

# Religion & Liberation

ISSUE IV



M  
C

## ISSUE IV

# Religion & Liberation

Issue 4: Religion & Liberation is made possible by the **Queens Council on the Arts** with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

### Team

#### Founder & Director

Stephanie Aliaga  
[spectrumstudio.works](http://spectrumstudio.works)

#### Creative Director

Ariana Ortiz  
[arianaortiz.com](http://arianaortiz.com)

#### Content Producer

Denisse Jimenez  
[denissejuliana.com](http://denissejuliana.com)

#### Editor

Reza Moreno  
[sustainthemag.com](http://sustainthemag.com)

#### Education Coordinator

Yovanna Roa-Reyes

### Contact

[info@mujeristascollective.com](mailto:info@mujeristascollective.com)  
[mujeristascollective.com](http://mujeristascollective.com)  
[@mujeristasco](https://twitter.com/mujeristasco)

Magazine designed by Stephanie Aliaga  
Cover Art by [Paola de la Calle](#)  
Illustration below by Ariana Ortiz



Published by Mujeristas Collective.  
All rights reserved 2020.

- |    |   |    |   |
|----|---|----|---|
| 04 | <i>Catholic School Uniform</i><br>Sarah Yanni | 16 | <i>La pobreza del hombre</i><br>Paola de la Calle           |
| 05 | <i>Youth Day</i><br>Alysa Bradley             | 18 | <i>La posteridad nos hará justicia</i><br>Angela Portillo   |
| 06 | <i>DNA</i><br>Dara Burke                      | 20 | <i>Tiquani Story</i><br>Tanya Leyva                         |
| 07 | <i>Soledad</i><br>Denisse Jimenez             | 21 | <i>Confiar en la Tierra</i><br>Gabriela Hnizdo              |
| 08 | <i>Not For You</i><br>Amy Bravo               | 22 | <i>The land of milk and honey</i><br>Darling Alvía          |
| 10 | <i>I Pray</i><br>Reza Moreno                  | 23 | <i>Indigenous Roots</i><br>Victoria Garcia                  |
| 11 | <i>Untitled</i><br>Darling Alvía              | 24 | <i>Decaying self-portraits</i><br>Gilda Tenopala Gutierrez  |
| 12 | <i>Altagracia</i><br>Alejandra Lopez          | 26 | <i>Guadalupe as Liberator</i><br>Stephanie Aliaga           |
| 13 | <i>Una leyenda negra</i><br>Ariana Ortiz      | 27 | <i>Cerro de las Tres Cruces, Medellín</i><br>Banu Bayraktar |
| 14 | <i>Reverence</i><br>Ashley Sanchez            |    |   |

## CATHOLIC

## UNI

## SCHOOL

## FORM

penny loafers: you wanted converse, anything else really. the shiny black leather, ephemeral shine, racked up mom's card at the uniform store. your feet would protest, the shoes too slim, squeezing appendages on the journey from english to math. it seemed far-fetched, the notion of needing to erase variety, all the way down to the enclosure of toes. it was supposed to subdue class difference, although everyone knew. the knock-off loafers from target, one-eighth the price, an instant label. you placed a copper gold penny in the front for good luck, knowing you'd need it with the nuns / knee high socks: buckling knees, your father's inheritance, the pain in your body you noticed the most. a choice of navy or white, the thick wool and cotton covered your shins, modest limbs. an august heat made manifest, the socks were non-optional despite triple digit temperatures. a trail of sweat on your lower legs, scrunched down near the teachers you know would go easy, a temporary reprieve, a blessing / pleated skirt: we took them off to let you in. years of shortening the thick fabric, hemmed, rolled, and for what? to look more seductive, i suppose. in middle school, mom made you wear it full-length, plaid and coarse, past your knees. you cried on the first day because you looked different, didn't look sexy, didn't know 13 year olds were supposed to. it was the beginning of bottom eyeliner and who did what behind the gym, and you wrote in your diary and made up scenarios about everyone who breathed near. you secretly bought a shorter skirt, wishing to belong, switching out of your long one

in the back of your neighbor's car every morning as it drove away from home / polo (tucked): baby pink color, always the favorite. you had a few options but none as subdued. a girlish pink, adequate and fitting for your bodies. virginal and fresh! a small school logo above your breast, a stamp for the public world to see. you didn't go to any school, you went to the one with the convent, only women. you will get so used to tucking in your shirt that even after abandoning the uniform, the habit will continue. scrunching fabric near your tailbone, visible through all clothes. neckline buttons always falling off, you learned how to sew them back on regularly. baby pink yarn to match the polo, no evidence of disassembly / blazer: heavy shoulder pads made you feel safe, protected. larger than you actually were. pins adorned the collar, bright ones, from tender things that you enjoyed without shame. golden crosses puncturing fabric, that was the time you loved church and religion and found comfort in hymns. soon, you will remove them, put them in boxes, forget. you'll lose the clips, you'll lose all faith. the blazer will assume its place in a plastic bag in a coat closet that smells like old age. like those parts of you, gone / ribbon: not an official part of the uniform, but a common adornment. the top of the christmas tree. young girls, good girls, soft ribbon atop a high ponytail. tied into a perfect bow, usually white silk. you always tried to use one but it protested against your coarse curls. it fell in the wrong way or out completely. another way you did not belong, another way your body did not match.

Growing up in the Black Church, women are valued for our appearance and the monetary support we provide, but not the leadership potential we have. Women are often taught to silence ourselves into salvation by submitting to men.

In many Black Churches, the pastors, reverends, and pulpit associates are predominantly male when the congregations are largely female. Speaking and preaching as a woman in the Black Church is always political. I imagine performing a poem is even more political.

Listen to Alysa Bradley's spoken poetry performed at First Calvary Baptist Church in Brooklyn below.



Y  
O  
U  
T  
H  
  
D  
A  
Y



D

by

N

Dara

A

Burke

The funny thing about my connection to the Catholic faith is that no matter how much I work to distance myself from it, it always seems to be there.

But a Catholic identity reaches far beyond one's participation. My dad grew up as a poor Catholic in Dublin. My mom grew up as a poor Catholic in San Juan and the South Bronx. My parents are reasonable, relatively progressive people—yet both defend the institution of Catholicism in a way that appears wholly incompatible with every other aspect of who they are.

My dad says the faith is in his DNA, a tagline that reminds me that Catholicism is not a political party I can simply choose to support or disavow. It's woven into the fabric of my heritage and family history, along with famine, alcoholism, and the other maladies that perpetuated poverty for generations.

I'm disgusted by the fact that Catholicism is so entrenched there, too. This disgust is compounded by the fact that my ancestors were forced into a faith that continues to be used to cut me and others off from fundamental rights. I hate the brash culture of conservatism and anti-intellectualism that permeates the Catholic community. Brett Kavanaughs were a dime a dozen on Sundays.

When my parents outgrew their marriage, we steadily began to sit farther back during mass, and eventually sat awkwardly on a staircase

behind the rest of the congregation. This broken system that has gaslighted generations of my family is like an extra organ sprouting inside of me. It sits in my innards, a lump of coal that fills me with guilt, regret, and self-loathing. I resent my family for refusing to allow themselves to detach from the church. But really, I resent that I can't seem to either. This brave new world is a secular one, but part of my spirit still rests in the faith along with its history of abuse against the people that made me. I unplug from science and ethics for the comfort that is my faith in an omniscient, inherently merciful being. In true Catholic fashion, I feel great guilt about the fact that I still feel connected to the Christian God I was raised to believe unquestioningly.

I sometimes wonder if I can ever come to terms with my Catholic identity and reclaim it as a point of pride. Perhaps someday I'll be able to discuss my experience of Catholicism in a way that does not make me feel heavy. The trouble is, I don't think that guilt and shame are compatible with pride. I believe that any sort of acceptance of my inner Catholic kid will involve forgiveness: forgiveness for my parents for baptizing me into a religion that promulgates hatred; forgiveness for the church community for not providing the support and acceptance my family needed and deserved; most importantly, forgiveness of myself for my inability to detach from my Catholic roots. To be honest, I've never been good at forgiveness. Hopefully God is, if all I was taught turns out to be true. Otherwise, I'm pretty much screwed in terms of the afterlife.

## *Soledad*

Denisse Jimenez







## NOT FOR YOU

I found this framed drawing of the Virgen Maria on Washington Avenue in Fort Greene. The painting was behind glass which meant I could easily paint a new layer onto the image without damaging the original piece. I knew that this image had to have been made by someone else who was Latin American, and I was interested in the idea of collaborating with a stranger in my neighborhood who exists within my culture. I painted over the figure with white and left the face drawn by the stranger revealed, along with the linework and drawing of Jesus in the background. This piece feels like a representation of my whitewashed upbringing but raises questions about whitewashing of religious figures throughout history.

Amy Bravo

# I Pray

Suffocated with guilt  
Judgement day is all around us when religion pours through our veins  
If religion is going to separate us as brothers and sisters and put borders  
between us, then I want no part in that

But I still find sanity when I close my hands real close to pray to a God I  
can't seem to see or hear, even if this God doesn't exist, they take away  
my fears and anxieties

I find security inside a church because it reminds me of my parents that I  
seem to be lacking  
If this same church is going to throw hateful words around, then leave me  
be

If I ever feel the need to force feed my children these hateful words that  
somehow end up in Christ's children's mouth then tie up my hands and  
throw away the key: please, I pray that I never end up like my parents.

Growing up Catholic in my family meant saving myself for marriage,  
that a man would never want me if I was tainted.

Growing up Catholic meant I was not allowed to explore different ideas  
or beliefs.

Growing up Catholic meant I was shackled to a bible that preached no  
form of liberation for the humanity it was trying to control.

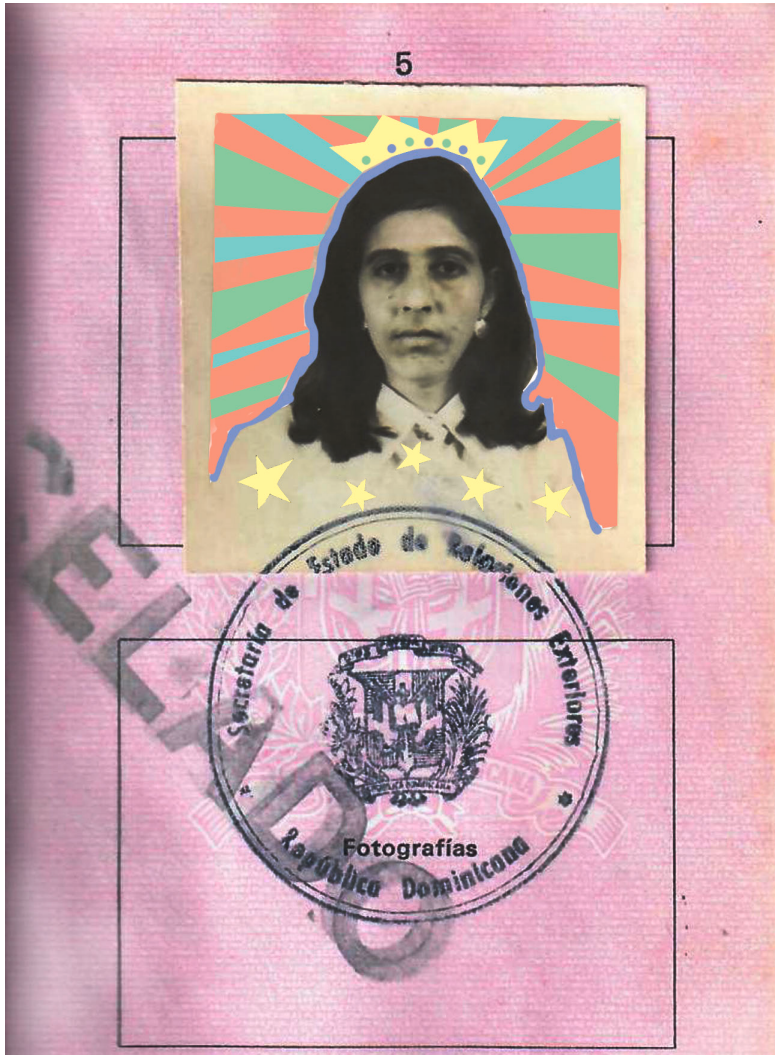
This is why I pray, I pray, I pray. I pray for those blinded by spirituality to  
one day see.

Reza Moreno



Darling Alvia





The base layer of the photo is my grandmother's passport when she immigrated to the United States in 1963 from Dominican Republic. Her middle name was Altagracia, which is the patron saint of Dominican Republic so I made her into a more modern, pastel version of Altagracia.

Alejandra Lopez

una leyenda negra

those who need to know, know:  
the old magic still runs hot, underpaints  
air, ground, the sunspots that fleck the wall

in weak, irreverent moments,  
I hope its echo limns my body, too,  
helps guide yours closer,  
thready pulse at my back

though the true binding—the names, the  
knowledge—  
has long since been sapped from our heads,  
wrenched from our mouths

but what are matters of truth when la virgen,  
crowned, brownskin  
smiles at me warmly, her dark eyes leading me  
to love?

ariana ortiz



on Sunday I  
looked for god in the mirror.  
unbraiding my hair,  
I paused because  
Mary doesn't have thick eyebrows,  
her face is smooth and hairless  
and it doesn't look like mine.

angels don't look like me either,  
they are peaceful and they are pale and blonde.  
they do not carry the reality of brown womanhood on their shoulders.  
not like me. they have nothing to lose.  
so, it only made sense, on that Sunday morning,  
that god wouldn't look like me.  
god can't look like me,  
a brown woman with a halo of black hair,  
and dark eyebrows and dark peach fuzz and dark eyes to match,  
because god wouldn't be told to stay in the shade and god wouldn't be told to  
silence themselves,  
god wouldn't be told that she bleeds every month because the first woman on earth  
was a sinner,  
god wouldn't be told that she came from the rib of man,  
god wouldn't be told to compromise.

on Sunday I  
tried to talk to god,  
remembering:

I was six when my mother taught me how to talk to god.  
with our right hands outstretched she showed me,  
first touching the temple,  
then the center of the chest,  
then each shoulder.  
she told me our conversations were holy,  
god would protect me because I, too, am a child of god.

I was six years old and I remember I tried to speak to god that night.  
god knew my name because when I was too young to remember,  
my parents took me to church, and I was bathed in holy water and  
my grandmother cried,  
then in the third grade I was clothed in white once more  
and my grandmother cried  
when I consumed Jesus's flesh and blood.  
that night, god listened until I fell asleep,  
and I was calm, and my mother was calm because she had showed me the way.

when I was old enough to hear the story  
of my grandmother's immigration to the united states,  
she told me that it was thanks to god that she did not die in the desert,  
thanks to god that she is here now, in her apartment,  
now a citizen of the country that raised me.

and in that apartment, above the dining room table, is Jesus himself,  
painted sitting at his own table, at his last supper.  
for as long as I can remember Jesus has watched us eat,  
for as long as I can remember crosses hung above my grandmother's door,  
for as long as I can remember she has lit prayer candles in times of need.  
god listens to my grandmother, and god listens to my mother,  
and that makes me think that maybe god  
is a brown woman.  
because god listens and understands, and god made sure that my grandmother made it here  
safely. she looks out for her own.

and maybe the painters had it all wrong,  
maybe Mary was brown like me and her upper lip also had peach fuzz,  
maybe her eyes, too, were brown infused with the gold that was ripped from the earth,  
maybe her mother told her to stay in the shade and that is why she made sure that  
I was born with the same brown skin, because she wasn't allowed to celebrate her  
brown-ness and she wants her daughters to be able to.

maybe they had it all wrong:  
maybe god didn't want riches all in her name,  
maybe god didn't ask for invasion and colonization of my parents' countries.  
I wonder,  
does she look at the empire on which the sun never sets and  
feel pain,  
does she see the phrase "holy war"  
and laugh at the thought,  
does she hold her breath and wait for liberation,  
does she ache for restoration like me, does she  
cry when she watches over us.

something tells me god just wants her creations to be appreciated.  
something tells me she is tired of conquests and steel and smoke.

I think god is a woman.  
she is tired and  
her work is taken for granted.

maybe god is brown like me, maybe angels are brown like me,  
maybe god made us bleed because we are ferocious and powerful,  
menstruation a reminder that we can support life, a reminder that we are divinely human.

maybe she knows the secret that women did not sprout from man's rib because  
us women belong to ourselves and nobody else.  
the force of creation lies within me,  
and god made it so.  
maybe I, too, am holy.

on Sunday I  
looked for god in the mirror.  
she smiled back at me,  
brown eyes the color of earth and honey.



“

## LA POBREZA DEL HOMBRE COMO RESULTADO DE LA RIQUEZA DE LA TIERRA

— EDUARDO GALEANO

Liberation Theology insists that we center the poor in our struggle for liberation. This mixed media collage, which sits on top of a map of South America, urges us to look at capitalism, colonization, and the exploitation of America Latina as the root cause of poverty and migration.

Paola de la Calle

\* The poverty of man as a result of the richness of the land





Angela Portillo



*Confiar en la Tierra*  
Gabriela Hnizdo



Tanya Leyva





## *The land of milk and honey*

Sunday mass, sermons about the promised land.  
The rules to get us there.  
I was promised a land of milk and honey.  
A lane paved with gold.  
Finding serenity in His kingdom.  
The rules to keep us pure.  
Til judgment day, kingdom come.

*Why go to heaven, when heaven is here?*

I found the promised land in her words.  
The lane paved with gold rest down her belly.  
The kingdom between her thighs.  
Her lips taste of milk and honey.  
There are no rules to reach her.  
Come as you are she whispers in my ear.  
I fall to my knees.  
The quiver in her voice is the Holy Ghost.  
And I feel a revival.  
Now Sunday mass feels like an extra task.  
A pointless act.  
I know how to find the promise land.  
I hear it in every good morning.  
And I can taste it on my tongue.  
I can feel it in her fingertips, while they glide across my body.  
She is the kingdom.  
The promise.  
The land of milk and honey.

Darling Alvia



As we discover the history behind “Catholic” beliefs and practices within Latin America, we end up connecting with indigenous roots. There are still so many traces of pre-Columbian culture in our present-day spiritual beliefs.

Victoria Garcia



# DECAYING

## SELF PORTRAITS



Gilda Tenopala Gutierrez



In the liberation image of Guadalupe in a traditional and sex-positive indigenous womanhood, La Virgen de Guadalupe's "cinnamon brown" skin and her Aztec (of Nahuatl) tongue gave the indigenous people a symbol of freedom after the European Catholic conquest of the Americas and gave Mexican-Americans a cultural and religious identity and also a symbol of liberation in social movements. Guadalupe dressed in traditional clothing and appearing to be an Indian or mestiza shows that she is one of the people and a representative of the oppressed. However, the portrayal of Guadalupe's brown skin gets lost in traditional and popular images and loses her significance of being an indigenous or mixed-race female that gave the conquered people a desirable image to identify with. In order to reclaim the erasure of the racial history of La Virgen de Guadalupe, we must reframe a liberating, anti-racist, sex-positive, pro-brown and indigenous womanhood imagery of Guadalupe in these traditional and popular images. Artists and theologians have been constructing their own representations of Guadalupe inspired by their own experiences of their sexual identity, but what about addressing the westernized images of La Virgen de Guadalupe?

Before the introduction of La Virgen de Guadalupe in 1531, Mesoamerican people worshiped female deities and "were closely connected to the energy of the earth, cosmos, animals, elements and human life." Coatlicue, which translates from Nahuatl to "skirt of snakes," was the goddess of the cosmos, sacred guardian and mother image for the Mexican nation and Mexican motherhood. The place of worship for the deity Coatlicue was located on the hill of Tepeyac in Tenochtitlan, Mexico City (Peterson 14). Spanish conquistadors destroyed the place of worship at Tepeyac to impose Christianity on the Mesoamericans, but they weren't able to destroy the birth of La Virgen de Guadalupe and mix it with their indigenous beliefs.

NICAN MOPOHUA  
 On December 9, 1531, a Nahau Indian man named Juan Diego was on his way to his catechism classes when he heard birds singing at the hilltop. He then heard a sweet voice saying his name and when he followed it to the top of the hill of Tepeyac, he saw a woman. She spoke to him in the Nahuatl language and identified herself as Mary, the mother of God. She asked Juan Diego to go to the bishop of "New Spain," Juan Zumárraga, to build a shrine in her name on the hill of Tepeyac. Since Juan Diego is an indigenous man, the bishop did not believe him. After the third time of going to the bishop, the bishop finally believed Juan Diego when he dropped his tilma and roses fell on the ground and the image of Guadalupe was imprinted on his cloak. The Nican Mophua is the most popular version of Guadalupe's story written by Luis Laso de la Vefa in 1649. It is also argued that Don Antonio Valeriano wrote it.

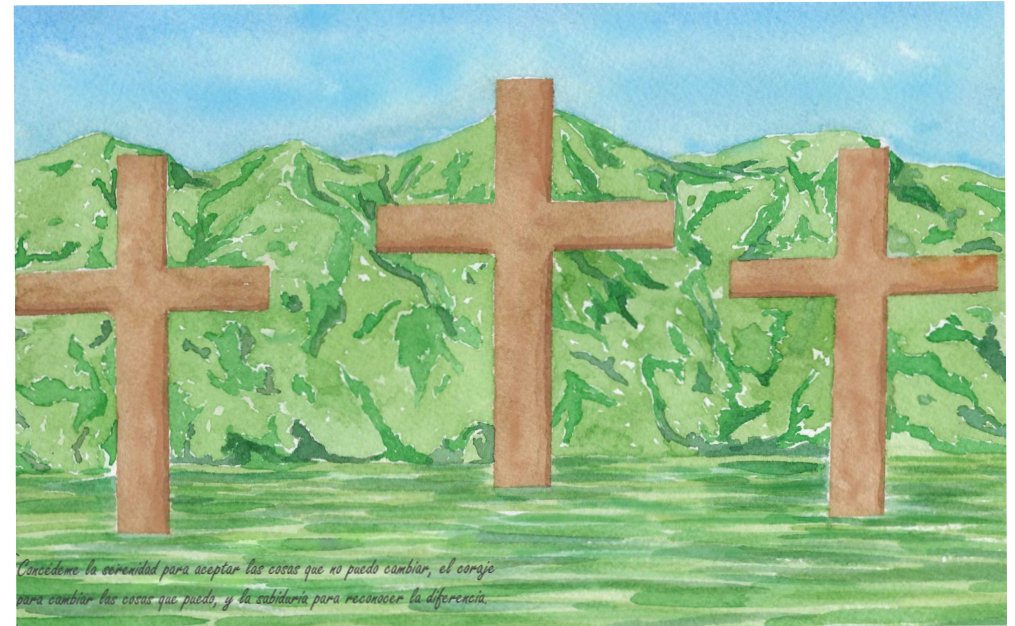
What's so significant about the story of Guadalupe is that she appeared to a lowly Indian or mestizo when she could have easily appeared to a noble Spanish ruler or a respected church official. Her physical appearance resembling Juan Diego's brown skin made indigenous people feel represented and closer to Guadalupe. Her location on Mount Tepeyac was the ancient site of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin that had been worshipped for decades.

HISTORIA  
 The Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, carried a small statue of the Madonna with him when searching for gold and encountering the indigenous peoples of Mexico (Kilroy-Ewbank). The white (European) Virgin or the "black virgin" of Spain was transformed and appropriated when brought to the New World (Feh 169).

GUADALUPE AS A SYMBOL OF LIBERATION  
 In 1764, Guadalupe became the patroness and national symbol of Mexico's liberation. In the Mexican War of Independence in 1810 to 1821, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla chose Guadalupe's image to rally serflos, mestizos, and indigenous peoples while changing "Viva Guadalupe." During the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920, the banner of Guadalupe was carried with the peasant fighters under Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. In the beginning of 1960s in California, the National Farm Workers Association led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta chose Guadalupe as a labor rights advocate for farmworkers that led thousands of campesinos to strike against exploited work and to represent the United Farm Workers of America. The power of Guadalupe's dark complexion allowed mestizos, serfs, and indigenous people to liberate, a symbol to rebel "against the rich, upper and middle class, against their subjugation of the poor and the indio." These examples show that the representation of La Virgen was able to unify in Mexico and the United States.

FEMINIST ART  
 Stephanie Aliaga

Latinx feminist artists and writers began reframing a sex-positive and queer representations of Guadalupe, coming from their own sexual identities and experiences of their sexuality in their culture. They also challenged the passivity and sexuality of Guadalupe. In Alma Lopez's digital art piece, "Our Lady," challenges the patriarchal concepts of womanhood and a women's sexuality such as queerness and to have control over our bodies and identity. Which goes against the concept of marianismo and the controlling image that the Virgin Mary can be perceived. In 1973, Evelyn P. Stevens, coined the word, marianismo, which has its roots from the Roman



*Concedeme la serenidad para aceptar  
 las cosas que no puedo cambiar*

*el coraje para cambiar las cosas  
 que puedo y la sabiduría para  
 reconocer la diferencia.*

Banu Bayraktar

# In Religion and Liberation,

Mujeristas Collective addresses a vital part of Ada María Isasi-Díaz's vision of *mujerismo*: liberation theology, a grassroots Christian movement that emphasizes action to achieve freedom from social, political, and economic oppression.

Containing visual and written works by women of color and Latinas across the U.S., "Religion and Liberation" explores our layered relationships with spirituality and organized religion itself, and confronts the entangled natures of politics and faith. It delves into the question of whether there is a future in religion as a means to liberation, and where that might begin.