to human identity and human memory, betraying the links

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199 *Ibid.* 367
between our in-placedness, there where we are, and the articulation of our own religious and overall personal identities. He writes, “Sacred spaces may both provoke a sense of what we lack yet evoke possibility and hope. They can assist the re-enchantment of urban existence and liberate people from a sense of fundamental estrangement.”

In *Spaces for the Sacred*, Sheldrake acknowledges that he is presenting neither a comprehensive thesis about space nor a systematic study of place, but “an exploration of ideas and interpretative perspectives.” This does not prevent him, however, from making foundational claims for his theological enterprise: God is “the only true catholic place,” while built environments can be either “sacraments or anti-sacraments.” This he elaborates by pointing to praxis as that which manifests place, and that ‘the catholicity of place’ for Christians is symbolised mostly ‘in the *koinonia* of believers filled with the Spirit of Jesus and shaped by the space of the Eucharist’, which in such a theological framework becomes a multi-dimensional place –catholic, eschatological, ethical, a place of reconciliation. Perhaps because of this sacramental echoes, Sheldrake points to the links between the ways in which we build our identity, either personal or religious, and by means of analyzing current practices of space in both secular and religiously invested places, he further advances new ways for Christian theologies and theologians to engage with and benefit from current debates about space in the wider academic world.

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201 Ibid, ix.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid. 168.
204 Ibid. 32.
4.7 Towards a Spatial Analysis of Every-day Religion

In his reflections about spatiality and everyday life, Sheldrake addresses, on the one hand, the nineteenth-century cultural and narrative ‘idealization of ‘the home’ as space for meaningful, intimate religious experiences, as well as the “paradox that ‘home’ was both associated with everyday life and yet was at the same time deemed to be a private space, protected from the evils of the outside, public world.”205 He challenges such dis-incarnated views of spirituality and further contrasts it with the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation: “no part of the material world or of human activity is inherently profane although it may be profaned by sinful human action. The everyday world is an authentic theological locus.”206 This combination of sacramental and incarnational emphases is, in my view, his most solid contribution to the spatial turn in Theology. Sheldrake makes it possible to think of sacred spaces created out of religious practice as essentially sacramental expressions of otherwise fundamental themes in Christian theologies –incarnation, divinity, communion- precisely by means of placing their subjects as being themselves eminent places for the sacred.

Because of the very spatial inevitability of any practice, even religious practices, the experience and practice of sacred space is and should remain among the elements considered for speaking about religious experience, particularly if this is to be done from an emic perspective. The established theological methodologies should seek, besides doctrinal comprehensiveness and evangelical coherence, the ability to speak both about and to actual religious practitioners,

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205 Sheldrake, Philip: *Spirituality and the Integrity of Theology* in *Spiritus, A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 7.1 (2007): 93-98. Sheldrake also points out that “the widespread Western mystique of ‘home’ really begins in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and becomes particularly prominent in the early Victorian era in Britain and North America”. He associates this mystique with “the sanctification of domesticity as the shaping symbol of a satisfactory life”, Ibid.

206 Ibid.
however detached they might be from the institutional framing of Christian theologies. While the traditional approach to space, and more specifically sacred space, has presented it as the source and agent of the religious experience, ‘the spatial turn’ has also meant that this perspective is challenged, setting a new theological paradigm by virtue of which the very production of sacred space is argued to be a source of religious experiences and, therefore, theologically pregnant with both meaning and intentionality. An essential part of this process is that of the discernment of religious experiences, which are reflected in both the ritual work and the subsequent production of sacred space. This would be, in my view, the theological equivalent of Kim Knott’s exercise in locating religion in a particular context by means of spatial analysis, taxonomically and thematically filtered through the contributions of Sheldrake’s work in regards to theological agency.

In this chapter, I have developed these elements, as found in the works of specific authors in both the sciences of religion and theological fields, in order to provide the language and descriptive tools to address, from an emic-conscious perspective, the ritual and spatial concreteness of Cuban religious family practices, and specifically that of bóvedas espirituales. My purpose is to provide a methodology; a set of analytical tools for the appropriate theological consideration of the practice of bóvedas espirituales, specifically as they might contribute to further the understanding of the dynamics and the contextuality of lived religion, the quotidian and domestic display and use of religious symbols, ritual, and language. In the following chapter I will appeal to both the five stages for the location of religion by means of its spatial markers as it has been proposed by Kim Knott and the sacramental approach to spatiality as elaborated by Sheldrake in order to propose a more specific theological approach to bóvedas espirituales. The theological points of departure for my reflections will be those elucidated in Chapter Three of this thesis and
which I have found to characterise the diversity of approaches to folk religions among exponents of Latin American liberation theologies. I will inform these reflections with the data gathered in the interviews informing my research of practitioners of bóvedas espirituales as well as the existing ethnographic scholarship on Cuban religious practices, as it has been presented in Chapter Two of this thesis.
Chapter Five

5. A Spatial Approach to Bóvedas Espirituales

My analysis of bóvedas espirituales is inspired by the belief that God is ‘taking place’ in the middle of the everyday concreteness of the life of the home, through the continual commemoration of ancestors and the domestic, seemingly mundane signs of the sacred.207 In many cases, practitioners of family religion in Cuba combine this dedicated ritual and narrative religious life of the home with the formal, at times active participation of organized Christian communities. This may help explain the emphatic sacramental language which practitioners employ when describing their own ritual life in the home and their ability to combine their confessional loyalties in such contexts. But in all fairness, the belief that God ‘takes place’ in the everyday should also account for a renewed interest among Christian theologians in Cuba for discerning, understanding and positively interacting with long established religious traditions, home practices and indispensable pieces of current Cuban domestic culture.

In the preceding chapters, I provided, firstly, an ethnographic and historical appraisal of Cuban bóvedas espirituales and, secondly, the elements for a theological and spatial approach to this archetypical practice of Cuban family religions. In this chapter, I will offer three steps for a specific, theological analysis of bóvedas espirituales, specifically how the practitioners of Cuban family religions enact sacred space through their use of bóvedas. I will begin by discussing the

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role of the body in the practices and representations of space in bóvedas espirituales, specifically as they illustrate the diversity of religious traditions in Cuba and how they have contributed to the cultural shaping of what is understood as quotidian, every day religious experiences of family religions. Secondly, I will elaborate on the dimensions and properties of space as discernible in the practice of bóvedas espirituales and how religious convictions persist and express themselves through the dimensions of space, thereby contributing to the production and reproduction of space. The dimensions of space, following Kim Knott and Henri Lefebvre, expose the analytical work to a multidimensional framework in which physical, mental and social space are brought together. Thirdly, I will describe bóvedas espirituales based on their spatial aspects and dynamics. Having advanced the theological possibilities involved in these elements spatial analysis throughout the chapter, I will then propose a theological rationale for addressing the enactment of sacred space in bóvedas espirituales and its potential for theologically grounding these forms of family religious practice.

This thesis is the first attempt at establishing a dedicated theological terminology and methodology for the purpose of addressing the practice of bóvedas espirituales; to somehow ascertain the theological agency of its practitioners. This goal will require my proposal to maintain a close linkage with the ethnographic evidence and make generous use of the existing scholarly work which relies heavily on the contributions from the sciences of religion, both in regards to the study of Cuban religious traditions and the reflection about fundamental issues for the study of religion and connected taxonomies. I will also restrict my reflections to the most fundamental and common types of bóvedas espirituales, precisely the type I could verify in use by those members of the Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba with whom I spoke about their family religious practices. I intend to demonstrate how spatial analysis of bóvedas espirituales can
enrich both the theological appreciation for family and overall folk-forms of religious practice as well as to explain how the spatial turn has effectively opened new doors for inquiry and dialogue for Christian theologies and theologians, which at the present time lie well beyond the scope and methodological resources available to them.

Kim Knott, in arguing for her methodology for the spatial location of religion, advances two requirements for her enterprise. On the one hand, it is necessary to provide “a theory and method of analysing” places, spaces, as well as the socially embedded spatial processes of location at work.\(^\text{208}\) On the other, it is required to discern the operational content for the category of religion, the object whose location is being sought.\(^\text{209}\) Therefore, in what follows I will develop a conceptual discussion of the term, specifically about concerns of practice and locality. That is, my use of the category of religion includes but does not limit itself to argumental, doctrine-concerned religious expressions, but it can also be verified in its ‘being done’ by practitioners. Religious practice, besides expressing and effecting religious desire, commitment and aesthetic, also contributes to the cognitive resolution of everyday, material, historical concerns and conflicts of just about every kind faced by practitioners.

But how does this practice-based definition of ‘religion’ relate to the way it has been conceptually addressed by sciences of religion? In general, post-Victorian academic approaches to ‘religion’ have persistently engaged in the construction of \textit{ad hoc} definitions. The philosophical and theological enunciations of the concept of ‘religion’, originated and only tested in the ‘Old World’ up to that point, appeared to offer little room for the already flourishingly

\(^{208}\) Kim Knott, \textit{The Location of Religion} (London: Equinox, 2005), 45.

\(^{209}\) \textit{Ibid.} 46.
diverse catalogue of ‘New World’ cultural forms and patterns to which ‘Old World’ missionaries, merchants, soldiers and philosophers were increasingly exposed.\footnote{210}

Anthropologist have for long worked towards appropriating or deconstructing a heavy theological, institutionally-religious baggage in both its outlook and methods when engaging non-European cultural forms. Sequentially, one could locate historical markers for the development of a conceptual understanding of ‘religion’ in E.B. Tylor’s intellectual emphasis on supernatural beings,\footnote{211} in Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred as that which unites people as moral communities within the ritual and narrative framework of unified systems\footnote{212} and in Geertz’s concern for the symbolic and how it affects specific moods and the construction of meaning.\footnote{213} More contemporarily, Boyer has spearheaded the cognitive study of religion, and from that perspective has provided a very useful critique of the quest for a ‘fully functional’ concept for ‘religion’:\footnote{214} what is generally seen as the anthropological definition of religion should be viewed as no more than a ‘summarized description’.\footnote{215} Any attempt at constructing an operational definition for ‘religion’ should take this complexity into consideration and, in response, seek appropriate conceptual strategies. With this purpose and as part of a far more ambitious and better argued approach to this same conceptual challenge, Stausberg writes of placing an emphasis on the \textit{specificity} of religion as a way to

\footnotetext[210]{Michael Lambek, ed. \textit{A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion}. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 65-69.}
\footnotetext[212]{Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.}
\footnotetext[213]{Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures}, New York: Basic Books, 2000.}
address (...) the specific and specifiable ways religion is and works as distinct from, or as compared to, other ‘systems’, ‘domains’, ‘spheres’ (...) or ‘maps’”. To study this specificity of religion “or conditions for identifying something as ‘religion’, does not necessarily imply that religion is a separate and timeless entity (...) these are culture-and-time bound discursive properties”.

Far from a threat of freezing present, living realities in past-time models and conceptual protocols, as Stausberg himself adds later on, “theorizing is here understood as means not of achieving closure but as an act of reopening the issues.”

This continual reopening of the issues would lead us to speak of religions, as a self-sufficient category of language that engages the plurality of forms, structures and manifestations within which we can find any particular ‘religion’, as well as enabling a rapprochement between its theoretical enunciations and practical enactments, always within an objective acknowledgment and description of the contextual frame:

Even with traditions, theories about religion stand in tension with religion in practice (...) Theories, whether indigenous or foreign, may stand in tension with practice because they articulate a norm or ideal against which the theoreticians judge practice and to which theorists expect practice to conform.

It is in this ‘doing’ where meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, is discerned, enunciated and acted upon. More often than not, meaning is discerned, enunciated and acted upon within the context of relationships that either speak of social realities or speculate (in an active fashion) about their ultimate future. Religion is thus very much approachable from a relationship-oriented perspective.

The social nature of human group behaviour is pivotal to our conceptualization, as it is through shared experiences and interactions in a cultural group that orientation that beliefs about the universe are formed.

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217 Ibid. 14.
From such collective perspectives about life, groups develop systematic practices and behaviours concerning what it means to exist, what is their relationship to the universe, what behaviours must be enacted to carry out the relationship and so on. Human groups develop religion.\(^{219}\)

Socially contours institutional understandings of the religious, reconstitutes context, narrative and preceding ‘worlds of meaning’ into personally appropriated praxis, into spaces for the inhabiting, even the embodiment of religious experiences. Religious experience is also an activity of the body, engaging all the senses and producing both material and mental spaces in which are enacted essential elements of the practitioner’s worldview. This embodiment of religious experience also speaks to an embodiment of the production of sacred space by means of the religious practice organizing and narrating that religious experience. In his 2011 book ‘More than Belief’, Manuel Vasquez develops his concern with the materiality intrinsic to religions by means of a intentionally non-reductive, material conceptualization of ‘religion’.\(^{220}\) Vasquez emphasizes the focus on the role of the body, embodied practice and practice of place and emplacement, specifically as these have reflected by the scholarly literature.

It is not possible to think of religion beyond space, and in order to study and reflect upon what is done religiously, it is necessary to consider spatial issues. Therefore, if we are to give comprehensive theological attention to local, culturally and socially embedded forms of religious belief and practice, it becomes necessary to address spatial concern as well as the possibilities spatial analysis opens for Christian theologies. To affirm that God is present to every reality across time and space demands at least the acknowledgement that spatial analysis is just as important to theological reflection as what we learn through the consideration of historical


records. The mystery of the Incarnation illuminates every reflection that Christian theologies have to make about space. It is only appropriate then to address the concerns and possibilities that spatial analysis opens up in the theological study of folk religious practices, specifically those found in bóvedas espirituales.

5.1 Bodies and Bóvedas Espirituales

The first element in the spatial methodology proposed by Kim Knott is that of the role of the human body as source of space. The task of locating religion in a space by means of evidences of the body requires an analysis of the way this particular place has been produced by the human body, as well as a discernment of what types of discourse are at work in that space –the way bodies are involved in producing and preserving space, and where religion can be located in these processes. In other words, this element illustrates how our bodies ‘in space’ enable both our experiencing and conceptualising of links between “things, places, persons, as well as regions, and to identify differences.”

Our bodies constitute our primordial space, one we –ideally- own and over which we have some degree of control. The spatiality of our bodies ‘takes place’ when we relate to our surroundings, to other living things, to animals, to other human beings and to communities. That is, we discern space through our bodies, in relational ways. The mental and physical coordinates by which we orientate ourselves, our sense of mental and physical location, all derive from our bodily and

222 Knott dates back this theoretical elaboration about the mental role of ‘body’ to the works of Emmanuel Kant, specifically his ‘Concerning the Ultimate Foundation of the Differentiation of Regions in Space’, in G.B. Kerferd & D.E. Walford eds., Kant: Selected Pre-Critical Writings and Correspondence with Beck, Op.Cit. 36-43.

The body is the primordial space for each individual, and as I argued earlier when discussing Kim Knott’s ‘properties of space’, it is by extension of this essential space, through ritual, that localized, concretized forms of sacred space are enacted.

These observations go beyond the bodily actuality of each subject and instead point to cultural structures of thinking and rationalizing the world around us, in which ‘a body’ stands for very specific mental images, supported by its own spatial actuality, and ‘space’ is both a tangible phenomenon and a conceptualization.\footnote{“‘Space’ is a concept which allows us to talk, write and share ideas about an aspect of human and social experience, in this case the experience of our situatedness vis-à-vis the body, others and the world about us. (…) When I use the word “space” (…) I mean the concept or notion of space not the phenomenon of space”, Kim Knott, \textit{At Home in the Secular}, 47.}

Hence the usefulness\footnote{The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether (…) The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us –namely the order of the body” in Henri Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}, 408.} of ‘the body’ as a tool for analysis can be seen in Knott’s methodology: it conceptually reinvests already existing and ongoing mental processes by means of which human beings are ‘naturally’ drawn to discerning the world from and within the bodily experience they have of that world: our environment, the nature of our society, time and progress, and the sacred.\footnote{For a discussion of the centrality of embodied spatial metaphors in cognition and representation, see G. Lakoff & M. Johnson: \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.}

Knott’s first step for discerning religion in space is, in one way, a re-statement of the physically and anthropologically obvious. However, it is innovative in that she links it with ethnographically discernible processes of enacting sacred space and therefore becomes a very useful tool for ethnographic description, as well as theological analysis.\footnote{“… the whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that is may forget it altogether . . . The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely the order of the body.” in Henri Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 405.} For this discernment of the body in space, Knott advances some essential questions and lines of research and analysis: “what discourses of the body are at work
within it; how are bodies used to maintain and reproduce it; and where, if at all, is religion situated in these processes?"  

Philip Sheldrake, in his use of the category of space, also capitalizes on the bodily aspect of religious practice. Appealing to an early Christian tradition, he addresses people, in their embodied humanity, as places, and furthermore as prime emplacement, or loci of the sacred. A verificationist approach to spatial religious practice would focus almost entirely on the type and content of religious practices, narratives and rituals, what is often appealed to as ‘spirituality’. Sheldrake, however, breaks this impasse by appealing instead to the cognitively revelatory potential of spatial practice, and particularly those spatial practices which can be coherently identified with overall practices of living. Sheldrake’s sacramental argument continues with the contrasting his previous assessment of people as loci of the sacred with the enunciation of God as “the only true catholic place.” The divine overflows any boundary or the particularity of place or space, hence Sheldrake’s appeal to the category of Catholicity. He adopts this theological exercise to underline the persisting tension in Christian theology between universal (‘catholicity’) and local connotations of space, further underlining the value of a sacramental approach for a comprehensive analysis of religious practice.

However, this appeal to sacramentality is not unqualified, nor does it endorse earlier developments which would point to sacraments as “the ‘eccentric’ intrusion of grace, or godly space, into what is otherwise a profane world.” Our universe, Sheldrake argues, is essentially sacramental, “of a graced nature”. Borrowing from liberation theologians, he asserts the double-edged character of this sacramental appeal, balancing the self-disclosure and self-offering of God, implied in the traditional understanding of the Christian sacraments. By emphasizing the

human response to God’s revelation, Sheldrake underlines the relevance of considering the ethical implications of any given religious practice being theologically analysed.\textsuperscript{230}

Bóvedas espirituales are, essentially, a single-body spatial enactment and in their use, practitioners enact a one-body physical space: one and only one practitioner can interact with one bóveda at a time. The bodily disciplines adopted in the practice of bóvedas espirituales appear to be more the result of exchanges between practitioners, inherited patterns of practice and ritual and, finally, diverse aesthetic and narrative borrowings which practitioners make from otherwise socially recognized agents of religious practice, whether Christian churches or organized cultic communities and institutions of the Yoruba and Spiritist traditions, in their local iterations.

In Cuban homes featuring bóvedas espirituales, among members of the domestic nucleus, two sets of bodily responses appear to co-exist in these practices. On the one hand, there is the behavior of those members of the home family who are religiously invested in the practice of bóvedas and, on the other, those who, while aware of the religious connotations of the bóveda, yet have no personal commitment to either the contents, narratives or disciplines embodied in and invoked by bóvedas espirituales. For those who are religiously invested in the practice of bóvedas espirituales, these constitute the nucleus of memory, power and ritual in the space of the home, as well as in mental spaces of ancestry, immanence and intimacy. Practitioners interact with their bóvedas with frequencies reflecting different perceptions about ritual needs and obligations, their individual desire for ritual performance and the actual ability of practitioners to combine the demands of their everyday life with their ritual commitments. These more engaged vocal forms of interaction with bóvedas appeared to follow a certain pattern which regularly included, in that order of prominence: the use of Christian traditional prayers (Our Father);

\textsuperscript{230} Philip Sheldrake, \textit{Spaces for the sacred: place, memory and identity} (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 64.
monologues directed to pictures or objects evoking a particular dead person; Pre-Vatican II devotional prayers, specifically those concerned with the dead; lighting candles; the use of Spiritist traditional prayers; the recitation of Christian traditional doctrinal-liturgical texts (e.g. the Apostles’ Creed); performing offerings of flowers, food samples or putting fresh water in the spiritual glasses; burning of aromatic substances (in lieu of incense, citrus peelings are often used instead) and devotional readings, which I found to be of a wide variety and quite specific to each practitioner.\(^{231}\)

These actions were usually performed in succession and as one whole ritual engagement. Practitioners stated that they performed these actions while kneeling or, when unable to do so, they would ‘work’ in their bóvedas in a physically feasible, but similarly specific and intentional as kneeling can be. When not engaged in the succession of prayer and texts, practitioners would sit in the vicinity of the bóveda, in some cases, engaging in ritual singing, usually consisting of both Spiritist canticles and Christian hymns, and also practising the equivalent of devotional contemplation of the symbolic arrangement making up each bóveda.

It is precisely the making up of each bóveda that reveals further bodily investments of their practitioners. It was often the case that objects in a bóveda were arranged in such a manner that some were particularly visible for the practitioners when standing, and some when kneeling. The latter were in some instances kept behind a veil, including as they did some food offerings, glasses of water and receptacles containing holy water collected from Christian churches. Bóvedas are also impressed with other bodily signs. From the oily fingerprints marked along the border of the shelf holding vasos espirituales, revealing their continual handling, re-filling and cleaning, to mementos of the deceased that might be kept in a bóveda, like a watch or a pair of

\(^{231}\) These devotional readings were originated, in that order of prevalence, in Christian texts of popular spirituality; readings from diverse Spiritist sources and Patakines, or Yoruba mythical narratives, and their versions.
eye glasses, or photographs, all evoking the whole corporeality of those now deceased. Then there are the commercially printed prayer cards and devotional imagery preserved through decades, depicting biblical scenes, Jesus, Christian saints and the Virgin Mary. In the case of those members of the household without a religious attachment to bóvedas espirituales, they were still expected to display some basic ritual consideration towards them.

Symbolically, the presence of bóvedas in each home was of general knowledge to the entire household, all of whom followed similarly vague rules to the effect that bóvedas were not to be tampered with, moved, or disregarded as a place of religious significance, for example, by engaging in rowdy or playful behaviour, or loud conversation while in its surroundings. Also, for practitioners and non-practitioners alike in the household family, a bodily taboo applies, in that most practitioners acknowledged that the room in which a bóveda were kept could not be used for either eating, money-counting or sexual activities of any sort.

Among members of the household, there is generally a bodily awareness of the space enacted by bóvedas espirituales. While the doctrinal or narrative involvement in this practice carries with it a whole set of ritual commitments and operations, even the co-existence with it entails some sort of discipline of the body in motion.

5.2 Bóvedas as dynamic spaces

Some of these spatial and behavioral regulations of the body betray their origins in the rural cultures of Cuba from early twentieth century onwards. Growing numbers of Cubans, while declaring themselves ‘Catholics’, in fact did little else to warrant that claim. Because of
geopolitical changes affecting Cuba, the previous influence enjoyed by the Roman Catholic Church was eroded by the growing participation of Evangelical churches in the cultural life of the country, thereby further challenging what until then was the pervading cultural medium for religious concerns. Folk religious practitioners continued freely appropriating elements of ritual, symbol and narrative from Christian churches, but under the new historical circumstances, with a renewed interest in the use of the Bible and extemporary forms of prayer. On the other hand, the practice of Spiritism persisted and in fact developed as it blended into Cuban folk religious practices, and even family religious practices. However, the legacy of Spiritism in Cuban folk religions did not go so far as to culturally cement the ideological disregard for the material, the perception of the senses, traditionally associated with religious or philosophical discourses which rely on body-spirit dualities. In fact, Spiritist practice in Cuba, and subsequently its continual influence on folk religion devices like bóvedas espirituales, has incorporated crucial elements from both African and European cultures, including but not limited to some of their most sensual, embodiment-driven displays of religious practice.

By the 1950s, bóvedas espirituales had become a predictable element in Cuban family religions as well as an archetype of Cuban folk religious practice. Hence, bóvedas espirituales, as we know them today, appear to have entered the Cuban religious panorama as a marginal entity, and have remained as such until the present time. Despite their considerable prevalence within the Cuban religious spectrum, the predictability of their presence in Cuban homes and the deep roots the practice enjoys in the Cuban cultural imaginary, yet the practice of bóvedas espirituales has remained socially marginalized or, in the best case, preserved as a practice of ritual intimacy in Cuban family religions.
Bóvedas espirituales constitute spaces which evidence their character as a human construct, brought into being by means of cultural processes of creation and recreation “through historical meanings, narratives and events.” However, the impact of bóvedas espirituales, as a religious practice, extends from the physical into the mental and the social dimensions –which also constitute the second element in Kim Knott’s methodology for the discernment of religion in space. As a physical object, a bóveda is created by artisans and religious practitioners, used and manipulated and related to, in specific spatial coordinates and with very specific purposes. In their syncretic and marginal character, they are often associated, in the wider culture with economically disadvantaged religious practitioners. The very inception and use of bóvedas invokes a ritual coming-to-terms with the historical character and the experiential actuality of the lives of practitioners. Out of such continued presence and usage in the physical realm come the mental depiction and narratives prevalent in the Cuban culture, which also speak to the primordial place of bóvedas espirituales in the cultural imaginary. They subsequently constitute the most socially prevalent notion for identifying and speaking about Cuban family religions, precisely because of the often intimate character of Cuban family religious practice. The multidimensional nature of the spaces enacted by bóvedas, the physical objects, conceptualized and socially narrated, translates them into mental spaces and archetypical expressions of religious practice which are hidden, kept behind closed doors and only available for the purveyor of members of the household.

Kim Knott lists this multidimensional configuration, together with simultaneity, extension and power as the ‘properties of space’, the third element in her methodology for locating religion in

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233 “Religion, which is social, practical and ideological, must also exist in and express itself through the dimensions of space”, Kim Knott, At Home in the Secular, 49. In this assertion, as in much of her spatial methodology, Knott is quick to acknowledge the influence of both Henri Lefebvre and Foucault.
space and which she dates back to Foucault’s 1967 lecture ‘Des espaces autres’ concerned with the seemingly inevitable connections between space and power, and the contributions of Doreen Massey in regards to the role of relationships in the creation of space. The spatial properties of simultaneity and extension describe both the internal complexity and diversity of a given space as well as its being dynamically interconnected with other, global sites, its being “constituted by synchronic relations and diachronic extensions.” In this sense, sacred space enacted by practitioners of bóvedas espirituales both encompasses an internal diversity and participates from a variety of external relations. This simultaneity is best reflected in the intensive dialogical processes reflected in the mixed nature of the practices staged in and in fact constituting bóvedas. Secondly, it is seen through the continual reference of the narrative devices associated with bóvedas espirituales (Yoruba patakines or mythical narratives, biblical texts, Christian traditional devotional readings, Spiritist devotional texts) to overarching spaces either of a geographical nature (Yorubaland, present time Niger; Jerusalem, in the Middle East; town of El Cobre, in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba) or within the common religious imaginary (Garden of Eden, The Land of the Spirits, Heaven). Thirdly, it is seen through the history of each particular bóveda being displayed in its own constitution and physical space, in its elements and their individual location and patterns of location within the wider space of the home.

Knott cites de Certeau’s assertion of the palimpsest-like quality of places, the spatial encompassing of multiple stories and the identities they illuminate, the relational quality and

236 Doreen Massey, Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place, 64-66; Doreen Massey: Space, Place and Gender, 152-154.
237 Ibid.
interconnectedness of spaces as well as of the persons, places and objects which constitute those spaces. Given the family-depth connotations of the narratives and rituals held around bóvedas (the combination of diachronic connections among elements found in, as well as the diachronic extensions going both in and out of the bóveda) it is not difficult to see how such relationships have contributed to the creation and re-creation of sacred space by means of the practice of bóvedas espirituales.

This very act of constituting sacred spaces illustrates the need for addressing what is in fact the last dimension of space advanced by Kim Knott: power. If, as Sheldrake insists, space, and more specifically sacred space, is always a human construct and, by necessity, it is always socially constituted, then it is only natural for the argument to turn to issues of power and how it is “caught up in the spaces occupied and produced by religion.” In the wider culture, the sacred is understood as the absolute power. The raison d'être for the sacred is to indicate a presence, a will and a purpose of that absolute power. Rituals are performed for the enactment and re-enactment of that purpose in space and time, and in any of its localized, narratively and ritually contextualized forms.

It is often the case that dominant groups utilize space in order to exercise and, at times, plainly abuse power by containing, removing or visibly excluding other social actors. This may eventually lead to the creation or re-creation of alternative sacred spaces, born out of exclusion and misuse of power. It is, after all, the capacity of space “to be shot through with ideology that makes it power-full,” argues Kim Knott, and continues: “All spatialities are political because

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240 Ibid., 25.
241 A very comprehensive approach to this subject is ”Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the End of an Era,” in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson eds. Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2-29.
they are the (covert) medium and (disguised) expression of asymmetrical relations of power.”

However, an alternative approach to power in religious practices does well in focusing instead in the operation of this category in the subjects of these practices. Akhil Gupta, appealing to the work of Michel Foucault, sums up this turn quite clearly:

(...) we do not propose to make resistance the property of a sovereign subject who is either transcendental with respect to the course of history or evolving within it. Rather, the task is to understand that form of power "which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity ... a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge."

Space, rather than a simple reality, can be seen instead as the always contested result of exercises of power, and to discern the links between power and religion for a specific space requires us to address what type of social links contribute to the constitution of space and what cultural symbols are appealed to for representing sacred space. This line of argument is just as important to theologians, as it further resources the discernment of the ethical nature and instincts to be found in family religious practices.

Specifically, bóvedas espirituales can be seen as enacting and actualizing sacred power by means of creating, maintaining, ritually cultivating and narratively endowing what is done within its boundaries and the boundaries of the space enacted by it. The claim of practitioners of bóvedas espirituales to be able to create locally by means of contesting the social, the power to constitute in their homes an appropriate spatial, ritual and symbolic spatial alternative (a contested space) to more socialized forms of religious practice is a primordial expression of this dimension of space.

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Still following Gupta, this contest could be re-conceptualized, away from “a disembodied duel with power”\textsuperscript{244} and into implications of the enactment of space with human identity.

5.3 Imagined Sacred Space

In the practice of \textit{bóvedas espirituales} and family religions as a whole, there is also an implicit claim to representing and narrating elements of ritual and symbol which are deemed at least comprehensive of the imaginary, religious worldviews of members of the household family. It is possible, so to speak, to discern features and salient points in the spiritualities represented and illustrated by the sacred space enacted by \textit{bóvedas espirituales}. These are spiritualities which seek to address the challenges and possibilities of the everyday life, embedded in the quotidian. These spiritualities are accessible to any Christian theology willing to engage the missiological possibilities which are opened by creative, generous approaches to the doctrinal traditions around the mystery of the Incarnation. How is spatiality appropriated by practitioners, or to put it another way, how is sacred space perceived, conceived and lived by people?

Kim Knott, once again appealing to the spatial reflections of Lefebvre, lists these three dynamics as `the aspects of space’, the fourth element in her methodology for locating religion. Knott first describes `perceived space’ as that space which is created, used and discerned by people in their quotidian life, encompassing the types of spatial practice which would be deemed of common sense, almost of an utilitarian nature and purpose. In the case of spaces enacted by religious practice, it appeals to those spatial practices being embedded in the sacred character of the space and becoming sacred themselves. When applied to the practice of \textit{bóvedas espirituales}, this

\textsuperscript{244} \textit{Ibid.} 28.
aspect of space describes those actions which could be deemed as both utilitarian and pregnant with exegesis of meaning, as in the case of lighting candles, or dusting the bóvedas, putting fresh flowers or fresh glasses of water.

However, these external features do not exhaust the meaning-invoking potential of bóvedas espirituales. As material, symbolic and ritual enactments of sacred space, bóvedas become ground for meaning, a lens for interpreting the wider space of the world, precisely as they are acknowledged by practitioners to, in fact, perform a religious purpose. The religious specificity of the spatial enactment of bóvedas espirituales is at least partly a response and further ritual, imaginative abstraction and representation of the wider material and symbolic world surrounding it. As Knott further argues, the phenomenon of religious practice, in its “social orderings, and cultural forms, is a consequence of spatial practice, though it is the attribution of meaning that gives such practice its character as ‘religious.’”245 On the other hand, there is a whole different set of spatial enactments to be found around bóvedas espirituales, surpassing in both intention and meaning the mere utilitarian essence of regular tasks for the upkeep of the space around them. Bóvedas encompass narratively involved spatial strategies, supported by ritual arrangements and symbolic conventions which, have been both received and adapted or created and further developed by practitioners.

‘Representations of space’ is the second aspect of space which Knott uses to describe the enactment of received and adapted ritual arrangement and symbolic conventions. It refers to those elements of space which can be attributed to preceding, dominant, socially-recognizable discourses of ideology, ritual canons and narrative orders. In the space enacted in bóvedas espirituales, these can be identified as the spatial norms, on the one hand, inherited from the

assortment of Cuban religious traditions, which throughout time have been adapted in order to more profitably inform Cuban folk religious practices and more specifically, family religions. On the other hand, there are the spatial models received from the wider Cuban cultural milieu, including civic, musical, literary, historical symbols, narratives and elements of ritual.

The third and last aspect of space is that referring to space lived by people, what Knott dates back to Lefebvre’s work as the aspect of ‘space of representation’, consisting of the practices of space which are subversive or at least alternative to the spatial status quo and “directly lived through its associated images and symbols.” These are the spatial practices which also seek to embody and give expression to ritual contestation and “symbolic resistance which offers the possibility (albeit temporary) of gathering people and enabling them to escape or transcend their oppressive, routine or meaningless existence.”

These are spatial tools for ethnographic description which appear very applicable to the practice of bóvedas espirituales. They are, indeed, spatial, narrative and symbolic alternatives to established canons of worship as found in the established religious traditions in Cuba, both throughout the Christian denominational spectrum, Spiritism traditions and African-originated religious complexes. But bóvedas espirituales persist to our day, first and foremost, because they were preserved, during times of socially-sanctioned hostility towards religion and their practitioners, as domestic and ritual-centered alternatives to government-endorsed political (civic cult of the heroes of the Revolution), artistic (La Nueva Trova, politically-committed art) and even spiritual (the Homeland) narratives for addressing collective desire, realization and commitment. More than an alternative, at times bóvedas have operated in outright subversion of socially dominant mores. For example, in their use of bóvedas espirituales, practitioners may

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choose to place in positions of spatial priority photographs or mementos of persons, whether mythical or historical, quite different from those preferred or plain endorsed by either the Christian churches or the established traditions in the religious community in which they may participate, or the political discourse of the State. Also, practitioners might choose to employ devotional texts, prayers, ritual actions and symbols which would not be condoned or even accepted by the structures of power in the communities where they live out their parallel religious or ideological loyalties.\textsuperscript{248} In the case of practitioners with existing connections to or even membership in a Christian church, these might extend into denominational traditions beyond that to which he or she is formally affiliated, or manifest themselves through the open, continued practice of narrative, ritual and symbolic syncretisation and overall administration of what takes place within the space of bóvedas espirituales.

These spatial aspects of perceived, represented and lived by people were first described by Henri Lefebvre not as predictable, sequenced stages of historical occurrence, but “as ever present spatial possibilities.”\textsuperscript{249} They are, indeed, stances of dynamic spatiality, the last aspect of space as proposed by Kim Knott, by means of which she seeks to describe the instances in which religious practice extends itself into the creation of other spaces, which may or may not openly recall their origin. The dynamics of space point to the degree to which bóvedas espirituales, as archetype of Cuban family religions, are embedded, indeed thoroughly enmeshed in the everyday life of all occupants of the home, and particularly practitioners. They participate from processes of everyday practice and their embodiment: “knowledge and discourse, production and

\textsuperscript{248} For example, in the case of women who also participate from worship services in Christian churches in Cuba who, while ritually tending to their bóvedas, they might adopt some of the manners and gestures typical of liturgical presiders i.e. priests or pastors.

reproduction.” In that process, the subject of those practices is just as embedded in religious ritual and religious concerns as he or she might be in other spheres of social and cultural life. This takes place within a hermeneutical and narrative balance that both preserves the integrity of either part but which also blends them into one discernible pattern, religious or not, of family life and dynamics of the home. But bóvedas also extend themselves into other places of the home, by means of smaller spatial arrangements, usually both in the front and back areas of the home – at times in the shape of small grottos featured in discrete corners of these areas of the house. The practices engaged in the vicinity of the bóveda are also extended into other spaces, even outside the home, as practitioners may carry with them mementos, prayer books, rosaries or others as they go through their daily life, away from home and their bóvedas. The prevalence that bóvedas espirituales display in the Cuban religious imagery and practice results precisely from their continued, repeated replication throughout homes across the island and even beyond and into the multiple geographical points in the world where the Cuban Diaspora can be found. Each instance, however, becomes an opportunity for practitioners to spatially contest the received bóvedas, for that purpose embedding in them unique elements of their own ritual, narrative and symbolic experience and practice.

5.4 Elements for a Theology of Space for Bóvedas Espirituales

When seen through the methodological prisms from Latin American liberation theologians I addressed earlier in my analysis, bóvedas espirituales were described as a fundamental place of Cuban religious practice. In them, ‘popular’ and ‘official’ categorizations for religious

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phenomena show themselves wanting, as do the rigid conceptual separations between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. Within the Cuban religious spectrum, bóvedas are archetypical marginal religious practices, in both their constitution and in the hermeneutic processes which have led to their present, most prevalent format. These syncretic processes take place within a wider cultural environment which has been and remains active towards religious mixture, and they reveal very specific patterns for the spatialization of religion.

In this chapter I have, first, described bóvedas espirituales following the methodology proposed by Kim Knott for the location of religion in space. In that order, I first addressed the role of the body in the practice of bóvedas espirituales, with emphasis on how these disciplines of ritual and symbol both organize the life of the home around them. They also illustrate the diversity of religious traditions informing its quotidian rituals, as well as its design and elements. Secondly, I described the dimensions and properties of space as found in the ways in which practitioners of family religions discern and enact sacred space. Thirdly, I completed this description through analyzing the spatial aspects and dynamics as verified in the practice of bóvedas, specifically pointing out the instances in which the space enacted by the bóveda is extended or replicated in other parts of the home. Out of this spatial analysis for the location of religion have been identified elements for theological reflections about bóvedas espirituales.

When addressing these theological possibilities opened up by spatial analysis, however, I am intentionally keeping distance from self-involved theoretical statements, easy conceptual avenues towards over generalizing, universal statements about God and religious belief. Instead, I have chosen to engage elements of analysis which are both illustrative of the spatial concerns involved in the practice of bóvedas espirituales and display potential for their being meaningfully shared among both practitioners and scholars also interested in Cuban family religions. In this sense,
bóvedas represent a fundamental practice among Cuban family religions, embodying the types of dynamic exchanges and borrowings between preceding religious systems, reflecting syncretic, localized processes of religious blending and compartmentalization of Cuban folk religions. *Bóvedas espirituales* not only gather a diversity of elements, whether symbolic or narrative, from those religious systems, but are also emblematic of the syncretic processes which have shaped and continue shaping Cuban folk religions.

To address theologically the beliefs and practices found in Cuba family religions, and overall in Cuban folk religions, demands a methodological acknowledgement of these religious and overall cultural realities. Not much religious practice in Cuba can be accurately analyzed without considering at length both the diversity of sources and the syncretic processes involved in their conformation. Particularly relevant to Cuban theological scholarship are the arguments and analysis about processes of cultural mixture and, specifically, religious syncretism, given both their demographic prevalence and defining incidence in the culture and all its socialized expressions.

Secondly, bóvedas are intentional, persistent enactments of sacred space, betraying the syncretic ritual work involved in their blending of narrative and symbolic traditions. *Bóvedas* enact behaviours and boundaries which are identified by practitioners as religious, and the bodily, ritual and narrative devices they evoke reaffirm that notion. By their ritual use, practitioners seek to enact purposes of prayer and mystical contemplation and remembrance, the ritual and narrative cultivation of attitudes towards a divine agency. This aspect of agency, and specifically of religious agency, calls for theological analyses concerned with folk religious practice to address the ethical implications of religious ritual practice.
Thirdly, in the ritual enactment of sacred space, practitioners of bóvedas espirituales display theological commitments which can be recognized and appreciated by Christian theologies. These include the notion of God ‘taking place’ in the midst of everyday life, the possibility of sacramental communion with ancestors and the cultivation of persistent patterns of religious narratives, rituals and symbols, in synchronicity with a reflection of power as legitimately enacted in bóvedas espirituales. What ‘happens’ in the rituals of family religions is a quiet challenge to absolute conceptions of ‘religion’ and this might explain the just as quiet refusal of Christian churches in Cuba to engage family and folk religions in their aesthetic, narrative and syncretic concreteness.

To address the demands that these forms of religious practice present to the missiological and oecumenical agenda of Christian churches would require a revision of the claims of doctrinal discipline and hermeneutical verticality which many of them continue to make. However, such a reconsideration of the categories used by Christian churches to speak about God, religion and belief could also open up what practitioners of folk and family religions themselves think about these issues. These are conversations that Christian churches in Cuba should be interested in encouraging, as they seek to further engage local expressions of culture and, indeed, religion.

Lastly, practitioners of bóvedas espirituales attest in their practices and their claims about these practices that their ritual enactments of sacred space do not necessarily seek to fulfill religious notions of dramatic enlightenment, sudden conversion, or earth shattering self-discovery. Rather, the commitments to these practices reflect sustained and reflexive patterns of spatial practice, grounded on specific narrative devices and maintained by very concrete ritual means.
This spatial description of bóvedas espirituales is the ethnographic, theological core of my spatial methodology for the theological analysis of Cuban family religions and, more specifically, that of bóvedas espirituales. This methodology is grounded on a theological affirmation that God is ‘taking place’ in the midst of human experience and spatiality, in both cosmic and local dimensions. This sacramental notion, after Sheldrake, is expanded with the discernment of people as places of the sacred, and their practices the embodiment of what constitutes what we otherwise speak of as the sacred.

But, to reiterate the innovative contribution of this spatial methodology for the theological analysis of bóvedas espirituales, it is about the contestation of traditional verificationist approaches for the study of folk religions. Further sources might be found for such a theological analysis of folk enactments of sacred space. For example, the many biblical narratives and even thematic blocks directly addressing the issue of place (emblematically, in the theme of the land), the early Christian theological works dealing with sacramentality, the body, pilgrimage and eschatological themes, or even current concerns in which Christian theologians and communities have planted a stake: issues of social justice, specifically those related to access and rights over land; the relationship between religious narrative and ritual and the wider community, and globalization.

Whichever thematic approach it might be, what is required is a strong methodological concern for the emic-oriented character of the analysis. Finally, such a methodology must acknowledge the need for ethical discernment, and to make room for the consideration of both liberating and oppressing patterns of relationships and socialization, which may well be reflected in the symbols, rituals and narratives engaged by practitioners of family religions and more specifically bóvedas espirituales.
The next and final section is the conclusions to my thesis paper. In it, I will be reviewing the findings of my analysis, specifically as they respond to my goals as stated in the Introduction to this thesis. Also, I will suggest further lines of analysis and research, as well as implications that my thesis work might have for both theological studies concerned with spatial issues and concerns of practical theology for those Churches seeking to revise their pastoral approach to practitioners of folk religions and, more specifically, Cuban churches seeking to renew their approach to practitioners of Cuban family religions and, more specifically, bóvedas espirituales.
Chapter 6

6. Conclusions

In this thesis, I have argued how Cuban family religions, specifically bóvedas espirituales, their narratives and ritual complexes, remain among the most prevalent form of religious practice in Cuba. I have described the sources and processes which have shaped what eventually became the current diversity of designs and uses of bóvedas espirituales, an emblematic form of Cuban family religions. I also reviewed the analyses of folk religions from Latin American liberation theologians and established fundamental thematic lines in their arguments. In the search for more emic-like approaches to the religious experience of practitioners of bóvedas espirituales, I have referred to the ‘spatial turn’ and its implications for the study of everyday religious practice. By using the spatial analysis methodology from Kim Knott and the theological contributions from Philip Sheldrake, as well as the information provided in previous chapters, I proposed a spatial interpretation of the practice of bóvedas espirituales. This concluding chapter highlights key analyses of my dissertation, and suggests the implications of this research for theological analysis of folk religions.

6.1 Overview of the Thesis

In the Introduction to this thesis, I provided a concise definition of what bóvedas espirituales are and discussed their historical context and evolution to their present use and prevalence in Cuban
family religions. I also pointed out the dismissive, if not hostile, view that Cuban Christian theologies and Churches have traditionally held about bóvedas. The Introduction also included observations about my research background, where I noted my long-standing engagement with issues of Cuba folk religion, as well as the motivations behind addressing the specificity of Cuban family religions, especially in bóvedas espirituales, and the goals of this thesis, together with observations about its methodology and structure.

My objectives with this thesis have been to propose a theological rationale which, while challenging the traditionally verificationist assessment of Cuban folk religions and specifically family religions, may engage the experiential concreteness of these religious practices. For this purpose, I also sought to provide a concise, accurate description of bóvedas espirituales by means of engaging the spatial concreteness of their resulting enactments of sacred space. I observed that accomplishing these goals would ultimately enable the Cuban churches to widen the availability of analytical tools for the missiological engagement of folk religions and, specifically, the domestic specificity of family religions.

In Chapter Two I argued how bóvedas espirituales constitute home-embedded, spatially-invested practices of Cuban folk religions. I also described the sources and processes through which they acquired their current characteristics and ritual use. I argued that the main purpose of bóvedas espirituales is to provide a stable, symbolically coherent space for the ritual practice of the remembrance of ancestors, as well as other uses: a place for meditation and devotional reading, spatial enactment of intercessory prayer and specific prayer practices.

A traditionally verificationist theological approach to Cuban folk religions and, more specifically, the practice of bóvedas espirituales, could not extend beyond the stark realization
that these are not, strictly speaking, ‘Christian’ practices in either their ritual performance or symbolic design. Any analysis seeking to adequately discern the place of bóvedas espirituales in Christian theological scholarship and the overall mission of Christian Churches must extend beyond such anthropologically impoverishing approaches and attempt to engage the lived-out signs of the presence of God in the quotidiant life of believers, within their quotidian spaces of the intimate. It is, however, beneficial to scholarly analysis to take account of the ethnographic sources which have visibly informed at least some aspects of Cuban family religious practices and specifically that of bóvedas espirituales. Analyzing the religious traditions behind bóvedas espirituales also enables a clearer understanding of the syncretic processes at work in the gradual, historically placed and culturally resourced adoption into the local culture and religious practice of specific elements from otherwise dissimilar religious and cultural traditions.

In Chapter Three, I engaged the works of Latin American liberation theologians, specifically their approaches to folk religions which were also alternatives to the verificationist approaches. Specifically, I described their analysis of the politics of the category ‘religion’ as they can be perceived in the official-popular religion debate, the role of margins as fitting context for theological revelation and reflection, and the practice of alternative strategies for knowledge. Their reflections have further shaped my notion of syncretism, not only as a finished phenomenon but as an always ongoing, dual process of appropriation and contestation. While noting the contributions of these thematic lines among liberation theologians, I also pointed that theological disciplines do not provide the tools for intentionally emic methodologies for discerning the contents of the religious experience elicited in bóvedas espirituales. In particular, I noted the difficulty of making these thematic insights from liberation theologians available to the actual practitioners of folk religions and specifically those practitioners of bóvedas espirituales.
In Chapter Four, I argued that the ‘spatial turn’ provides imaginative, agency-conscious tools to discern the ethnographic concreteness of spaces enacted by religious practice. Because issues of agency and power are inevitably involved in these enactments of sacred spaces, it is possible to acknowledge both the ethnographic complexity of bóvedas and the ritual agency of their practitioners. For this purpose, I considered what is known as ‘the spatial turn’ in both the sciences of religion and Christian theologies. In order to inform this analysis, I reviewed the historiographies of the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘religious experience’, and established the connections therein by way of theological reflection. Specifically, I emphasized how a discernment of enacted sacred space could contribute to enhancing our understanding of theological agency, particularly among practitioners of folk religions, and how this would be an alternative to previous verificationist approaches which resulted in assessments which essentially impoverished the agency of practitioners. I briefly described the work in this field by Kim Knott, as well as her methodology for locating religion in space. I further described some characteristics of ‘the spatial turn’ in Christian theology, specifically through the works of Philip Sheldrake. I argued how this academic perspective offers analytical tools for discerning theological agency beyond the verificationist reductionism of previous approaches and instead enables the analysis on the spatially enacted evidence of religious experiences connected to folk religious practices and specifically bóvedas espirituales.

In Chapter Five, I further developed the theological instances of ‘the spatial turn’, with the purpose of offering a theological analysis of bóvedas espirituales. First, I established the essential elements of the spatial description of bóvedas espirituales, by means of the methodology proposed by Kim Knott. As part of this exercise, I reviewed related elements in the conceptual shaping of the category of ‘religion’ and then presented a spatial description and
analysis of bóvedas espirituales, specifically concerned with how the spatial practices observed in connection with them can be interpreted as enactments of sacred space. This description, while grounded on the methodology proposed by Kim Knott, also incorporates analytical elements from the reviewed theological approaches to folk religions among Latin American liberation theologians, the theological contributions of Philip Sheldrake to the scholarly work of ‘the spatial turn’ and the ethnographic data obtained from both the existing academic bibliography and observations carried on among practitioners of bóvedas espirituales who were also active participants of parish communities of the Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba.

6.2 Review of Findings

Through this analysis, I have demonstrated that bóvedas espirituales are intentional, ritual enactments of sacred space. They evidence bodily disciplines, dynamism and imaginative capacity in their practitioners which at least suggest systematic hermeneutical commitments. Bóvedas espirituales are ethnographically ‘thick’ phenomena, even within the wider and more complex diversity of religious practices in Cuba. They encompass and enable the constitution and reconstitution of inter-personal links among members of the family by means of ritual participation. Bóvedas espirituales contribute to the setting of social spaces (and their boundaries) within the community of the household family. They make possible the collective actualization of a mythical past, from the historical and narrative complexity of ethnically distinctive groups to the concreteness and intimacy of household and family traditions and narratives. These continual actualizations bring about, almost by necessity, the design and use of
collective means for the production of structures of meaning and distinctive notions of group memory.

These features reflect, first, local, independently adopted, notions of household hierarchical power and the means for its exercise: often enough, the setting and enforcement of social boundaries in the household family in fact goes on to contest overarching, wider social concerns for stratification and spatiality. The possibility for spatial coexistence, even that for good communal living, is enacted and re-visited by means of intentional re-setting of received notions of boundaries. Secondly, these characteristics of family religion contribute to the fostering of both practices and cultural notions of solidarity and corporate responsibility, by means of the communal observance of bodily, ritual disciplines concerning the sacred as enacted by bóvedas espirituales. Finally, they reveal commitments, both individual and group-wise, to the remembrance and ritualization of a common past and history. Bóvedas espirituales are precisely one of the, if not the main ritual, symbolic means by which practitioners of Cuban family religions enact these distinct structures of meaning and notions of group memory.

A theological and spatial analysis of bóvedas espirituales, on the other hand, brings the academic exercise closer to the claims being made by practitioners in regards to the means for and implications of their enactments of sacred space in their practice of Cuban family religions. A theological methodology and language concerned with folk religions will be all the more effective as they succeed in engaging not just the ethnographic evidence and phenomenological concreteness of their object of interest but especially the emic uniqueness of the subject of their interest, the folk religion practitioner –or their community. To combine a theological analysis with the basic tools of spatial analysis renders the possibilities created by ‘the spatial turn’ for methodological alternatives to verificationist approaches to folk religious practices.
Based on my proposed theological-spatial analysis, bóvedas are shown to reflect persisting, everyday dynamics of ritual embodiment, conception, negotiation and imagination of enacted sacred space within the encompassing and at the same time intimate space of the home. While further, better organized field research should contribute even more information in this respect, both the available evidence and the subsequent theological analysis indicate that practitioners of bóvedas espirituales display patterns of bodily, dynamic and imagined intentionality and coherence which suggest that their practices are amenable to theological analysis. Practitioners of bóvedas espirituales appear to discern the revelation of God’s being as taking place, first, within the narrative and sacramental frameworks dictated by authorities of Christian churches but also in the everyday life of the home, the family, the local community. Frequently, forms of family religion emphasize God’s grace and very specific needs and unknowns in the life of the household community. Not surprisingly, the sacred space enacted by bóvedas is, essentially, relationship-driven. As stated before, the primary purpose for bóvedas is the ritual cultivation of communion with ancestors. But because of the patterns of intercessory prayer predictably involved in accomplishing this purpose, bóvedas espirituales also serve as background for regular intercessory prayers for the living, especially members of the same household and extended family.

While I have limited my approach to those aspects of the practice of Cuban family religions and more specifically of bóvedas espirituales which are the most congenial to spatial analysis, further research and discussion is sure to move this argument into even deeper engagement with issues like the spatial agency of practitioners, the nature of systematic exercises of what amounts to theological reflection and the discursive and ritual dynamics for liminal spaces throughout the lives of practitioners. In what follows, I will outline the implications of my spatial analysis of
bóvedas espirituales for theological methodologies for the analysis of Cuban everyday religious practice, as well as issues concerning theological education.

6.3 Implications for theological analyses of folk religions

In my third chapter, when reviewing the works of Latin American liberation theologians around the issue of folk religions, I noted that their methodologies enable this issue to be analyzed from theologically significant angles. These methodologies, however, do not perform nearly as well if they are meant to be experientially meaningful to the subjects of folk religions”251 and, specifically, to those who engage in the concrete practice of bóvedas espirituales.

The ‘spatial turn’, and more specifically the theological approach to enacted sacred space which I have proposed, has the potential to elicit research whose results can be deemed as experientially meaningful to practitioners. This is because spatial analysis of religious practices capitalizes upon what is done ritually, what is enacted spatially and what is intended and religiously practiced. This succession of agentic roles, on the one hand, describes and informs what is, by all accounts, an emic-oriented methodology of ethnographic analysis, establishing a paradigm of scientific research which stays very close to the actual praxis of folk religions. On the other hand, it underlines the embedded character of the religious practices being analyzed, their being existentially fused within the everyday life of practitioners. Out of these contributions, I have been able to discern, as I earlier proposed, “… a more emic approach to (…) those theological

251 Chapter Three, 53.
elements already present to and discerned by those same subjects of folk religions, as expressed and encountered in their religious experiences.”  

In this same line, a theological approach to enacted sacred space after the methodological prompters of ‘the spatial turn’ would also contribute to moving the scholarly study of folk religions closer to the spatial level of the religious experience, and overall human experience, in which practitioners appear to invest the most. Space is where practitioners enact their beliefs, concretize their faith and symbolize their affections and desires. Meaning is discerned, enacted and narrated not only by means of the words, objects and actions employed by practitioners but also by the sacred space enacted by these expressions of religious, even theological agency.

Studies of Cuban folk religions, and the resulting pastoral practice of Christian churches, would benefit from reassessing the role of the family home in the creation, recreation and transmission of religious values, meaning and traditions. The home is a primary context where folk religious practices occur. This requires theologians and pastors alike to be acquainted with basic issues connected to family and housing, hierarchies, privacy, shared spaces, spatial disciplines and the location of religion in those processes as well as in their material enactments. Also, it is important to address those issues where contested space can be discerned: gender, power and boundary control. As Kim Knott has emphasized, idealized conceptions of the domestic must be upgraded to an ethically driven discernment of sacred space, which is also alert to oppression and overall the collusion with violence and degradation.  

In the Cuban context, whenever possible, family homes are ‘kept in the family’, passed down from one generation to the next as, if at all, the main form of inheritance. Because Christian

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252 Ibid.
253 Kim Knott. The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis, 96-98.
churches (both as institutions and local communities) in Cuba remain comparatively few in numbers and rather modest in social penetration and geographical reach, the family home remains a central space for worship and prayer *vis-a-vis* churches and other settings for institutionally sanctioned religious practices. The current practice of Cuban house missions or house churches, in which large spaces of family homes are turned into spaces for public worship, is socially unsustainable and should not be taken as the paradigm for all questions involving family religious practices or, essentially, home religions. The family home is often seeing as capable of containing sacred spaces, or spaces which practitioners acknowledge to be sacred, in open contestation of institutionally sanctioned enactments of sacred space (for example, in Christian churches). There is also a marked concern among practitioners for the intercession for and the well-being of ancestors, as well as for the enjoyment of communion with them. Practitioners of *bóvedas espirituales* do this, however, from the very specific perspective of the family home, and this translates some of the most notable features of Cuban folk religions into more intimate and personally involved concerns and aesthetically meaningful ritual and symbolic means.

The practice of *bóvedas espirituales* displays characteristics which are common to the wider spectrum of Cuban folk religions. I have pointed out above the syncretic processes commonly involved in the creation, re-creation and transmission of religious traditions. The shared religious commitments, which I have argued are displayed by practitioners of *bóvedas espirituales* constitute another important contribution to the way Christian theologies approach folk religions. More often than not, theologians and pastoral staff interacting with practitioners of folk religions appeal to syncretism in order to describe what characterises the ritual and narrative outcome, the ‘finished product’ of historical processes of syncretic exchange between demographic and ethnic
cultures and individuals. To appeal instead to the analysis of how sacred space is enacted in Cuban folk religions, as emblematically displayed in bóvedas espirituales, reinforces the appeal to syncretism as describing a process, rather than a finished condition or nature, characterizing the hermeneutic, discursive and creative processes leading to the eventual adoption of folk religious practices. This is a process which, just like the religious practices it has contributed to shape, is better appreciated as ‘lived’ rather than ‘performed’ by practitioners.

6.4 Final Reflections

This thesis focused on producing both an accurate description of bóvedas espirituales, an emblematic practice of Cuban family religions, as well as the articulation of their theological, spatial analysis. I pursued these goals in four parts. First, by describing the cultural sources of bóvedas espirituales and addressing the syncretic dynamics which can be verified in their design and use by practitioners. Secondly, by describing the methodologies of Latin American liberation theologians for the analysis of folk religions and underlining those elements with the most potential to contribute to unlocking theological themes found in Cuban family religions and specifically bóvedas espirituales. Thirdly, by responding to the need for more emic concerned theological methodologies with the adoption of methodological contributions of the ‘spatial turn’ to the analysis of religious agency and, consequently, the proposal of a theological, spatial methodology for the discernment of theological relevance of bóvedas espirituales. Fourth and finally, by applying this methodology to bóvedas espirituales, with the theoretical background provided by both my account of Cuban religious traditions and Latin American liberationist theological approaches to folk religions.
My analysis has shown that the ‘spatial turn’ can provide the tools for discerning the theological import of folk religious practices and specifically so in the case of family religions and bóvedas espirituales. When subjected to even elementary forms of spatial analysis, bóvedas display their potential as ethnographically accessible, theologically pregnant enactments of sacred space and spatial expressions in response to religious experiences. Emblematically among practices of Cuban folk religions and more specifically family religions, bóvedas espirituales reveal a palimpsest quality, holding together a multiplicity of stories and clues to the internal diversity and multiple external links of the practices involved.

That is, bóvedas in their internal and external complexity, the syncretic processes I have described in Chapter Two, point to relational networks of places and persons, narratives and memories, all of which, precisely, constitute the space bóvedas enact. They reveal, in their inception and use, a ritual reckoning of the historicity and the relevance of the religious experiences of practitioners, their being privileged loci or places of the sacred, as well as the cognitively revelatory potential of spatial practice. As practitioners persist in these practices of family religions, so persist their enactments of the belief that God ‘takes place’ in their everyday and that of people like them. That folk religions and family religions should emphasize the cultivation of the responses of practitioners to what they understand and embody in ritual and prayer as God’s continuing revelation underlines a commitment to ethical reflection which is fertile ground for even more sustained Christian theological reflections.

This ethical dimension of the enactment of sacred space by practitioners of bóvedas espirituales is also present in the contested character of the space itself, as well as in the practices and narratives that constitute that sacred space. When creating and enacting sacred space in the always contested space of their homes, practitioners are de facto making claims about their
identity and theological, ritual agency. Practitioners enact and, for all purposes, create meaning by acknowledging that their religious practice performs a religious purpose, and they do so while conscious of the contested character of these enacted sacred spaces vis-à-vis those enacted by more socially-embedded forms of religious (and, at times, even civic) practice.

To claim that it is possible to discern theological agency in the practice of bóvedas espirituales demands new venues for the way Christian theologies and institutional forms of Christianity in Cuba have related to family religions and overall to folk religions. Both theologians and pastoral agents of Cuban Christian churches must reconsider the conceptual barriers preventing them from assuming syncretism as a process embedded not just in the religious practices they might find in folk and family religions but also in Christianity itself and overall in the literary, symbolic, aesthetic dimensions of the Cuban culture. It is also important that there should be a growing understanding of syncretism, not as a qualifier of given religious practices and attitudes, but as the sort of dynamic which describes continuous, everyday life-embedded obliterations of inherited barriers between sacred and profane, folk and official religion.

My reflections here are moved by the beauty and complexity of the practices of family religions I have been able to observe, as well as the loyalty, imagination and flourishing talents of their practitioners. My analysis on the viability of applying spatial methodologies to the discernment of theological agency in family religions had the purpose of further informing the dynamics and hermeneutical processes at work in folk religions. With that, I sought to further inform and enable the better pastoral care and theological reflections of Cuban churches, and also to contribute to global conversations about the Christian responses to folk religions. As I argued
earlier in this thesis\textsuperscript{254}, this would help to further enable the mission, practice, and message, of Cuban Christian churches, and to theologians and pastoral agents everywhere concerned with the issue of folk religions, to grow in their understanding of what actually takes place, both ritually and narratively, in the lives of many Cubans and specifically those, like my mother, who are practitioners of family religions, and \textit{bóvedas espirituales}.

\textsuperscript{254} \textit{Introduction}, 10.
7. Bibliography


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