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## The Underlying Effects of Religion in Puerto Rico

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THE UNDERLYING EFFECTS OF RELIGION IN PUERTO RICO

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors Undergraduate Thesis Program  
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## ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to explore the role religion has played in the Puerto Rican society. Growing up in this culture entails a deep and implicit connection with the religious world. Religious values, beliefs, and attitudes are firmly entrenched and amplified through the family, culture, and schools. Because it is so deeply entrenched, it is difficult to find a place to leverage a critique of its impact, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Thus, in order to understand the societal matters and challenges the island faces, an in-depth study that explores the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of Puerto Ricans is necessary.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THESIS

### *Introduction*

This study explores the role religion has played in Puerto Rican society. Growing up in this culture entails a deep and implicit connection with the religious world. Religious values, beliefs, and attitudes are firmly entrenched and amplified through the family, culture, and schools. Because it is so deeply entrenched, it is difficult to find a place to leverage a critique of its impact. The enduring moral principles that Puerto Ricans are typically taught impose restrictions for those who fall outside of the prescribed norm. Consequently, there is limited room for diversity and alternative perspectives. This is especially significant in a tightly integrated culture.

In order to understand societal matters and challenges the island faces, an in-depth study that explores the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of Puerto Ricans is necessary. According to Dr. Philip Mellor, a university professor in Leeds, the embodied experience of religion deserves more attention. He argues that “it is an area in which the sociology of religion has a potentially significant contribution to make towards the enhancement of debates about the interaction between human beings, their bodies, experiences, emotions, and the sociocultural forces that shape the interaction” (qtd. In Greil 532). Thus, new analysis can usher in a new path towards the understanding of the underlying impacts of religion in Puerto Rico. In this study, religion is understood as “a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant” (Little and McGivern 472). It also takes into account people’s concerns or beliefs about their lives and their fate after death. However, this project will

focus on the predominant religion in Puerto Rico, Christianity. Currently, there is little critique about religion on the island due to the existing affiliation of religion with positivity and righteousness (Varas-Díaz et. al. 9). The saturation of this notion makes it challenging to comprehend the hidden negative aspects and implications concerning the society.

This thesis will explore some ways in which religion contributes to some of the social injustices faced by the people of Puerto Rico. The guiding question is: How does religion, as a social institution, help understand the societal issues and norms in Puerto Rico? Additionally, this thesis will explore the following sub-questions: How do religious institutions convey their message throughout Puerto Rico? How has the influence of contradicting Christian beliefs affected the LGBTQ community? How does the church perpetuate the patriarchal system in Puerto Rico and what repercussions does it have on women's rights? As well as, what limitations are established in the society due to the power religion holds?

These questions will be addressed by conducting a thorough literature review that will include information on historical content, cultural traditions, the effects of language, distinguished core and shared beliefs, and relevant news sources. Ultimately, by structuring and integrating the information derived from the literature review, I hope to contribute new, innovative, and significant findings towards the growing body of research.

### *Research Questions*

Religion has a significant and close relation to social behavior, values, personality, and even mental health. In many countries, Christianity is largely encouraged or favored by its people. This is the case of the Caribbean island, Puerto Rico. According to a 2014 study by the

Pew Research Center, 89% of the population identified as Christian.<sup>1</sup> Through certain traditions, educational systems, island-wide events, and holidays the Christian faith is preserved and practiced. This research intends to explore the real and significant power religious institutions have in Puerto Rico. Due to the broad range of Puerto Ricans who associate the concept of religion with positivity and rectitude, wrongdoings and unnecessary interference of religious institutions in political as well as societal matters go widely unnoticed or are disregarded (Varas-Díaz et. al. 9). Nevertheless, these religious institutions still follow many antiquated views that adhere to oppressive frameworks. The existing social pressure of associating religion to positivity constrains critical and transformative dialog between the people. In the book “La Religión Como Problema en Puerto Rico”, the author asserts that it is implicitly prohibited to discuss the harm these beliefs and practices have brought to this society. This has been further encouraged by the government of Puerto Rico, who has looked to religious institutions for assistance in relation to societal issues like violence and drug addiction (Varas-Díaz et. al. 9). “To question the church or religious practices is considered to be anti-cultural; therefore, it is undesirable” (Varas-Díaz et. al. 10). Conversely, it is necessary to disclose that as generational change occurs, people have gradually begun questioning these institutions. However, the fact remains that even if a person considers themselves atheist, it is almost impossible to remove themselves completely from a culture that was built on a religious foundation.

Throughout the years, the lack of critique towards religious institutions has paved the way for groups to develop ways of taking advantage of the uncritical attitude and over-

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<sup>1</sup> Krogstad, Jens Manuel, et al. “Key Findings about Puerto Rico.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 29 Mar. 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/29/key-findings-about-puerto-rico/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/29/key-findings-about-puerto-rico/).

acceptance of religious beliefs and its affiliation with mainstream Puerto Rican culture. For instance, the Mita Congregation is an influential Christian denomination that has benefited from this ideal. It was founded in 1940 and was recognized by the US Congress in 2015. They have acquired numerous properties, cooperatives, and corporations.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Mita Congregation has founded establishments not only in many states of the United States, but also in multiple Latin American countries. Thus, they are known to be a financially and politically powerful institution.

Often, the perpetuation of these ideals is achieved through educational institutions. For instance, there is a monopoly of private education at all levels, and an incursion of organized religion into academic, professional, and social policy fields (Varas-Díaz et. al. 10). Of 1,496 schools on the island, 641 of them are private schools<sup>3</sup> - from which a considerable percentage are affiliated to Christian practices. Additionally, many public schools instigate and transmit a lopsided perspective of a specific worldview. This can be seen through Law number 60, which encourages that in every school of the Public Education System of Puerto Rico, a daily meditation period is carried out before classes begin (Varas-Díaz et. al. 119). Furthermore, religion's positive image is preserved by the proliferation of television and radio media for religious programming. A study conducted in 2007 found that 25% of the television channels in Puerto Rico were dedicated to religious programming.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, radio, television, and Internet

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<sup>2</sup> EPRL, Grupo Editorial. "García Peraza, Juanita." *EnciclopediaPR*, 16 Sept. 2014, [enciclopediapr.org/encyclopedia/garcia-peraza-juanita/](http://enciclopediapr.org/encyclopedia/garcia-peraza-juanita/).

<sup>3</sup> López Alicea, Keila. "Los Colegios Se Preparan Para El Inicio De Clases." *El Nuevo Día*, 6 June 2020, pp. 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> Rosario Albert, Luis. "La Estructura Del Mercado De La Televisión En Puerto Rico: Globalización y Concentración." *Anàlisi* 35, 2007, pp. 189–211.



access have enabled the promulgation of religious ideologies in a diluted matter. This includes the stigmatization of communities like the LGBTQ+. They do this by offering programs that are generally provided by non-religious channels, such as comedy, music, couples counseling, kids show, and even sale of commercial cleaning and beauty equipment (Varas-Díaz et. al. 25). These are strategies that help maintain their dogmatic views and increase their number of supporters. By the same token, the Catholic Church offers a program in which political debates and analysis are discussed.

Aside from these methods, patron saint festivities are celebrated throughout the island. These are festivities that take place once a year in each of the municipalities to honor the patron saint of the town. According to Catholic tradition, this custom originated because each founded town needed a proclaimed saint for protection.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to thank and praise each saint, a religious celebration is carried out. Today, it still maintains this religious character, but it has incorporated secular and folk characteristics such as parades, games of chance, traditional food, fair machines or holiday attractions, and music.<sup>6</sup> Other events with religious origins that are largely celebrated in Puerto Rico are Holy Week, Christmas (which begins in Thanksgiving and ends in mid-January), Three Kings Day, “Las Octavitas” ( an extension of Christmas, this includes parties of a religious nature to glorify the Magi and Jesus with songs), and “Fiestas de la Calle San Sebastián” or “Sanse” (a music-filled cultural jubilee that marks the official end of the holiday season). Within these celebrations, it is common to find artisans selling traditional religious

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<sup>5</sup> EPRL, Grupo Editorial. “Fiestas Patronales.” *EnciclopediaPR*, 9 Sept. 2014, [enciclopedia.pr.org/encyclopedia/fiestas-patronales/](http://enciclopedia.pr.org/encyclopedia/fiestas-patronales/).

<sup>6</sup> EPRL, Grupo Editorial. “Fiestas Patronales.” *EnciclopediaPR*, 9 Sept. 2014, [enciclopedia.pr.org/encyclopedia/fiestas-patronales/](http://enciclopedia.pr.org/encyclopedia/fiestas-patronales/).

figures' carvings. They have been made for over 400 years on the island. Moreover, it is important to note that many people go to church services to pray and properly commemorate these celebrations.

Considering that every month of every year a Christian celebration is taking place on the island, it is only natural that the religious influence transmits to our language and expressions. Even for those Puerto Ricans who don't subscribe to the religion of Christianity, it is almost certain that a considerable amount of those practices has shaped their identity and how they perceive the world; meaning that leaders within the government of Puerto Rico are biased in some kind of way. This can be seen in the creation of government jobs for religious leaders for the private benefit of their communities. It is also evident in many policies and legislations that indirectly adhere to religious notions and beliefs.

Recent examples of negative religious impacts in Puerto Rico are the rectification of the Civil Code and the murders of five transgender women. The New Civil Code is the second most important legal document of the island. This document dates back to 1930 and has been in the process of rectification for over 20 years. In it, government officials have created controversial adjustments, like eliminating a section that had previously prohibited discrimination towards gender, race, and religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, ambiguous language in the document, such as the attribute of personality to an unborn child, creates a loophole for arguments against certain women's rights (like abortion), and a regression of rights gained by the transgender community.<sup>8</sup> On June 1st, 2020, the governor of Puerto Rico, Wanda Vázquez, announced the approval of the

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<sup>7</sup> Colón Dávila, Javier. "Exigen Veto De La Gobernadora." *El Nuevo Día*, 17 May 2020, pp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Colón Dávila, Javier. "Exigen Veto De La Gobernadora." *El Nuevo Día*, 17 May 2020, pp. 4–5.

New Civil Code. The process of approval was made during the Coronavirus pandemic, meaning no public hearings were held and protests were prohibited. These are but a few examples of the influence religion has had in the Puerto Rican society. Hence, by employing more constructive criticism, we can filter out the negative impacts these biases carry out.

### *Theoretical Framework*

According to some, religion emerged as a tool of power and control. As groups of people became larger, from the hundreds to the thousands, skepticism between them transpired. The community needed something other than a genetic identity to work harmoniously and productively, and the development of common beliefs and practices involving notions of the sacred seemed to fit this bill as it produced a common object of focus beyond individual beliefs and perspectives. Consequently, religion emerged as a cultural commonality that encouraged a particular belief that allowed them to succeed in these larger groups.<sup>9</sup> This cultural idea encouraged trust, unity, productivity, and a higher level of cooperation. Over time, tribes and communities began to branch off based on their beliefs and experiences. Even though religion enabled unity, it also ostracized those who did not follow the rules or pursued the established religious and social norms. It then served as part of a community's identity, meaning it became embedded in their culture (Rawan Abdulla). In this framework, it becomes difficult to differentiate between religion and culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Vedantam, Shankar, et al. "Where Does Religion Come From? One Researcher Points To 'Cultural' Evolution." NPR, NPR, 6 May 2019, [www.npr.org/2019/05/06/720656274/where-does-religion-come-from-one-researcher-points-to-cultural-evolution](http://www.npr.org/2019/05/06/720656274/where-does-religion-come-from-one-researcher-points-to-cultural-evolution)

The concept of culture is complex. However, a basic definition for it can be: the characteristics of and knowledge shared by a group of people (Paloutzian and Park 331). These particularities may include values, norms, symbols, and practices. For this reason, according to Paloutzian and Park, religion can be considered a culture.<sup>10</sup> Even if they are understood as being separate, ethnic cultures and religious cultures are strongly intertwined. A reason for this is that, often, religion has been responsible for national patterns of cultural behaviors. Religion also interacts with many of the existing cultural influences that distinguish a particular group. For example, Christianity is practiced and manifested in different ways among Black Americans, White Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Interestingly, self-identity cannot be divorced from social and cultural life. Therefore, the values, norms, and beliefs that dictate the religion practiced by an individual will shape that person's understanding of life; and, consequently, the experiences that will contribute to their distinctiveness (identity).<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Christianity, as with many religions, is known to use a patriarchal framework. It enhances or encourages behaviors affiliated with a religious patriarchal system, such as the notion that men and women are separate and distinct entities created by God with gender-specific social expectations and moral obligations. Women, for example, are said to be the ones responsible for sexual temptation and caregiving thus relegated to the social sphere of the home and the moral gatekeeping of sexuality. Yet, women within this system, particularly the more fundamentalist versions, insist that women maintain a submissive posture towards men as

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<sup>10</sup> Paloutzian, Raymond F., and Crystal L. Park. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Second ed., Guilford Press, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Rawan Abdulla, Mariam. Culture, Religion, and Freedom of Religion or Belief, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 16:4, 2018, pp.102-115, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2018.1535033

heads of the home and other positions of authority. This idea represents a dominant understanding of gender and sexuality in the Christian tradition.<sup>12</sup> Thus, women in the Christian community are expected to behave accordingly. Otherwise, they may be stigmatized, shunned, or labeled as disloyal to God and their faith. Gender and sexuality are two primary sites of concern:

By delving beneath the male-dominated surface of religion as it is commonly organized and symbolically represented, sociologists of religion can gain insight into new problems and fresh perspectives on old ones. This is particularly relevant to understanding the positioning of different religious groups in relation to issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the veiling of Muslim women—all which give rise to anxieties about gender. (Greil & Davidman 532)

The patriarchal structure used to practice and learn about religious beliefs naturally projects onto people's behavior and how they understand the world. Often, it is led by specific and often powerful leaders. Thus, to understand societal behavior, factors like the one previously mentioned should be taken into account. This reassures and emboldens the purpose of the emergence of religion as a social institution, in the sense of creating and maintaining specific social norms.

### *Methodology*

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<sup>12</sup> Kenny, Mary. "Patriarchy and Christian Feminism." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 95, no. 378, 2006, pp. 175–181. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/30095818](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30095818). Accessed 6 June 2020.

This research study will employ an interdisciplinary approach (IDS). An interdisciplinary approach is content-agnostic, which means that the focus is not on acquiring a specific bundle of information; instead, the focus is on developing an interdisciplinary mindset that is necessary for a broad range of perspective taking, critical analysis, and integration of diverse sources (Woodill 2019). Its literal definition is “between the disciplines.” Sharon Woodill (2019) conceptualizes the term as the negative space of the disciplines. She states that “interdisciplinary often wander in spaces not yet claimed by a discipline, though they often draw on disciplinary tools to render their insights intelligible to others within the more traditional knowledge enterprise.” (Woodill 24, 2020). The advantage of this is the holistic perspective acquired, which creates a new path to discover innovative approaches to real-world and complex issues. Furthermore, she explains that “academic work in this space requires a shift of attention from objects to relationships and posits knowing as engagement rather than abstracted dissection.” (Woodill, 2020). Hence, its objective is to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice. This is done through the usage of the core competencies that make up the interdisciplinary approach; these are perspective taking, critical thinking, and integration. The terms can be roughly translated into how one sees, thinks, and does.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this methodological approach allows researchers to obtain a unique response to the issues being explored. Thereby, the complex nature of the sociology of religion in Puerto Rico can be best understood through an interdisciplinary method.

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<sup>13</sup> Woodill, Sharon. “Defining Interdisciplinary Studies.” *The Faculty Focus*, Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, 2020, 24-25.

It is a critical approach that will enable an understanding of the elaborate and diverse aspects of the issue. This research requires information from various disciplines, such as history, gender, and religious studies.

In the thesis, the historical aspect will be used to explain part of Puerto Rico's origins and development. This is a crucial part of the study because the islands' current and prominent religious ideals are strongly tied to the Spanish invasion in 1493. Catholicism was forced onto the indigenous people in Boriken- name which the indigenous called the island. The Spaniards saw the indigenous as savages that needed to be saved; therefore, it was their duty to convert them to Christianity. The indigenous, called Taínos, changed from a polytheist to a monotheist religion. In 1511, the catholic church was officially founded as an institution in Puerto Rico.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the Spanish-American war took place, and Puerto Rico became U.S. territory. Thus, relative religious plurality was adopted.

To understand the effects of each historical transition, articles on religious studies will be used. By the same token, it will serve as a tool to analyze religion from a systematic standpoint and cultural perspective. Lastly, gender studies enables a deeper understanding of women and sexuality in conjunction with Christianity. As mentioned in the Theoretical Framework section, gender issues form part of any social structure and are considered as a subfield in sociology- sociology of gender. As a result, the combination of these disciplines will construct a more comprehensive overview of the issue.

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<sup>14</sup> EPRL, Grupo Editorial. "Credos: Breve Acercamiento Histórico." *EnciclopediaPR*, 16 Sept. 2014, [enciclopediapr.org/encyclopedia/credos-breve-acercamiento-historico/](http://enciclopediapr.org/encyclopedia/credos-breve-acercamiento-historico/).

## CHAPTER 2 OVERVIEW OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

### *Theory*

Numerous scholars have theorized the relationship between religion and culture. One of them being the aforementioned theory that by virtue of their shared particularities, religion can be considered a culture (Paloutzian and Park 331). In doing so, they are categorized as ethnic cultures and religious cultures. For instance, Jewish Puerto Ricans may share differing characteristics from the rest of the people in the island. Moreover, others suggest that religion is inherently a cultural expression (Beyers 1). Thus, religion is determined by culture. This notion can be exemplified by comparing and contrasting Catholic practices and celebrations in Puerto Rico with a foreign Catholic group, such as Peruvians. Thus, this implies that although the religion might be the same, the practices may differ according to the influence of a culture. On the other hand, certain scholars argue that its relationship is predominantly interactive and two-sided, which implies that ‘the way of life influences the approach to religion, and the religious attitude influences the way of life’ (Dawson 46).

All of these theories have produced important insights about this relationship, and each theory has implications that impact the approach to the study of religion. For example, if religion is considered a culture segment, then the considered approach may be anthropological and ethnographic (Beyers 1). Likewise, societies attempt to understand the relationship between religion and culture through their prevalent beliefs and particular understanding of both concepts. For instance, people who reside on the island of Puerto Rico consider or recognize that religion, specifically Christianity, plays an important role in their culture. Due to the island's historical



context, this notion is fundamentally accurate. Although it is inaccurate to state that every Puerto Rican is Christian, it is not hyperbole to say that the majority of Puerto Ricans do encounter or practice the religion through mainstay cultural traditions. “Each town has a Catholic church at its center and celebrates its patron saint with an annual festival. Although many patron-saint festivals have become much more secular over time, they typically include a religious procession and special Mass to mark the day” (Van Atten). Thus, Puerto Ricans are exposed to religious celebrations all year round. Consequently, all the previous approaches can be used to analyze the role of religion in Puerto Rico.

Several key questions have punctuated this area of study and set the stage for the emergence of broader explanations. Such questions include: How do religion and culture influence each other? What makes them distinct and similar? Are they interdependent? Is one more important than the other? Often, assumptions based on dominant cultural concepts and ideas about the relationship between religion and culture are embedded in explanations. They are often taken as pre-given conclusions or essential societal attributes. However, this thesis will endeavor to question “evident” assumptions. More specifically, this thesis will seek to gain a deeper understanding of existing social structures that govern people’s behavior regarding religion in the Puerto Rican society. For instance, within the system of an organized religion there will always be a ‘powerful subject’ who is regarded not only as the official communicator of the divine word, but one who also polices or attempts to enforce the rules and beliefs of the institution (Varas-Díaz, et al. 125). Some of these ‘powerful subjects’ may be a priest, minister, or monk.

Religion in Puerto Rico has been an area of study that has historically been under-investigated. This is not surprising because, as one scholar writes:

If we really believe that something is ‘natural’ or a ‘fact,’ why would we challenge it? Even the most superficial engagement with the nation’s history reveals myriad examples of seemingly natural occurrences, taken-for-granted assumptions, and presumed inevitabilities that have been completely repudiated.

(Nealon and Searls Giroux 5)

The tendency to neglect to question things that seem ‘normal’ can easily be seen through the ways in which women and African Americans, among others, have been treated in the U.S. across time. The belief that these groups were inferior to white males enabled violation and oppression of those deemed to be ‘naturally’ less than, and it protected laws that infringed on their fundamental human rights. For instance, women’s right to vote, slavery, and Jim Crow laws are among the most renowned and controversial ideologies in American history. Given that actions and thoughts are tightly connected, a more in-depth exploration of this relationship is warranted.

Most things in our quotidian life may seem like a natural fact; consequently, people are often confined to conventional ideas and refrained from new ways of thinking (Nealon and Searls Giroux 6). At times, it may seem that social acceptance is the key to getting things done; however, in reality, such moments of blockage can lead to valuable and transformative insight. The Protestant Reformation is a perfect example that helps illustrate this point. Individuals such as “Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Henry VIII challenged papal authority and questioned the

Catholic Church's ability to define Christian practice" ("The Reformation"). As a result, "the Protestant Reformation was the 16th-century religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheaval that splintered Catholic Europe, setting in place the structures and beliefs that would define the continent in the modern era" ("The Reformation"). Nonetheless, these types of confrontations served not only to create other Christian or religious denominations, but they also paved the way for secular ideals. For instance, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, postulated God's existence as a condition of morality and later regarded God's idea as a "projection" of human concerns (Helm). Those theories were swiftly adopted by future thinkers and scholars, like Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Feuerbach (Helm). Furthermore, it is relevant to note that the previous examples were only used to depict the importance of critical thinking and innovation.

Additionally, established facts and beliefs are determined by a person or a group of people and subsequently accepted by society. Even though this course of action has enabled humankind's advancement, arguably, it is relevant to consider its relationship with authority. For example, "canonicity establishes some authority (through the designation of 'genius' or 'greatness') based on honor and reverence as opposed to critical questioning and challenge" (Nealon and Searls Giroux 11). Furthermore, the formation of ideas, the designation of names, and the classification of concepts tend to derive from respectable theorists and thinkers' minds. Consequently, "the names that are assigned to objects or ideas may reveal more about the namer or author than the thing being named" (McCutcheon 10). Hence, the author is not entirely in control of the meaning, and interpretations of concepts can vary throughout each individual. Furthermore, by virtue of these interpretations, it is not surprising that ideologies will emerge.

Ideologies are often understood as deeply rooted beliefs in concepts or ideas that are false or misleading (Nealon and Searls Giroux 94). However, in this thesis, ideologies are better understood as deeply rooted beliefs that are immune to or shielded from alternative beliefs or understandings thus limited in scope and/or potentially false or misleading. Moreover, this may apply to how people follow and understand the constitution, political leaders, and high-positioned priests or pastors. “The same generic material takes on different meanings, values and identities in relation to different classification systems, each of which puts into practice different sets of interests- which changes from time to time, group to group, and occasion to occasion” (McCutcheon 13). For example, the academic study of religion has modified its name various times throughout history. In Britain during the 19th century, it was known as Science of Religion, “emphasizing the systematic and rational manner in which it was studied (McCutcheon 16). Conversely, the name was succeeded by Comparative Religion, which placed its focus on “the cross-cultural nature of its data” (McCutcheon 16). Therefore, despite what one may think, names are not necessarily neutral and objective labels but instead are products of social worlds that change over time. This may imply that the way in which certain language is perceived or understood depends on the social contexts of a particular time and culture, which will be better analyzed in some of the paragraphs below.

### *Culture*

To apprehend the process that allows us to conceptualize the information that dictates our behavior and perception of reality, it is crucial to analyze the role of language and culture. Nealon and Searls Giroux stated that there are some cultural considerations in which meaning is

brought about by “a reading process that is context-bound and culturally produced. Moreover, there is no preexisting metaphysical or transcendental meaning that can be somehow found throughout a text” (51). Cultural contexts can be challenging to discern, mainly because the word ‘culture’ can be addressed through a diverse set of definitions. However, for purposes of this study, culture entails the characteristics and knowledge shared by a group of people. This definition includes shared values, rituals, behaviors, norms, institutions, symbols, and practices that form or represent a specific culture (Paloutzian and Park 331).

Nevertheless, there may be some complexities regarding culture’s contributions to an individual’s identity, its boundaries, and the inclusion of subcultures or semi-autonomous cultures. Categories that are usually used to identify cultures are race and ethnicity, yet “the vast majority of cultures in the world today are considered multiethnic and multiracial” (Nealon and Searls Giroux 52). The difference between the two is that race refers to an individual's physical characteristics, whereas ethnicity is linked with cultural expression and identification (Blakemore). Furthermore, “both are social constructs used to categorize and characterize seemingly distinct populations,” (Blakemore). Although some may argue that race is a biological factor that can be identified through common physical characteristics and genetic information, scientists have proven those claims' inaccurate: “Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups,” (Daws). This implies that greater genetic variation exists within “racial” groups than between them. The understandings and distinctions of both concepts, however, can vary from place to place and may affect social stratification, public policy, civil rights law, among others; such as in the case of the United States with its Jim Crow laws from the late 19th century until early 20th

century. The variation of these cultural and social understandings largely stems from the concept of socialization. Although culture and society are considered interdependent, they do not hold the same significance. As previously noted, a culture is considered the reflection of a group's practices and belief systems, whereas a society "represents the people who share those beliefs and practices" ("Culture and Society"). Furthermore, socialization "is the lifelong process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs, and ideologies, providing an individual with the skills and habits necessary for participating within his or her own society" ("Socialization Throughout the Life Span"). Therefore, individuals learn or acquire their world-views based on how they are socialized. In other words, it is culturally and socially constructed. Additionally, it is possible to change perspectives through anticipatory socialization and resocialization.

The effort by which non-group-members adopt the values and standards of groups they aspire to join is known as Anticipatory socialization ("Socialization Throughout the Life Span"). Doing so will ease the newcomers' entry to the group and help them interact appropriately once they have been accepted. For example, a man who desires to become a priest must follow a specific set of attitudes and practices to be accepted by the church's people. On the other hand, "resocialization is defined as radically changing someone's personality by carefully controlling their environment" ("Socialization Throughout the Life Span"). Although the change that is undergone through resocialization is considered somewhat radical, it could also occur in a subtle manner such as when entering a church group or residing in a religious convent. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the close relationship between language and socialization. The main premise implies that one becomes socialized through language, and that language is learned

through socialization (Daws). Thus, as we learn to communicate, we also undertake notions and ideas of the society and environment around us.

One learns to organize socially charged languages through various methods, including classification or categorizations. These categorizations facilitate and encourage humans to create beliefs and biases onto societal constructs, such as race, class, ethnicities, gender, and regionalism. The previous constructs can be identified through language ideologies (Daws). It is through the filter of language ideologies that individuals make sense of the world around them as well as understand social hierarchy (Daws). Ultimately, these ideologies index a person's or society's understanding of others and itself. Considering that language is embedded in culture, it is not hyperbole to state that all humans possess conscious or subconscious language ideologies (Daws). It is an act in which one's sociocultural experience is expressed through language.

### *Religion*

One understanding of religion considers the belief systems and practices that formulate what a person or a group of people deems spiritually significant or sacred (Little and McGivern 472). It is a cultural universal that can be found in all social groups (Little and McGivern 472). However, it is crucial to understand what and why we consider specific human behaviors as 'religious' or 'non-religious.' There are many approaches to the academic study of religion (see McCutcheon), but given this study's emphasis on socio-cultural considerations, it will primarily focus on sociology. As a result, this type of analysis will elucidate knowledge beyond the behaviors and common assumptions about religion. "Whether we consider our views on politics, homosexuality, or our children's education, the sociological study of religion provides valuable

insights into our collective behavior,” (Little and McGivern 481). These views and behaviors divulge our fundamental understanding of other crucial aspects of our lives (Little and McGivern 481). Therefore, aside from the spiritual experience, religions significantly impact social structures, evolution, and stability. These assumptions were accentuated by social theorists Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Although all three supported different ideals, they coincided with religion's centrality in society (Little and McGivern 474).

The German sociologist, Max Weber, believed religion was a precipitator of social change (Little and McGivern 473). Even though he mainly examined the impact of religious belief on economic activities, the social change generated or complemented by religion can be translated to many historical events. For instance, Catholicism served as a tool of the Spanish as a colonizer to gain more power over its colonies. In Puerto Rico, Catholicism, along with Spanish customs, produced a transformation in the indigenous culture and economy. Prior to the contact with European society, taínos were farmers, fishers, and skilled craftspeople. Many of the products produced were used in a widespread trade network among the islands (“Taíno Society”). Conversely, during the years of conquest<sup>15</sup>, the economy was best defined as an agricultural subsistence economy, which later depended on importing slaves for labor purposes (Bowman). Thus, religion was used to reshape indigenous’ behaviors and beliefs on life and the Spanish’s role on the island.

On the other hand, Emile Durkheim reckoned that religious institutions were designed to achieve social stability and functionalism. Such reasoning encourages social cohesion and promotes behavior consistency in a community (Little and McGivern 473). Durkheim’s notion

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<sup>15</sup>The Spanish settlement lasted from 1493 to 1898.



can be exemplified through the Puerto Rican celebrations and gatherings. Although not all jubilation alludes to or carries Christian origins, a great deal of them do. The biggest celebrations include Christmas and *Las Fiestas Patronales*. Both festivities encourage social gatherings, sharing meals, dancing, and singing. Through these types of celebrations, the community has the opportunity to come together, while at the same time commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ in December and honor each town's patron saint during different dates, all year round. It is significant to note, however, that most celebrations are transitioning to secular events. Nonetheless, they are adhering to the functions theorized by Durkheim.

Although religion could be considered a catalyst of social change and an indispensable factor for social cohesion, its complex nature also enables it to be understood as a distraction and/or expression for the oppressed. This theory is better explained by philosopher Karl Marx, who argued that religion produces more harm than good. The rationalization behind his stance is that religion reflects society's social stratification and maintains inequality and perpetuates the status quo (Little and McGivern 474). For this reason, Marx often referred to religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people.” (Little and McGivern 474). The phrase is often misinterpreted by associating the opium with the effect of ‘escaping reality’ or diverting one's problems through religion. In reality, Marx used that phrase to refer to religion as the product of the oppressed people. He suggested that it is created through the projection of their needs and desires into an idealized existence, which essentially allows people to accept their current circumstances as the natural order of things. For instance, just like the Spaniards brought upon social change to Boriken, they also imposed a set of beliefs onto the natives and taught them

obedience to authority as a condition for achieving future prosperity through salvation. Therefore, Christianity, and religion in general, can be both oppressive as well as a liberating force.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, although some more than others, religion can be found at the core of any society. In the case of Puerto Rico, it is clear that Christianity has played a crucial role in the development of its society. Due to its historical context, people in Puerto Rico often regard religiosity as a positive factor of society. However, it is crucial to point out the recent and increasing trend of secularization within Western societies and their impact on Puerto Rico. Consequently, Puerto Ricans are daring to challenge persistent notions of the importance of Christianity in Puerto Rico and its specific influence on a number of social norms. To evaluate the role of religion in societies, this chapter described the predominant theories of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Furthermore, it takes into consideration its relationship with Puerto Rican culture and history. Consequently, the previous theories help explain the predominant attitudes and beliefs of the islanders. Its historical context stems from the Spanish conquest and further connects it with the current fusion of ideals produced by said events. The upcoming chapter will take these concepts into account and will explore some of the outcomes of the effects in the Puerto Rican society.

## CHAPTER 3 UNDERLYING IMPACTS

This chapter considers the previous concepts and theories with the intention of unearthing an in-depth understanding of the established, ingrained, and predominant belief systems that preside over the Puerto Rican society. However, it does so by analyzing the connections between religious as well as historical events and processes with current shared beliefs. Moreover, the chapter focuses on the implications these religious ideologies have had on gender discrimination and violence, the New Civil Code, and current political outcomes.

### *Core Puerto Rican Ideals*

This section elucidates the prevalent Puerto Rican values and beliefs that will help explain society's behavior and understanding towards topics such as legislation, politics, and gender and sexuality. "The social nature of shared beliefs is well reflected in the way they are formed. Shared beliefs, which pertain to the realm of sociopolitical contents such as societal beliefs, may be viewed as socially constructed to a large extent. That means these beliefs are formed through social processes in social situations in which sociocultural meanings are established" (Bar-Tal 1). The way in which beliefs are established is done through an implicit negotiation process and unchallenged acceptance of the ideals. In his book, *Shared Beliefs in a Society*, Bar-Tal describes the process of negotiation as interactions between members of a society that determine and construct knowledge on which they agree (see Bar-Tal 1). Furthermore, the unchallenged acceptance "indicates passive acquisition of beliefs from external sources, which are usually perceived as knowledge authorities" (Bar-Tal 1). However, it is

important to note that in both cases individuals actively digest and interpret the information given.

Once beliefs are formed, individuals proceed to communicate them. They are expressed through various means, such as literature, paintings, films, videos, among others. By doing so, the dissemination of beliefs can include several social implications. For instance, the usage of the words “pato” and “maricón” in Puerto Rico, are utilized as a pejorative term to ridicule and deride the masculinity of men. Moreover, some Puerto Ricans (mostly men) often “interchange these words and the term gay in many ways, referring to both objects and people” (Torres). Subsequently, people who engage in these types of interactions are implicitly accepting the idea of “Machismo,” which is the Spanish term for the “social behavior pattern in which the Latino male exhibits an overbearing attitude to anyone in a position he perceives as inferior to his, demanding complete subservience. Machismo is usually used and defined with a negative connotation” (Mendoza 2). Additionally, “Latin men are expected to be a “varón,” who is caring, responsible, decisive, strong of character, and the protector of the extended family. Some of the more commonly known negative aspects of machismo are aggressiveness, physical strength, emotional insensitivity, and womanizing” (Mendoza 2). This concept is deeply related to Puerto Ricans’ understanding of respect, protection, and dignity. This belief has been put into effect since childhood through socialization and often induces gender violence and toxic masculinity, which refers to “the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and it encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men” (Kupers 713). In essence, the usage of seemingly inoffensive terms or actions can in fact contribute or be part of the dissemination process of a particular ideal.

On the other hand, shared beliefs, whether subconscious or deliberate, exist and are enforced partly because their awareness tends to provide a sense of similarity and confidence to those who concur with them (whichever they may be). When such discovery is made, the realization of shared beliefs may lead to group formation and strengthening of beliefs (see Bar-Tal 6). The fortification of those beliefs then prompts individuals to gain confidence in the knowledge that they perceive to be mostly accepted (see Bar-Tal 5). As a result, this awareness “validates their contents and increases the sense of knowing” (Bar-Tal 5). Once a group’s belief receives some sort of social validation, it influences their behavior and decision-making (Bar-Tal 7). Thus, the nature and the awareness of sharing, according to several social psychologists, “is fundamental in the construction of social reality” (Bar-Tal 5). That being said, this section attempts to dissect and unravel some of the beliefs in the Puerto Rican repertoire.

Puerto Rican culture and values are highly conditioned by the island’s history. By virtue of The Treaty of Paris of 1898, article X, the territories yielded by Spain to the United States would have a right to freely exercise religion (Varas-Díaz et al. 104). However, this did not mean that the conservative teachings of the Spanish regime would be dissolved or forgotten by the people. The lack of recognition of certain fundamental freedoms was evidenced in the Spanish Catholic tradition, which transpired in the island through colonization and evangelization efforts. Some of these constraints were manifested through rigid gender roles, laws restricting religious freedom- mostly limited to Catholic views, and strict conservative views on sexuality. These social norms censored everything that the Catholic Church of Spain understood to be distant from the imposed dogma (Varas-Díaz et al. 104). Spain’s absolutist government lasted 405 years in Puerto Rico. This suggests that not only did the Spanish set the foundation of modern Puerto

Rican society, but that its control over the island lasted 283 more years than that of the United States<sup>16</sup>. Despite decades of efforts to Americanize Puerto Rico, the people in the island successfully opposed U.S. assimilation strategies. These strategies include measures to make English the official language, granting U.S. citizenship in 1917, and displacing the Catholic religion with Protestantism, among others (Méndez 44). Additionally, during the period of the US military conquest, Americans utilized “religion and the public education system as intellectual tools of Manifest Destiny ideology” (Méndez 41).

Manifest Destiny ideology is a religious philosophy that referred to the United States as the nation destined to expand its territory and spread democracy across North America by a divine force (“Manifest Destiny”). The distorted vision and intentions of the Manifest Destiny ideal underestimated the cultural legacy left by the Spanish regime in Puerto Rico. Thus, the aftermath of the decisions that were made in attempt to control the people on the island failed miserably (Méndez 45). For Instance, banning the Puerto Rican flag and imposing the American one only added fire to the nationalist sentiment. The resistance of the Puerto Rican people prevailed throughout the 1930s, when the nationalist movement led by the Popular Democratic Party won widespread support across the island (“U.S. takes control of Puerto Rico”). Even though Puerto Rico remains a U.S. territory, this nationalist sentiment lives within the great majority of Puerto Ricans in the island and in the diaspora.

Furthermore, many values and behaviors adopted by the people in the island adhere to religious and patriarchal ideologies, which have played an important role in Puerto Rican history

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<sup>16</sup> The years taken into account are from 1493 to 2020. The Spanish ruled from 1493-1898; 405 years. The United States has held power from 1898-2020 (present day); 122 years.

and culture. To demonstrate the previous statement, this chapter refers to a survey conducted by students and professors of the university of “Sagrado Corazón.” The study found that 94% of the participants considered family as the most important aspect in their lives (Rivera Clemente). However, other results from that study showed that 70% of them gave great importance to work, followed by leisure (66%) and religion (65%) (Rivera Clemente). Lastly, it found that 10 to 12% of people would not prefer or tolerate living next to people from another race, religion, or homosexuals (Rivera Clemente). However, predominant ideologies and behaviors against women were accentuated after the implementation of “Operation Bootstrap.”

During these series of projects, which took place throughout the mid-twentieth century, governor Luis Muñoz Marín attempted to modernize and industrialize the island. “This plan included cheap labor and introduced new tax laws to attract American companies to the island” (Ellis 3). Consequently, “Puerto Ricans were being overworked, and overnight power dynamics on the island were being flipped as the wealth switched from aristocratic sugar and tobacco-producing families to the families of the foreign owned companies” (Ellis 3). As a result of these new implicit societal norms, women in all social classes were respected or given value solely based on their contributions to their man’s status in the society (Ellis 3). This conservative and patriarchal attitude in the Puerto Rican society (and, thus, in government structures) is part of the cause behind violence against women in the island. Ultimately, the implications of these fundamentalist ideals and the lack of willingness to advance an equitable agenda will be analyzed in the section below.

## *Gender and Sexuality*

The patriarchal framework has been deeply embedded into the Puerto Rican society. However, this section will focus on femicide as well as gender violence, and how it correlates to concepts of “machismo.” Furthermore, in order to understand said relationship, it is crucial to delineate the difference between female and women. The term “female” refers to biological sex, whereas “woman” refers to gender or social identity. This being said, understandings and, thus, violence toward both may be different. For instance, as will be discussed in greater detail below, the dehumanization of transgender women can lead to severe acts of brutality. This may be because people in a society actively refuse to accept their gender. Hence, they perceive them as a man that needs to toughen up.

Although Puerto Rican society has evolved considerably since the Spanish ruling, the essence of their dogmas, values, and beliefs still remain within Puerto Rico’s modern culture. For instance, “the origin of machismo can be traced to pre-Columbian times and has been influenced by both indigenous and European forms of masculinity” (Coronado). Thus, strict gender roles, imposed strict catholic beliefs, and rigid conservative views on sexuality can be discerned in various aspects or affairs of the current Puerto Rican society, which can in turn be exemplified in the recent increase in domestic and gender violence from the year 2019 to 2020.

In Puerto Rico, approximately 272 women and girls have been reported missing in the first ten months of 2020 (“Ascienden a 87”). Moreover, from 2018 to 2020 there have been 441 women and 457 girls reported missing (“Ascienden a 87”). Although statistics show that there has been a significant decrease in the number of disappeared women and girls, the people of Puerto Rico are asking for a state of emergency. This is largely due to recent studies that



demonstrate the severity of the issue. “In Puerto Rico, there is 1 femicide every 7 days, which is equivalent to an average of 3.00 femicide per every 100,000 women. According to the report *Global Burden of Armed Violence, Every Body Counts*, averages above 3 are considered a high rate.” (Avilés & Rodríguez Reyes 6-7). Femicide is the most extreme form of gender violence, and it broadly refers to the killing of women or girls as an act of discrimination and their inequality (“What Do We Mean by Femicide?”). The women most vulnerable to these kinds of attacks are between the age of 25 and 34. Additionally, women with low education attainment are five times more likely to be at risk of femicide, which usually occurs in the family’s or the victim’s household. Despite there being reports and some statistics of gender violence in Puerto Rico, most governmental resources are inadequate. This includes the Puerto Rico Police Department as well as “Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, out of approximately 11,468 active police agents, only 30 are designated to work the cases of missing people (“Ascienden a 87”). Unfortunately, many Puerto Ricans do not view this as a pressing issue, thereby demonstrating the set of common beliefs espousing crucial gender ideology that entails significant inequality outcomes.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, much of these ideals and biases correspond to the ways in which men and women have been socialized. This helps explain the roots of the patriarchal ideology and how it translates to the high rate of gender violence on the island. Moreover, a typical comment is that men die at a greater rate than women, and this comment serves to disregard the status of women and their elevated risks specifically correlated to their gender.

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<sup>17</sup> *Oficina de la Procuradora de las mujeres* is the governmental office that deals with gender and domestic violence in the island.

Bearing this in mind, it is crucial to highlight what differentiates the reasons by which most of these women and girls have been killed. The homicide of a woman is in most cases directly linked or caused by the complex circumstances of their gender. This can be played out through resentment, hostility, or misogyny by their male counterparts (Avilés & Rodríguez Reyes 11).

Likewise, transgender women are also being murdered in significant numbers. Since the beginning of 2020, six have been killed on the island, whereas in 2019 there were none (2020). “For many transgender people, living openly can be its own act of defiance in a society that continues to set rigid cultural norms for gender identity and expression” (Lee 4). Furthermore:

“Transgender and gender-expansive people face stigma surrounding who they are from an early age. Often rooted in inaccurate beliefs and politically-motivated attacks on transgender identities, this stigma erects barriers in virtually every facet of life, denying transgender people the equal opportunity to succeed and be accepted for who they are. Moreover, anti-transgender stigma can have long-term impacts on mental health and economic and housing stability, especially if individuals experience familial rejection and isolation from social support systems” (Lee 4).

Therefore, the lack of compassion and misapprehension instigates acts of dehumanization as well as violence towards the transgender and gender-expansive community. In attempt to combat the discrimination and inequality against women and people in the LGBTQ+ community, activist and organizations (such as *Comité Amplio para la Búsqueda de Equidad* or CABE) are

calling for a state of emergency. Moreover, they are advocating for the implementation of gender studies in school curriculums and educating police on these matters. However, it remains a battle against conservative perspectives that dominate the outlook of older generations and governmental officials. Primarily, this notion evidences the religious, traditional, and conservative ideals left by the Spaniards during their reign in Puerto Rico. Nonetheless, it is pivotal to know that these connections are theoretical in nature with real-world implications.

### *New Civil Code*

Aside from acknowledging that religious values and beliefs affect the decisions made by political candidates, it is crucial to look into the island's existing legislations. As mentioned in Chapter One, the New Civil Code (Law #55-2020) is the second<sup>18</sup> most important legal document in Puerto Rico and it dates back to 1930. The civil code regulates the person, the family, movable and immovable property, succession and wills, obligations and contracts, among many others. The importance of the civil code stems from the fact that it is the book that regulates how people and legal entities are linked to each other and conduct business. Furthermore, Puerto Rico inherited the code from the Spanish regime during their ruling on the island and had not been amended since 1930. Thus, the New Civil Code has been in the process of rectification for more than twenty years. However, in June 2020 the governor of Puerto Rico announced its approval. Essentially, the main issue with this action is that many objections and disputes were voiced by the islanders, yet public hearings were not possible due to the quarantine mandates that were temporarily enacted by the government in order to prevent the spread of

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<sup>18</sup> The first most important legal document being the Constitution.

Novel Coronavirus 19. In doing so, the government further encouraged a higher level of distrust between the people and the government, they failed to consider some valid concerns brought on by the people, and (to a certain extent) they violated the democratic process in which it should have been carried out.

On the other hand, the New Civil Code was led and proposed by the controversial political figure María Milagros Charbonier. She was a member of the Puerto Rico House of Representatives from 2013 to 2020. Charbonier is considered controversial because of her conservative and religious views towards individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, legalization of marijuana, among others. These beliefs have undoubtedly guided her work and impact in the Puerto Rican government. For instance, in 2015 she sued the governor of Puerto Rico, Alejandro García Padilla, with the intention to block same-sex marriage in the island. In this case, Charbonier argued that the ruling made by the United States Supreme Court of granting same-sex couples the fundamental right to be wed was not applicable to laws in Puerto Rico because of its status as a unincorporated territory<sup>19</sup>. Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico dismissed the case and stated that the complainants would not prevail with their case. Furthermore, Charbonier along with Guillermo Miranda and Majority Leader Carlos "Johnny" Méndez proposed a law that prohibits "imposing a substantial burden on a person's free religious exercise" and defines religious exercise as "performing an act or refusing to perform an act which is substantially motivated by a religious belief"<sup>20</sup> (Denuncian Intento). Some of the biggest

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<sup>19</sup> See "2015 DTS 093 Charbonier Laureano V. Garcia Padilla, Gobernador 2015 TSPR093 -Jurisprudencia Del Tribunal Supremo De P.R." *LexJuris*, 2015, [www.lexjuris.com/LexJuris/tspr2015/lexj2015093.htm](http://www.lexjuris.com/LexJuris/tspr2015/lexj2015093.htm).

<sup>20</sup> See [www.primerahora.com/noticias/gobierno-politica/notas/denuncian-intento-de-legalizar-el-discrimen/](http://www.primerahora.com/noticias/gobierno-politica/notas/denuncian-intento-de-legalizar-el-discrimen/).

concerns with this proposed law is the space it creates for discrimination and intolerance, especially towards people in the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to the project being led by a controversial political figure and being passed without public hearings, there are a series of unaddressed critical concerns. The predominant concerns among Puerto Ricans and the most relevant to this thesis include laws that affect surrogacy, women's rights regarding abortion, sex change on birth certificates, and marriage. Each of these laws were written in such a way that confusion and incongruity prevail in its language, which inherently threatens the legitimacy of certain fundamental rights and leaves them open to interpretation. Firstly, on Article 70 of the New Civil Code it states that “los derechos que se reconocen al no nacido están supeditados a que este nazca con vida y no menoscaban en forma alguna los derechos constitucionales de la mujer gestante a tomar decisiones sobre su embarazo”<sup>21</sup> (Art. 70, 33). Thus, the code denotes that the means attributed to the unborn child do not detract from the constitutional rights of women to interrupt their pregnancy. However, the real concerns lie within certain provisions that could be interpreted as an ascription of legal personality to the unborn. Some of the clauses being: “Birth determines personality and legal capacity; but the conceived is considered born for all the purposes that are favorable to it, provided that it is born with the conditions expressed in the following article”<sup>22</sup>(Art. 69, 33). Thus, by considering the conceived as born for all purposes that are favorable to it, the New Civil Code attributes legal personality which recognizes certain rights to

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<sup>21</sup> Translation: “The rights that are recognized to the unborn are subject to their being born alive and in no way undermine the constitutional rights of pregnant women to make decisions about their pregnancy.”

<sup>22</sup> In Spanish: El nacimiento determina la personalidad y la capacidad jurídica; pero el concebido se tiene por nacido para todos los efectos que le son favorables, siempre que nazca con las condiciones que expresa el artículo siguiente.

the nasciturus. Consequently, this language may be interpreted in a way that can be used to support a repeal of abortion rights in the future.

On the other hand, Article 76 establishes that “el cuerpo humano es inviolable y no puede ser objeto de contratación privada, salvo las disposiciones contenida en los artículos siguientes sobre donación de órganos, células, tejidos, sangre, plasma, gametos, embriones, y maternidad subrogada, o cuando la ley disponga algo distinto”<sup>23</sup>(Art. 76, 34). This clause establishes that the human body cannot be subject to private contracting, with some exceptions that include surrogacy. Nonetheless, the subsequent articles do not establish a regulatory framework for surrogacy. The subsequent premise only reports that the surrogate motherhood can only exist if the surrogate mother does not have any genealogical link with the unborn child. Therefore, the lack of information or structure on surrogacy predominantly affects the LGBTQ+ community who often utilize this reproductive method.

In addition, the LGBTQ+ community has also been affected through the retrogression of the new restrictions pertaining to the change of sex on the birth certificate. Prior to the approval of the New Civil Code, the right to change the sex designation on the birth certificate was recognized without the need to file a legal action. However, the new code considers necessary filing a legal action for the purpose of this modification. At the same time, it says “nada de lo aquí instituido menoscaba el proceso establecido en los casos de una solicitud para que se refleje un cambio de género en la certificación de nacimiento”<sup>24</sup> (Art. 694, 191). The previous clause

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<sup>23</sup> Translation: The human body is inviolable and cannot be the object of private contracting, except for the provisions contained in the following articles on donation of organs, cells, tissues, blood, plasma, gametes, embryos, and surrogacy, or when the law provides otherwise.

<sup>24</sup> Translation: Nothing of what is instituted here undermines the process established in the cases of a request for reflecting a gender change in the birth certificate.

recognizes the right to request a change in the gender designation of the birth certificate.

However, the process followed in the Demographic Registry once the sex change is authorized on the birth certificate is unclear. Ultimately, it is written in such way that evokes a setback in the fight for equality as well as the rights achieved by transgender citizens in Puerto Rico.

Lastly, there is some confusion and concern regarding the process and ability to marry. The definition of marriage in the code replaced the wording that marriage was a union between a man and a woman, to “a civil institution that comes from a civil contract by virtue of which two natural persons mutually bind themselves to be spouses” (Art. 376, 106). Furthermore, it is unclear as to why there is an emphasis on the word "natural." It can be considered as redundant, given the fact that in the Puerto Rican legal system all human beings, regardless of their sex, gender or identity, are natural persons. By the same token, the union between people of the same sex is not explicitly recognized. Thus, stating that marriage is between “natural persons” may lead to future judicial interpretations against the LGBTQ + community.

Ultimately, the evident concerns and objections towards the New Civil Code reveal the persistent tensions between the relationship of church and state, as well as Progressive Christianity and Conservative Christians. Moreover, taking into consideration the growing concern of the conservative movement that is happening in the US government and judicial system, these laws in Puerto Rico may lay the groundwork for the overturn of these attained rights. Thus, the ideal situation would be to reverse the effects of these established laws or clarify its ambiguous language as a bulwark against potential regressive federal legislation.

## CHAPTER 4 POLITICAL PROGRESS

Despite the barriers and even potential setbacks of gender and sexual politics in PR, significant advances have been made, and more advances are on the horizon. This chapter briefly outlines some of the more significant achievements. It also highlights some initiatives promising to promote a broader inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in PR. There has been an increase of conversations about human rights and social justice that has encouraged people to educate themselves on those issues as well as assess their relevance in society. These conversations potentially lead to more actions, particularly on gender violence, the church's influence on legislation, environmental protection, LGBTQ+ rights, and education reform.

Political activity is a shared experience among people in a given country. Thus, politics can serve as a reflection of the historical outcomes and occurrences of a society. Ever since the ratification of the Jones Act in 1917<sup>25</sup>, Puerto Rico has instilled and maintained a strict bipartisan political system (Rosario Cortés). The scheme in place was inherently based on the political status of the island. The option favored either statehood or to remain a commonwealth, in which the dominant political parties are the New Progressive Party (PNP) and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD). Typically, the main issues addressed by these parties are the status, economy, education, and corruption in the island. However, in recent years concerns towards gender violence, the church's influence on legislation, environmental protection, LGBTQ+ rights, and education reform have gained extraordinary attention. Moreover, flourishing alongside those

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<sup>25</sup> The Jones Act of 1917 granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship. Additionally, it “created a bill of rights for the territory, separated its government into executive, legislative and judicial branches, and declared Puerto Rico’s official language to be English” (“Puerto Ricans Become U.S. Citizens, Are Recruited for War Effort”).



matters are new political parties that have prioritized those issues in their agenda. For instance, the Citizens' Victory Movement (MVC) and Project Dignity (PD) are political parties created in 2019 that possess opposing views regarding the issues previously mentioned. Furthermore, the support and attention the Citizens' Victory Movement, lead by Alexandra Lúgaro, has been receiving can be considered somewhat revolutionary. This is primarily because it is the first time since 1952 that a political party (that does not favor statehood nor commonwealth) has been able to obtain substantial support<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, this shift in perception mirrors the concerns of the current Puerto Rican society.

Aside from gaining popularity, it is important to note that the Citizens' Victory Movement incorporates liberal socialism ideals. For example, they advocate for the implementation of gender studies in all the Puerto Rican school curriculums. This subject was one of the main issues discussed in the 2020 political debate. The adversary was Cesar Vázquez, candidate from the Project Dignity party, which is a conservative party that uses Christian democracy as its political foundation. Interestingly, the last religious political party was the Christian Action Party (PAC) that participated in two elections in the 1960s but never obtained their objective. Essentially, their goal was to impede access to contraceptives and sterilization as well as promote religious education across the island ("Partido Religioso"). It is believed that the overwhelming attention MVC has received, may have contributed to the emergence of Project Dignity and inspired them to propose their conservative and religious ideologies. Those ideologies are evident In Project Dignity's website, under "Proyecto Redes," in which there is a written statement meant to appeal to voters who share their beliefs, the paragraph says:

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<sup>26</sup> Electoral results since 1932 may be viewed here: <http://electionspuertorico.org/cgi-bin/municipios.cgi>

Nuestros niños, nuestras familias, y Puerto Rico estarán protegidos de leyes injustas, aumento de la luz abusivo, y de **la tiranía de la ideología de género** si nos unimos y votamos por Proyecto Dignidad. Usted está invitado a registrarse en la red de Proyecto Dignidad, manténgase informado, e invite a otros a hacer lo mismo. Responda al llamado histórico uniéndose a esta Red para que todos unidos llevemos a Proyecto Dignidad al Triunfo Electoral 2020. Por tus niños, por tu familia y por Puerto Rico - Proyecto Dignidad 2020. Atrévete a creer<sup>27</sup>. (Proyecto Redes)

In the previous statement, the political party highlights their stance regarding issues of gender. The first sentence roughly translates to: “Our children, our families, and Puerto Rico will be protected from unjust laws, the increasing energy bill, and from the tyranny of gender ideology if we join forces and vote for Proyecto Dignidad” (Proyecto Redes). The key phrase being: “the tyranny of gender ideology.”

The term “gender ideology” is gaining traction among conservatives across the world. According to their beliefs, gender ideology was created by radical feminists and lesbian academics, both typically characterized as theoretically and morally challenged intellectual sources. Furthermore, this gender ideology is said to have been made to promote the idea that “gender has nothing to do with biological differences and can be chosen at will” (Campoy). It is also classified as a dangerous ideology that “threatens to infect children and destroy democracy (Campoy). The term itself, however, was credited to right-wing conservatives, and it is often

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<sup>27</sup> **Translation:** Our children, our families, and Puerto Rico will be protected from unjust laws, the increasing energy bill, and from the tyranny of gender ideology if we unite and vote for Proyecto Dignidad. You are invited to register in the Project Dignity network, stay informed, and invite others to do the same. Respond to the historic call by joining this Network so that we can all together lead Project Dignity to Electoral Triumph 2020. For your children, for your family and for Puerto Rico - Project Dignity 2020. Dare to believe.

used as an efficacious communication and persuasion tool that “helps its ‘fighters’ avoid overtly homophobic language—which is prohibited by law in some countries—and to frame their arguments in secular terms” (Campoy). One of their most compelling arguments is the disruption of “family values.” For instance, “if traditional roles of husband and wife, father and mother, man and woman are merely social constructs, then other identities beyond those binaries become just as valid, injecting chaos into the order of things” (Campoy). Therefore, “gender ideology,” often is described as a strawman fallacy aligning with core Puerto Rican ideals and the importance given to family and its prescribed structure. “By oversimplifying the issues, the concept of ‘gender ideology’ [it] allows conservatives to package them in ways that are easy to understand—and contest” (Campoy). In other words, simplifying the complexities of gender makes it easier to encourage dissent.

Ultimately, the clash of ideologies uncovers the enduring, yet neglected, influence of religious principles that predominate the island. At the same time, it illustrates the considerable progress towards more inclusive and tolerant cultural norms. It may be argued that societal change and cultural evolution is somewhat exhibited through the emergence of the new political parties. For instance, due to the recent general election (held on November 3, 2020), politicians were encouraged to participate in political debates. In these debates, *perspectiva de género* (gender perspective) was considered a crucial topic of discussion, which also included the controversy of the implementation of gender studies in public schools. The importance given to issues of gender is a relatively new action in Puerto Rican politics. This demonstrates a change in people’s beliefs and behaviors. To provide a better example of the desired actions, the Citizens’ Victory Movement plans to implement a gender studies and Human Rights course in the public

school's curriculum, enforce and expand norms regarding discrimination and harassment, enable participation of women and LGBTQ+ organizations and feminist groups in discussions of public policy as well as create policies to eradicate gender violence, the enforcement of a secular state, among others (Victoria Ciudadana). Although there is still ongoing debate over which policies are either too radical, not enough, or just right, the Puerto Rican society has shown some progress within issues of gender.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This thesis evaluates the ways in which religion, specifically Christianity as a religious institution, has contributed to the perpetuation of certain social injustices, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors on the island of Puerto Rico. Furthermore, it explores the real and significant power of religious institutions. It does so by questioning the religious foundation in which its culture was built. In doing so, this thesis aims to provide a broader perspective of the implicit effects of Christianity in Puerto Rico, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

Despite the scarce and sometimes unreliable sources of information, several key findings emerged throughout the course of the thesis. This was done through an Interdisciplinary approach, which enabled an in-depth comprehension as a result of the consolidation of multiple perspectives and disciplines. The core competencies it entailed was critical thinking, perspective taking, and integration of ideas. Moreover, the absence of critical questioning and undogmatic views has constrained people to accept most things in their life like a natural fact. Consequently, these boundaries constrain people to conventional ways of thinking, which, of course, leads to the social acceptance of particular beliefs and behaviors. Often, these biases are employed through socially charged language, which facilitates categorization and societal constructs such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, among others. Ultimately, these demonstrate people's or society's understanding of others and themselves.

On the other hand, a crucial finding within the Puerto Rican society is the increasing trend of secularization, which is occurring at a western society level. As a result, Puerto Ricans

are daring to challenge persistent notions of the importance of Christianity in Puerto Rico and its specific influence on a great deal of social norms. However, as a society, shared beliefs are difficult to ameliorate. The way these are established consist of an implicit negotiation process and an unchallenged acceptance of the ideals. Once these beliefs are formed and recognized, individuals proceed to communicate them with the rest of the community. Nonetheless, individuals do actively interpret and digest them before doing so. Since Puerto Rican's culture is highly conditioned by their history, many social norms and beliefs stem from the colonization era. For instance, many Puerto Ricans subconsciously link their understanding of respect, protection, and dignity to the concept of "machismo." Often, this is done through the process of socialization and has led to toxic masculinity and a staggering number of cases of gender violence. Countless of these ideologies prevailed and transpired during the strict Spanish regime and have made their way to the present through the conservation of these shared beliefs and by the belief that they are crucial or pertinent to the Puerto Rican culture. This is not to say that the weight and influence these detrimental beliefs carries has not diminished. However, they do hold some concealed influence in Puerto Rican culture. In essence, many values and behaviors adopted by the people in the island adhere to religious and patriarchal ideologies, which have played an important role in Puerto Rican history and culture.

Nonetheless, it is through history that we are able to find moral understanding and ameliorate identity within a society. Thus, in order for these developments to take place, it is crucial to conduct more interdisciplinary and sociological research of this topic. These views and behaviors divulge our fundamental understanding of other crucial aspects of our lives. Therefore, publication of data by reliable sources would serve a great purpose in the advancement of the

sociopolitical agenda of the Puerto Rican society. Ultimately, this thesis has paved the way for the discerning of crucial matters that require further attention which will subsequently affect the overall development of Puerto Rico.

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