



Machismo, Marianismo, and the SDA Church

Latinos still cling to Hispanic Catholic assumptions about male/female relations. Ellen White offers a new model.

by Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson and Caleb Rosado

ALL HUMAN SOCIETIES OPERATE BY CERTAIN “rules” with regard to male-female relations. In Latino culture these norms can be summarized by the terms *machismo* and its feminine counterpart *hembrismo* or *marianismo*. To best understand these polar concepts and their impact on male-female relations both in Latino society and in the church, we will briefly examine the backdrop of medieval Spain, since it was the conflictive society from which most Latino/Latina values derive. We will later show how these values are changing in the context of American urban societies (both Latin America and the United States), and in the particular environment of the Adventist Church.

Spain’s history can best be understood from the perspective of the intermittent conflicts

and coexistence of three religiously diverse cultures: Arab, Jewish, and Christian. While it is true that the Romans gave Spain its language (60 percent of Spanish derives from Latin) and its religion (Roman Catholic), it is even more important to understand the cultural impact on the Iberian Peninsula of the conflicts waged among Islam, Judaism, and Christianity over the span of some 800 years. In contrast to the rest of Europe, Spain’s crusades took place in its own back yard, as it were, affecting both the demographics and the Spanish world view in a very decisive way. The influences of Jewish and Arabic culture on Christian Spain during its formative years, long negated in the official history books of the nation, help to explain the particular brand of machismo that arose on the peninsula and that was exported to the Americas. The Spanish “conquistador,” for example, can be adequately understood only against the backdrop of eight centuries of religious wars on the peninsula and the resulting importance assigned to the male as “warrior for God.” On the other hand, the unique charac-

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teristics of the Spanish notion of “honor” easily arise from Arabic restrictions surrounding women. It can safely be said that the religious and patriotic conceptual roots of the Latino *macho* are firmly rooted in Spain’s history.

Machismo

Without a doubt, the behavioral structures surrounding the male are the most fundamental and, therefore, the most influential in Latino social life, both in Spain, Spanish America, and Spanish-American culture as it exists in the United States. It is a framework that is consonant with a society that Américo Castro characterized as implacably centered on the individual rather than on the collectivity.¹ Even the classic Latino concern for the family must be contextualized in light of the pre-eminence of the male and the important role the family plays in preserving his social position.

What precisely is *machismo*? Machismo assumes the sole and exclusive dominance of the male and the preservation of that controlling position by subsuming the female. Because machismo favors the male over the female in matters pertaining to individual freedoms, it is often defined negatively. Jorge Gissi for example, defines machismo as “an oppressive ideology that divides people into superior and inferior by their sex.”² The superiority of the *macho*, though not explicit, is manifested implicitly at all levels: the physical (the male is strong, resistant, and aggressive); the sexual (the male has more energy, meaning that he needs more than one woman); and the mental (males are more intelligent and less emotional, thus more capable of leadership).

Machismo, in its best formulation, is an exaggerated orientation toward life by which man sees his role in society as being one of

protector, provider, and pursuer of woman.³ In its less heroic form, it is expressed through violence or indifference toward women. Ultimately, the strength assigned to the male is revealed in his view of woman as his most valuable “possession” since, within the marriage, her beauty, intelligence, talents, and acquiescence to his will mark him as a privileged male. Once the *macho* has created the woman in the image he has chosen, she can become the depository of all the ideals assigned to her by the man, as will be seen later in the discussion of marianismo.

There are many ways in which the male asserts his place and role in Hispanic society. For one thing, the Latino must perpetually “prove” to society that he is in charge, both as head of household and provider. Since the *macho* is meant to be the sole breadwinner of his family, remunerative work becomes an important means of establishing his personhood. Despite the popular myth of the “lazy Latin,” work is the measure of the Latino’s manhood. The Spanish *gamberro* [the dissolute], for example, is held in contempt precisely for shirking his work responsibilities and choosing to live off of women. Gilmore points out that the earning of a large salary is not necessary for the macho to establish his manhood. Ideally, work represents sacrifice and service to the family.⁴ Although it may come as a surprise, the Latina long has been allowed to work not only in service roles (maids, farming, etc.), but also as teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, and even as political figures of prominence. However, these are prerogatives historically enjoyed by upper-class or educated women (the issue of choice rather than necessity is important here) who were never expected to create policy, but rather to carry out male-initiated ground rules. Her role in the workplace must contribute to preserving the male’s place of *respeto* [respect] in society.

Another fundamental means through which the male establishes his masculinity is through his sexual relations with the woman in the pursuer role. Here the macho is allowed a certain socially-approved "truancy," both prior to and after marriage, as a kind of social compensation for his role as provider and protector. Manuel Peña declares that this role of pursuer is often legitimized with *charritas coloradas* [off-color jokes].⁵ The adolescent male is permitted and possibly expected to have participated in "promiscuous adventurism" as proof of his masculinity. After marriage, a man proves his worth by the number of children, particularly male children, he can engender. In southern Spain, for example, a married man with no children is scorned even if he was youthfully promiscuous;⁶ and barrenness is seen as his fault, even if it is hers, a theme dealt with dramatically in Garcia Lorca's *Yerma*.⁷

So heavy is the weight of responsibility for the male to be the economic and sexual "doer" that Hispanic society spurns the man who does not seem to be actively proving his manhood. What might be interpreted as theatricality is a survival mechanism of the Latino who lives perpetually under the judgment of society. A man's effectiveness is measured as others see him in action, where his performance can be evaluated.⁸ Additionally, the macho can wield his male prerogatives, sometimes regardless of moral correctness. In fact, ethical behavior can be interpreted as effeminate, since moral purity is effectively assigned to the woman.

On the other hand, it is important to note that behind the term macho lies the Spanish concept of "honor," which is not based on

male sexual morality, but on a man's ability to walk the delicate line between familial responsibility and the social expectations surrounding his existence as a male. And here a corrective is in order. The way the term *macho* is used in English, synonymous with such terms as "tough," "insensitive," "sexually promiscuous," is not a reflection of the Latino understanding of the term. In Spanish, to be a *macho* means to be a socially responsible person who takes care of his own with dignity and honor. Therefore, the true *macho* demands *respeto*, especially from other males, for being a socially

responsible being, although not necessarily a sexually faithful one. This situation explains why it is more important for the Latino male to be a man of his word (keeping promises) than keeping faith with his wife. Tirso de Molina's Don Juan,

the model for all other Don Juan figures in European literature, dies a truly *macho* death, preferring to keep a foolhardy promise than repent from defiling the wedding bed.⁹

Marianismo

It was the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), who once declared, in the purest of Latino macho traditions, that "the destiny of woman is to be seen by man."¹⁰ Ortega did not blush to admit that, in his perception, woman's only function was to be the "object" of some word or act of gallantry. This passive, objectifying view of the woman as a kind of invention of man, one that is "present" when and as he wills, lies at the heart of Hispanic culture as we know it even today.

The real macho, in early agrarian contexts, was ideally the man who provided and protected his family and his community, who was the spiritual guardian, preserving the religious underpinnings of society.

Insofar as she has been present by and for the man, the Latina has essentially been absent from society except as a transitive entity limited in her ideal sphere of action. It is this ideal existence of the woman in the mind of man that has come to be called *marianismo* or *hembrismo*.

If machismo represents the endless activity and assertion of the male ego, then *hembrismo* (femaleness), as an extension of machismo, is the necessary secular, polar opposite of the macho's aggressive search for honor and glory. The spiritualization of hembrismo, which is called marianismo, deriving from the Catholic conceptualization of the Virgin Mary (in Spanish, *la Virgen María*), conveys a kind of holy mystique that ever surrounds the ideal, long-suffering woman created by the strongly patriarchal Hispanic culture. The wife of the *macho* is ideally passive with respect to activities outside the home and in her relationship with her husband. Whether or not her husband's decisions benefit her or her family, she will abide by his decisions. In her home, however, the ideal Latina is an active entity, serving as the sole nurturer and instructor of her children and sole guardian of the most highly esteemed moral values.

The concept of marianismo begins and ends with the concept of "virginity," going well beyond mere physical purity. For the centripetal male, the female must become the completing opposite, the centrifugal depository of all the highest Christian virtues, namely, humility, patience, abnegation, and self-effacement. She must provide the moral and spiritual equilibrium his society does not allow him. Because societal demands are so great on both male and female, any deviation from these norms, particularly female deviation, is seen as social treason.

The image of woman as social traitor arises out of a dialectic virgin/whore complex seen in more traditional societies, where women are often viewed as either one or the other.

Due to a limited male perception of the woman as an individual human entity with the full range of human physical, intellectual, social and spiritual needs, the category of *la mujer traicionera* (traitorous woman) can include women not only involved in blatant sexual promiscuity, but also women seen as spurning traditional values and behaviors assigned to their gender.

Even within the permissive context in which the Latino moves, vis-à-vis the female, there is a strong though limited moral sense in the *macho*. With respect to the woman, that sense is directed to the mother, inasmuch as she is the embodiment of the female virtues the *macho* most needs and respects. As the almost sole and indispensable means of holding the family together, she often wields a kind of moral authority, even over the male. Curiously, there is no special day dedicated to the mother in either Spain or Spanish-America (except in Puerto Rico where the American calendar is used and where, interestingly, Mother's Day festivities rival those of Christmas and Easter). But the cult to the mother takes different forms. Older women (mothers) are looked to for counsel, and even younger mothers who display the preferred virtues are allowed to function in the political, intellectual, and religious life of the community.

Machismo and the Information Society

Machismo/marianismo as a social phenomenon can best be observed in countries where both the religious and the socioeconomic aspects of life call for a centralized authoritative system.¹¹ Thus, because of Catholicism's strong communal ties within a patriarchal society, machismo is most prevalent in those countries where this religion has historically dominated—Italy, France, Portugal, Poland, Spain, and all of Latin America.

Protestant societies with their strong sense of individualism and independence have experienced a different kind of machismo, particularly in the agrarian phases of social evolution, but not to the same exaggerated degree as have the Mediterranean and Latin American societies.

From a socioeconomic point of view, machismo arises from a communitarian approach to life in which the concern is with the preservation of the community. It is a social response to the economic, political structures of society, legitimized by religion. In agrarian societies, for example, those with little or no infrastructure (police protection, health-care and governance systems), machismo had a positive function in that the reputation of a man to protect and provide for his family extended beyond the family to the community at large. In earlier times this reputation gave the male's family a sense of security in what was otherwise an unprotected environment, and it elicited a sense of respect from the community for what belonged to this socially responsible man. The real *macho*, in early agrarian contexts, was ideally the man who not only provided and protected his family and his community, but who was the spiritual guardian, preserving the religious underpinnings of society.

The shift to an industrial society and the movement of people from the rural areas to the city in pursuit of economic survival created an inevitable breakdown in male-female roles. The need to protect the family was obviated in a context where economic need drove the woman outside the home to the workplace. In

some cases, the woman might be the only one with a job, so that the role of provider took on new meaning. In this kind of social context, machismo began to take on a negative and even dysfunctional dimension that tended to tear down rather than build up the family. Although normally associated with the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, these changes began to surface earlier. That the agrarian arrangement was already meeting with difficulties as early as the conflictive Spanish 16th and 17th centuries, for example, is evident in the many honor plays written in Spain during this period.¹² The "protection" of

the male had already become a straitjacket for the emerging independence of the woman.

In the information society, with its fine-spun network of communication and interchange, the role of the various members of the family is experiencing further changes. With the availability of services to all members of the family, attitude

changes toward the role that each member is to play in the well-being, maintenance, and development of the family are needed. In this social context, a sense of equality and mutuality contributes to family harmony. The continued expression of machismo in this new environment tends to be destructive to the survival of the family as a unit, since it forces the various members of the family to adjust their legitimate needs and functions to one inflexible member of the family. When the man of the house continues to make unrealistic demands of his family, limiting their social, educational, career, spiritual, and other forms of development either by means of physical

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aggression or by pathetic posturings, the vitality of the family is sapped.

The increase in divorce, so often attributed in fundamentalist religious circles to women abdicating their "traditional" place in the home (due to a kind of romanticizing of their place in agrarian societies), can more fairly be laid at the feet both of sex-ratio realities and of male intransigence in adjusting to these socioeconomic realities which no longer favor the man over other members of the family. This intractable attitude exists because social change does not always result in a change of mindset. Although living in a new social order, male-dominated institutions and assumptions continue to operate from an anachronistic frame of reference. This is especially true of people that come to an urban setting from a rural one, as is the case for many first-generation Latinos, Italians, and others from strong patriarchal/rural societies.

Clearly, industrialization and increased education in the Spanish-speaking world, while creating greater intolerance for the double standard of male-female behavior, have done little to effectively replace the old standards of what constitutes a man or a woman in Latino/Latina society. The increasing participation of

women in public life, and particularly in economic life, as a result of high academic achievement, without the concomitant adjustments in male-female relations, is creating a crisis in gender relations.¹³ However, despite what may seem to be an extremely rigid social system, resocialization based on the virtues of both machismo and marianismo can serve as a viable means within Hispanic society to effect change in the patriarchal mode of social organization. To be sure, much of that change is taking place all over the Spanish-speaking world, including the United States.

Adventism and the Latino Gender Myths

In the inevitable evolution of Latino/Latina roles, it is important to remember the pivotal role of the Catholic Church in the preservation of the mythical dimensions of traditional roles. Church doctrine with respect to birth control in the predominantly Catholic countries of the Hispanic world is consistent with the church's understanding of the role of women. On the one hand, it teaches that the supposed equality of male and female is both false and unnatural, and that both pain in childbirth and her subjection to her husband were mandated by God. Even a progressive leader such as Pope John XXIII, though lamenting the fact that women's rights are not sufficiently recognized, consoles women by reminding them that the purpose for which they were created was maternity. Maternity, nurture, and sacrifice are the natural functions of the woman, according to this doctrine.¹⁴

Adventism stands significantly on the opposite side of Catholicism as a Protestant religion rising out of 19th-century American Victorianism and the Protestant ethic.¹⁵ Whereas Latino/Latina individuality grows out of a Hispano-Arabic and Catholic identity based on who one is by birth, the American Protes-

Adapted from Elly Simmons' "Face"



tant ethic allows the individual to “outgrow” social origin and station by dint of personal effort.¹⁶ In fact, one is what one has achieved, regardless of origin. In Hispanic culture, education is possibly the only route of escape from a disadvantaged beginning, whether it be due to race, social station, or gender. The Protestant values independence, self-sufficiency, and hard work, no matter how humble, while the Hispano-Catholic ethic values only the independence of the male, even as it sustains the social interdependence that gives so much importance to the family and the community (including respect to parents and the elderly). Neither the Protestant nor the Catholic mindset allows for women to assume significant roles outside the home: Remunerative labor is valued exclusively for the male. However, it will be the Protestant and pioneering spirit of 19th-century United States that will give birth to a religion that insists on the full humanity of women: Seventh-day Adventism.

On the one hand, Adventism, as espoused by Ellen White, rejected those elements of Victorianism and Catholicism that imprisoned women. Given the urgency of the Advent, the Adventist woman was not to waste her time in preparing delicacies of food and dress for her family, as required by Victorian precept. She was to be health-minded and efficient in all her domestic work so that she might have time free to teach and preach the Advent gospel. In comparison with Hispanic machismo/marianismo, Adventism will not assign domestic duties and child-rearing exclusively to the woman. Her husband must be an effective “king” in his collaboration with the “queen” mother in the instruction and guidance of the children. The sole fidelity of the father to the mother is implied in this concept of male and female as team members. At the same time, Adventism teaches that every individual is responsible for his or her own salvation. Man cannot be saved by the “madonna” mother—

the Virgin Mary, the mother of God—nor woman through childbearing, as Paul seems to imply in 1 Timothy 2:15. The Protestant concept of salvation as a gift given generously by God to all humanity breaks with the Catholic notion that equality of male and female is unnatural.

Furthermore, the call to preach the gospel is given to both men and women. Woman cannot abdicate her responsibilities in this regard, even with those duties connected with the care of the home and children. Ellen White goes so far as to suggest that capable women should leave their children in the care of trustworthy child caretakers so that the work of the Lord might be advanced.¹⁷ As to the Christian virtues of patience and humility, Adventism once again sustains the doctrine of the spiritual equality of male and female. Humility and service are Christian, not solely feminine, virtues. Christ gave the example of all the Christian virtues as a male of the species. Likewise, the call to Christian virtue in preserving the sanctity of marriage is expected of both husband and wife. It is no longer the male honor that must be protected, but that of God.

Finally, the Adventist understanding of the

Adapted from Elly Simmons' "Calm"



Imago Dei (image of God) departs substantially from Catholicism in its insistence on both male and female equally as the image of God. Liberation, in this context, is understood to mean man and woman's freedom to be fully human, fulfilling their shared destiny, not as each other's captives, but as "prisoners of hope" in Jesus Christ.

Implications

Adventism arose in an atmosphere of social unrest that was meant to change the lot of women, a socio-historical fact that should not be lost on Adventists of any culture entering the 21st century. The revaluation of woman was the necessary setting for a religious movement that was to usher in the ultimate kingdom of God. Ellen White saw the Advent gospel as a form of freedom from socially imposed mores on both men and women so that the gospel might have full priority and all might participate in its dissemination and benefits.

There is no doubt that the liberating concepts of Adventism were well received in the Spanish-speaking world, particularly by women. Under the aegis of this gospel, the woman could, in good conscience, limit the number of children she brought into a world living on borrowed time. She could assert her socially approved role as "keeper of the faith" even in the face of opposition by her husband, and, regardless of her social origins or economic status, she could become a spiritual leader in the community of the church.

Together with the spiritual power of the Advent message, the call to matrimonial and parental responsibility, as well as the invitation to take on a difficult, challenging task (the preaching of the Advent), also had its appeal to the Latino, offering him a way of being truly virtuous while still being fully a man in the eyes of society.

Unfortunately, Ellen White has often been read selectively to preserve the traditional place of woman in Hispanic society (although this kind of reading of Ellen White is hardly limited to Latinos). Spiritualizing Ellen White on a kind of madonna model has allowed for a characteristically Latino reading and understanding of her practical advice on Christian belief and practice. While they have embraced the Protestant understanding of individual freedom and salvation, Hispanics still cling largely to Hispano-Catholic assumptions in their social and domestic male/female relations. The ensuing dialectical tension between a theology of Protestant individualism and Catholic social stratification calls for a high level of spiritual and intellectual integrity, in both men and women, to overcome.

Conclusion

We can easily see parallels between the church and North American society. Adventist men, as do men in society at large, still wield structural power. Men continue to be the chief shapers of religious practice and belief within the Adventist Church. As in our society, Adventist women outnumber Adventist men (membership is made up of more than 60 percent women). Outside the United States and Canada, the female church membership most certainly parallels and in some places possibly exceeds that of the North American church. Women members are officially valued for their contribution to sustaining the status quo. This "maintenance" role to which women are held is consistent with the withholding of personal rights and freedoms seen in society at large (although, unfortunately, correctives are more aggressively being applied to this imbalance outside the church than inside). In the church, gender inequality is further legitimized by a male-dominated biblical hermeneutic (whether

espoused by male or female) that plays down biblical teachings affirming male-female equality in favor of a "headship" theology that implies male superiority. Although this type of thinking tends to inform church organizational practice, it is to the church's credit that there exists another theology that underscores the essential and effective equality of male and female.

As the church enters the next century, the Global Age, an era in which the world church's needs will assume a higher profile, the important implications of this discussion of Latino/Latina gender issues will become evident. If white women find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to sharing in the development of acceptable belief and practice in the Adventist Church, women of color

all over the world, at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder inside and outside of the church, face even greater challenges in this regard.

This essay is a call to return to the sources of Adventism (the Bible and the writings of Ellen White) to find a new paradigm that crosses gender and national boundaries in order to find the essential gospel of freedom and human dignity that lies at the very heart of the Christian and the Adventist message to the world. It is a call to base Adventist belief and practice on spiritual integrity rather than on social expediency. It is an appeal to build a more inclusive world church that accords the full freedoms and responsibilities to women that their humanity, created by an all-knowing God, guarantees them.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Américo Castro, *De la edad conflictiva: crisis de la cultura española en el siglo XVII* (Madrid: Taurus, 1972).

2. Jorge Gissi, cited in Enrique Dussel, *Liberación de la mujer y erótica latinoamericana* (Bogotá: Edit. Nueva América, 1980), p. 64.

3. For a further elaboration of this definition and understanding of *machismo*, see Caleb Rosado, *Women/Church/God: A Socio-Biblical Study* (Riverside, Calif.: Loma Linda University Press, 1990).

4. David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 42.

5. Manuel Peña, "Class, Gender, and Machismo: The 'Tracherious-Woman' Folklore of Mexican Male Workers," *Gender & Society* 5:1 (March 1991), p. 30-46.

6. Gilmore, *Manhood*, p. 41.

7. In the play, the protagonist, Yerma (meaning "barren woman") lives a tortured existence because her husband will not "give" her children.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

9. It is significant, however, that Tirso, a 17th-century Spanish monk, not only disdains the philandering, irresponsible, and childless male, but condemns him on Christian moral grounds for sexual promiscuity. There has always been a Christian corrective for excessive *machob* behavior throughout the Spanish-speaking world, even when the Catholic Church protects male prerogatives over the female.

10. José Ortega y Gasset, *El hombre y la gente* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 165-169.

11. For a further elaboration of this thesis, see Rosado, *Women/Church/God*.

12. One need only consider the treatment of the theme by such notable playwrights as Lope de Vega and Calderón. In the latter's "El médico de su honra" (*Honor's Remedy*), the mere suspicion of infidelity (created by hearsay) is enough to warrant the death of the wife.

13. See Judith Teresa González, "Dilemmas of the High-Achieving Chicana: The Double-Bind Factor in Male/Female Relationships," *Sex Roles* 18:7/8 (1988).

14. Mary Porter and Corey Venning, "Catholicism and Women's Role in Italy and Ireland," in Lynne B. Iglitzin and Ruth Ross, eds., *Women in the World: A Comparative Study* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Clio Books, 1976), p. 53.

15. Andrew Greeley, "Protestant and Catholic: Is the Analogical Imagination Extinct?" *American Sociological Review* 54 (August 1989), pp. 485-502. In general, Catholicism represents a communitarian orientation to life, whereas Protestantism sustains a more individualistic view. Andrew Greeley suggests that herein lies the fundamental difference between these two Christian religions. Machismo comes out of a communitarian approach to the preservation of the community, but it also arises out of the Hispano-Arabic brand of individualism that places individual freedom above the interests

of the group, specifically in the male. This kind of individual independence is manifest in the Latino disregard for certain social rules.

16. Greeley, *Protestant*, 486; see *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1958); see *Suicide* (New York: The Free Press, 1951). Max Weber and Emile Durkheim—two of the founding fathers of sociology—held that these two different approaches to life and group relations impact the economic development of societies and the individual's relationship to society, respectively. Weber held that the Protestant focus on individual achievement led to economic success, while the communitarian ethic of

Catholicism tended to impede education and economic achievement. For Durkheim, the relationship between communal integration and a low incidence of suicide in Catholic countries stood out in sharp contrast to the individualism and high rate of suicide prevalent in Protestant countries. Even so, the heroic dimensions of the Hispano-Arabic individual find expression in such literary figures as Don Quixote, whose wrong-headed idealism reflects a deep-seated *macho* longing for ultimate glory and fame while pursuing noble goals, including sacrificial fidelity to the female beloved.

17. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1948), pp. 452, 453.