CEMENT, EARTHWORMS, AND CHEESE FACTORIES

Religion and Community Development in Rural Ecuador

JILL DETEMPLE

University of Notre Dame Press

Notre Dame, Indiana

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Many people and organizations in many places have made this book possible. In Ecuador, I am grateful to familia Martinez-Pacheco, who hosted me in my early days in the country, taught me Spanish, and became family. I also thank Carmen Baux, who has given me shelter, warm tortillas, and unbounded enthusiasm for almost two decades, and the Lucio family, who have opened up their homes and lives in ways that have improved this work and made its existence feasible. I also thank Peace Corps–Ecuador, especially the headquarters and training staff, for allowing me to conduct research with a very fresh group of trainees. In the town I call San Marcos, I would like to extend special gratitude to the extensionists of the municipio, Santa Anita women’s cooperative members, and the missionaries I call Joyce Davis and Ruth Bauer. All of them were more than generous with their time and resources, enriching this work with their comments and suggestions, and my life with the stories of theirs.

In North Carolina I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my adviser, Ruel Tyson, Jr., and to Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Charlie Thompson, Orin Starn, and Randall Styers, who read the earliest versions of this work with humor, skill, and critical eyes, and who epitomize a truly helpful dissertation committee. Arturo Escobar acted as mentor and cheerleader, and I thank him for his support. I am also grateful to the Tinker Foundation, which funded initial research for this project, and to the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which awarded me a dissertation completion fellowship when I
needed it most. Maryellen Davis-Collett, Phil Hassett, Kathryn Lofton, Tom Pearson, Nora Rubel, and David Shefferman made graduate life enriching and enjoyable. The Danger Girls—Celeste Gagnon, Miranda Hassett, Marsha Michie, and Quincy Newell—improved my writing, my thinking, and my sense of humor in ways various and deep. Eve Carson and Anna Lassiter gave me new eyes with which to see San Marcos. Hope Toscher and Myra Covington Quick held my hand, loved on my newborn, fed me chocolate, and pushed through paperwork in ways I still deem heroic. You truly are the pillars of the earth.

At Southern Methodist University I am grateful for a University Research Council grant that allowed me to do fieldwork in Ecuador. Thanks too to my remarkable set of colleagues in the Religious Studies Department. Bill Barnard, Rick Cogley, Mark Chancey, Johan Elverskog, Serge Frolov, John Lamoreaux, and Steven Lindquist have all read pieces of this manuscript and contributed to a uniquely collegial and supportive environment in which to see it through to its completion. Peggy Varghese and Kenitra Brown proved that the title “department assistant” is an understatement of epic proportions. Thanks to both of them for support ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. Thanks also to my students, especially Katye Dunn, Erin Eidenshink, Katie Josephson, Wesleigh Ogle, Robert Perales, Lindsey Geist, and Luke Friedman, all of whom took a special interest in this project and made some real contributions to it in conversations both in and out of the classroom. At the University of Notre Dame Press, special thanks to Chuck Van Hof, who gave this book a chance; Robyn Karkiewicz, who handled more details than I can imagine; and to the anonymous reviewers who took extraordinary care in reading the manuscript. Rebecca DeBoer and Margo Shearman provided keen editorial eyes and ears as they made the text sing. This work is better because of all of you.

Finally, this book would not be possible without the continual support and sacrifice of my husband, Brian Bunge—partner in Ecuador, partner for life. My sister, Rachel, has been a constant cheerleader. My parents, Janet and Duane DeTemple, not only gave me wings but exhibited unusual courage in letting me use them. I hope to do the same for Molly and John, who have already discovered the joys and the magic of running with scissors.

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“So, are you an evangelical, or what?” It was a misty afternoon in 1996 in a small community high in the Ecuadorian mountains. Vicente, a middle-aged Catholic farmer, had paused as we worked together on a composting project, squinting at me over shovels and small creatures wriggling in our hands. He was “just checking,” he explained after I assured him that I had no desire to change his religion. He had heard of other communities that had converted wholesale from Catholicism to Protestant Christianity in order to receive coveted development assistance—including water systems, microenterprises, and latrines—and he wanted to be sure that I wasn’t one of the suspected evangelicals, using earthworms to win his soul. My curiosity piqued, I asked other people in the community if they had heard of evangelical Christians offering aid for conversion and came to learn that Vicente was not alone in his fears. “The Protestants!” one woman exclaimed as we sorted corn seed on her front porch, “They’re taking over [conquistando] the world!”

These comments, and countless others that I would hear from campesinos in Ecuador’s Bolívar province as a development worker and later as a researcher, reflect rural Ecuadorians’ keen awareness of changes in the religious makeup of Latin America which have marked the past thirty years. Since the 1980s Protestant Christian denominations, especially evangelical and Pentecostal churches, have attracted increasing numbers of Latin Americans. Brazil, almost exclusively Roman Catholic in 1970, is now less than 90 percent Roman Catholic, and 46.6 percent of Christians identify as charismatic or Pentecostal. Ecuador, which...
had virtually no Protestant population in 1970 (1.4 percent), is now approximately 93 percent Roman Catholic, and the church is both growing more charismatic and losing about 2 percent of its adherents per year.\(^3\) With such rapid change under way, Viche had a reason to query the religious status of the earthworms and their potential to be linked to conversion.

But Vicente’s question also points to other changes that Ecuadorians have experienced as citizens of a “developing” country that receives approximately $60 million in U.S. foreign assistance annually, and which is home to more than one hundred NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) dedicated to development work.\(^4\) The “boom” of NGOs engaged in overseas projects came after the end of the “development decades” of the 1950s–80s, when development was primarily under the auspices of government programs that emphasized national economic strategies, programs and restructuring. The increase in NGOs also reflects a shift in development strategies to more localized and “needs based” endeavors administered by local organizations. These trends have opened the door for faith-based organizations to become primary points of contact between the recipients of development and aid programs and the government donors that regularly fund them.\(^5\)

While Vicente’s question and the remarks of the woman on the porch point to recent situations in which religion and development have become entangled in donor agencies and sites of reception, the woman’s comment offhandedly invoking the Conquest of the New World by Spanish forces evokes a much longer entanglement of religion and development. I was surprised at Vicente’s question because I believed myself to be in Ecuador holding earthworms and fielding questions about my religious motivations because of what I saw as a secular system of international assistance launched at the end of the Second World War. Vicente’s question, however, points to a longer and more complicated history that has mixed religious change and technological innovation from times before Europeans set foot in the Americas. It also highlights religion, development, and their confluence in rural areas as spaces in which Ecuadorians and other actors in the “developing” world negotiate the contours of that world.

These negotiations, constitutive of modernity, simultaneously refute the secularization model of 1960s social scientists, embrace some
aspects of “needs based,” “alternative,” and “capabilities” approaches to development while refusing others, and highlight the roles of desire, place, and embodiment in both religious and development practices. These are themes I returned to Bolívar to investigate during summer research trips in 2000 and 2001, for ten months in 2002–3, and again for summer season research in 2006 as I lived and worked in San Marcos, a cantonal capital of six thousand people at the intersection of the mountainous and coastal regions of the province.

San Marcos was an excellent field site because several development agencies, both secular and religiously affiliated, are active in the area and have been for more than twenty years. San Marcos is home to North American evangelical missionaries, Jehovah’s Witnesses, two growing Pentecostal congregations, and an active and vital Catholic Church. In many cases, development and religion are elided in the lives of people and institutions, making their overlap, and the play of religion and development as local and global phenomena, relatively easy to see and talk about.

San Marcos’s status as a cantonal capital in a rural area also made it attractive as a study site. The weekly market draws people into town from a wide area, revealing the give-and-take of development and religion as institutions that connect people over space and time, as well as a moving snapshot of local politics and people. As the regional political center, San Marcos is home to many government development programs. The agricultural extensionists from one of these programs, UMATA (Unidad Municipal de Asistencia Técnica Agropecuaria—Municipal Team for Small Farm Assistance), invited me to join them for projects in San Marcos and in Sinche, a coastal community. Every two weeks, I crowded into a municipal truck, a four-wheel-drive vehicle—or, as the funding for the program dwindled, onto a series of buses—and made the trek to the coastal region of the canton with UMATA employees to plant seedlings, talk about guinea pigs, or plan for future projects. When not with UMATA, I attended the weekly meetings of the Catholic Santa Anita women’s cooperative, and also spent time with Ruth Bauer and Joyce Davis, two evangelical missionaries who had lived and worked in San Marcos for almost thirty years. All of these groups included people eager to talk, and I conducted more than sixty in-depth interviews, as well as dozens of informal interviews and discussions.
with group and association members, project participants, and people from San Marcos and surrounding communities.

My initial questions during the early stages of my research echoed Vicente’s. I wanted to know if people were switching religious affiliation to garner development aid offered by faith-based organizations, and how they decided to make such a change. Very early on, however, I realized that this was not the most useful trajectory. Anthropological and economic studies on “social capital” had already examined religious affiliation as a determinant factor in the success of development projects, and such studies often had the effect of characterizing religion in moral functionalist terms, citing religion as something that was likely to keep communities together due to shared “values” and “understanding,” which aided in collective goals and strategies to implement development projects. Communities that prayed together, many scholars and faith-based development practitioners hypothesized, might be more likely to stay together and to take ownership of development processes, goals, and the daily work required for success.

These moral and functional descriptions of religion, however, failed to account adequately for religious experiences, institutional structures, and points of contact with other parts of daily life evident in central Ecuador. Vicente’s question points to the ways in which religion affects social constructions not just of communities but also of objects and places, and the ways in which those objects and places become involved in religious understandings of the world, a process similar to what American religious historian Robert Orsi has termed “lived religion.” Orsi writes that “Workplaces, homes and streets—as well as churches, temples, shrines, class meetings and other more immediately recognizable sites of religious activity—are the places humans make something of the world they have found themselves thrown into, and, in turn, it is through these subtle, intimate, quotidian actions on the world that meanings are made, known and verified. ‘Religion’ is best approached . . . by meeting men and women at this daily task, in all the spaces of their experience.” Religious meaning and experience are sited, multivalent, and ripe for entanglement with a wide variety of actors, ideas, places, and things. Earthworms, shovels, and a foreign technical adviser may all be used to encounter, produce, and make sense of religious worlds.
Development is similarly produced and experienced in daily tasks and spaces. As I lived and worked with my husband, Brian, in San Marcos—sharing a courtyard with our landlady, her children, and a variety of domesticated animals—we were often engaged in the daily work of “progress” as we fed the “improved” guinea pigs kept in a cage with which we shared a wall, and as we installed an on-demand, electric “Frankenstein” shower in our outdoor bathroom. Lucía, the woman from whom we leased our two-room cinderblock house, used our rent money to make improvements on her property, amassing materials for a new kitchen and adding a greenhouse to her garden across the street with Brian’s help. We often talked as we met in the process of doing laundry in the courtyard lavandería, Brian and Lucía comparing tips and tricks for making the labor-intensive work go faster. In San Marcos, this kind of work, and the language of its planning and improvement, are summed up in “la lucha,” the fight or struggle of everyday existence. Religion—specifically Christianity—and development are a part and parcel of the lucha, acting as guides for its enactment at the same time that they promise liberation from its unceasing necessity.

It is this liberatory promise that has caused some scholars to compare development to religion, dubbing both “transcendent.” Arturo Escobar, Gilbert Rist, Wolfgang Sachs, and others writing as “postdevelopment” scholars in the 1990s roundly criticized international economic development (IED), arguing that it had become an idealized form of colonialism with universal westernization as its ultimate goal. This view characterized development as a discourse made up of ideologies and programs that shaped global thinking about a normative “progress” based on Western and largely secular ideals. As a transcendent discourse, international economic development seemed composed of the stuff of “global faith,” its ontological status as a global good unassailable even in the face of evidence that it had failed to work.

Certainly, development, like religion, possesses some of this transcendent, even sacred, quality. Development and religion are discourses that supersede physical, ideological, and chronological boundaries. Religious traditions such as Christianity and Judaism, like development, exist as “things in themselves” even as they are, as J. Z. Smith warns, categories, “creation[s] of scholars’ study.” But religion and development are not experienced or enacted in that transcendent, transnational,
transhistorical realm. Rather, religion and development are “lived” and often become entangled in the quotidian world of bedrooms, kitchens, organizational meetings, and buildings. Lived development, like lived religion, is invented, contested, produced, and reproduced in the places, objects, and stuff of everyday life.

It is in these spaces, as well as in the networks spun by global forces, that religion and development become entangled, acting on one another even as they act on the experiences, perceptions, and production of meaning of those whose lives they touch. Development and religion are embedded not only within one another, but within the moving and volatile streams of neoliberal capitalism, the U.S. “plan” to rid Colombia and Ecuador of coca production, and the amorphous “war on terror” that has revived many of the early “hearts and minds” campaigns of the American anti-communist era. The long interaction among religion, development, and the global forces in which they are entangled attests to their deployment and the consequences of that deployment, as Ecuadorians, like so many people in what we have come to call the “developing world,” engage in a continuing struggle for agency and identity in their courtyards, kitchens, fields, and bedrooms.

Indeed, the entanglement of religion and development in the contemporary Andes reveals, in a particularly clear light, processes of continual negotiations about the meaning of modernity, about its legitimacy and authority in daily life. Where Ecuadorians encounter religious and development ideologies and apparatuses, they often strategically respond to those ideologies and apparatuses, incorporating, changing, and rejecting them in ways frequently unintended by those with whom such discourses originate. The nature of these negotiations, especially as they play out in the creative spaces of homes and communities, points to a modernity in which people remain invested in retaining traditional cosmologies and life ways, even as they redefine and support those cosmologies and life ways using the tools and language of “progress.” What remains contested is the nature of that “progress” and the right to define its parameters and end goals. A focus on the intersection of “the modern” as it is embodied in lived religious and development spaces exposes the ways in which Ecuadorians are continually reforming not only Christianity and development, but modernity itself.
In naming these processes of negotiation and contestation a reformation of modernity, I am consciously invoking the religious and historical overtones embedded in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe. Specifically, I highlight processes of contestation, change, restoration, and struggle which characterized the European Reformation. I also highlight mechanisms of production, reproduction, and pedagogy which make what Arjun Appadurai calls the “global imagination of modernity,” and thus its global negotiation in local spaces, possible.12

Here, some clarification in terminology will be useful. By modernity, I mean the particular worldview, predominant in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century and especially prominent in Western societies during industrialization, which favors an ethos of rationality, progress, mechanization, specialization, and a distinctive break from the past. Many philosophers in the Enlightenment era sought to define an enlightened, rational modernity against tradition, and specifically its incarnation in religion, claiming, as did David Hume in his Natural History of Religion, that “ignorance is the mother of devotion.”13 For Max Weber, writing more than a century later, modernity, and in particular capitalist modernity in Protestant contexts, was defined by a continual de-sacralization of daily life. Weber’s “iron cage” of meaningless, profane work is one ultimate expression of this divide.14

More recent scholarship has described the defining feature of modernity as that of a “rupture” that has reconfigured, and continues to reconfigure, social constructions of reality and possibility.15 Characterizing modernity as “the everyday cultural practices though which the work of the imagination is transformed,” Arjun Appadurai rejects a hierarchical model in which modernity is invented by Western elites and remains out of the reach of the majority of the world. Rather, Appadurai argues, processes of globalization, and specifically a global media coupled with migration, have expanded modernity beyond simple, geographically described boundaries of rationality or progress to an expanded, changing, and universal imaginative field.

My analysis begins at this point of universality, seeking to describe its deployment, and the consequences of that deployment, at a specific place and time. Such a starting point necessarily rejects a view of
modernity as transcendent or invulnerable to the discourses and global forces in which it is produced and reproduced. As Bruno Latour has argued—and as the continued marriage of religious and development discourses illustrates—modernity’s hallmark division of nature and culture, tradition and progress, is continually breached.

Latour’s discussion of modernity, in which he outlines a “modern Constitution” that divides nature from culture and science from politics despite the proliferation of their hybrid forms, is particularly helpful as we examine the roles of religion and development in contemporary Ecuador. Beginning with the assertion that modernity is often described in human terms, as the “birth” or the “death” of a certain kind of humanism, Latour makes the argument that modernity is equally defined by the invention and separation of a nonhuman world composed of things, objects, and beasts. Like a system of government that appoints judicial authority to one branch and legislative to another, the modern constitution declares that science shall be humanity’s access to nature—the world of things that has an unchanging ontological status. Politics shall be the space in which discourses concerning the social shall take place. God, Latour argues, must remain “crossed out,” removed to the sidelines so that God’s dual status as a natural and social being does not interfere with either side of the modern divide. “No one is truly modern,” writes Latour, “who does not agree to keep God from interfering with Natural Law as well as with the laws of the Republic.”

The problem with this constitution, and with modernity as a seemingly self-evident and self-contained state, Latour goes on to argue, is that the divide that defines modernity is impossible to maintain in practice. A hallmark of the modern state, for example, Ecuadorian road construction is often the center of social and scientific debate that ranges from indigenous land and cultural rights to the feasibility of constructing international highways on muddy jungle floors and steep mountain slopes. Billboards sponsored by the Ministry of Transportation and Public Works in 2002 depicted a stylized road leading into the sunset of an equally idealized future as a caption proclaimed, “Only one way, only one road, the development of the country!”

These entangling processes have ensured that religion maintains and even strengthens its presence in the early twenty-first century de-
spite predictions of its demise. Scholars have noted this, and many focus on religion as they seek to redefine modernity or explain the instability of its operational terms. Some have theorized, for example, that the rise of global fundamentalism, be it Christian or Islamic, indicates a resurgent resistance to modernity, usually characterized in terms of rationality and technology, and its incarnation in globalization. In this vein, David Martin and Harvey Cox described the rise of global Pentecostalism in the 1990s as an expression of resistance, both to the exploitations of capitalist systems and to a certain hegemony of the rational. In ways similar to music, Cox theorized, speaking in tongues and laying on hands allow Pentecostal practitioners to recapture something primal, a divine truth and eschatological hope that biblical exegesis and medical science leave behind.\(^\text{19}\) By pitting jihad against McWorld, Benjamin Barber also pointed to religion as that which resists a certain form of modernity, here encapsulated in globalization.\(^\text{20}\) All of these authors set religious practice and expression against science, or the rational, and pointed to the conflict itself as the hallmark of the times in which we live.

What I suggest here, however, is that what we are witnessing in the rise of mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, and charismatic Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere, and in fundamentalist strains of religion globally, is not so much a resistance to modernity, but, again, a significant reformation of its terms and conditions, enacted, as was the Protestant Reformation, through vehicles of negotiation. It is, in many senses, a restorationist movement, though not one that should be taken to be pure or transcendent. Religious fundamentalists, missionaries, development workers, and many rural Ecuadorians with whom they come into contact and who do their work, are not so much pitting faith against rationality, as Cox and Martin suggested, as they are arguing against ideas of rationality and progress that leave faith and religious or “traditional” ways of knowing behind. When medical missionaries distribute Bibles with bandages and sermons with surgeries, they do not reject medical science but “restore” to it sets of values and meaning they feel a compartmentalized modernity has abandoned. When rural Ecuadorians either accept or reject their medical care and/or the religious messages that accompany it, they join the missionaries in establishing meaning and agency, sometimes meeting missionaries in their
vision of integration, and sometimes refusing to accept the combinatorial message they offer. Missionaries and their clients are engaged in processes of negotiation that work to reform the meaning and significance of progress, its desirability and its contours, in the modern world.

The ways that people perceive and negotiate the discourses of religion and development as they have and do come together and break apart in their homes, communities, and national life are as vital and as varied as the discourses themselves. A careful attention to this negotiation displaces many of the common and disempowering tales of a hegemonic development invented, implemented, and analyzed solely by a (neo)colonial and secular West. Development, and indeed modernity, have not only never been secular, they have never been entirely Western in their invention, application, or possibility as a source of local knowledge and power.

Orientation: Three Scenes from the Road

My choice of San Marcos as a site in which to research religion as an academic came partially out of my experiences working in development as a Peace Corps volunteer. Having lived a little more than two years in Bolívar province as an agricultural extensionist, I came to this project with some idea of local concerns and with a working vocabulary for the realities of agricultural development. I knew whom to talk to at the Ministry of Agriculture office and at the feed-and-seed store. I also came into the project knowing that I had friends and family up the road. While I had not worked in San Marcos before, I knew people who had, and they paved the way for an unusually smooth entrance into the community. Much of the difficult work of orientation was done before I arrived.

What follows are three scenes from San Marcos, meant to do similar work in orientation to some of the spaces and circumstances in which religion and development interact, and to the consequences of that interaction as they manifest in the particular modes of desire, community, and a tension between what Ecuadorians call “cement things” and newer expressions of development which focus less on infrastruc-
ture and more on social and communal wholeness and becoming. These scenes are a prologue, an introduction to some of the people, places, and institutions that occupy these pages. They are the beginning of my attempt, using the tools of ethnography and historical, religious, political, and economic analyses, to answer Vicente’s question about the religious status of my earthworms more thoroughly than I did that day in 1996. These scenes acknowledge that his intimations about the connections between religious and technological change were well founded, and continue to merit inquiry as he and others in his community negotiate a growing and complicated array of development and religious institutions, ideologies, and practices.

**Birth**

Coming into the small house in Puyupamba, Henry Palacios and a visiting medical resident moved quickly to the midwife and her patient, asking questions. They were relieved to find that the woman had been in labor for only a few hours, despite the worried words of her husband when he interrupted their supper in the evangelical Runa (indigenous) church across the street in order to summon their help. The baby, it seemed, was correctly positioned for a normal delivery, and labor was proceeding unexceptionally.

With this established, Henry, an HCJB medical missionary, knelt down next to the midwife, ready to work. It was soon apparent, however, that his North American upbringing and medical school education had limited merit in the context of the Runa birthing style in which a woman squats, supported by a sister or other female relative. He couldn’t see anything, the doctor complained, telling the crowd that had gathered in the room that he “[had] no training for this position.” Smiling, Ruth, a fellow HCJB missionary who had lived and worked in San Marcos for almost thirty years, commented that he should look again. The baby’s head was crowning.

Henry’s remarks were the topic of conversation for those of us returning to San Marcos for the night in “Moses,” the Chevy Suburban that houses HCJB medical caravan supplies and people. As we rode into town, dodging potholes on the dark and muddy road, Ruth told
stories of her time in the field, recounting some heroic deeds in a breech delivery a few years before. A trained nurse, she had acted as midwife, negotiating a tangled umbilical cord and four gangly limbs coming into the world in reverse order. “I’ve seen all kinds of things,” she mused as we rounded a corner and the lights of San Marcos came into view.

Party X

For the most part, the meeting had gone well. The municipal agricultural team had survived the ride to Sinche in the alcalde’s (regional mayor’s) Chevy Vitara, dropping more than a thousand meters on the slippery dirt road to the coast with few problems. In Sinche, on the coastal plains at the southern extent of the canton, forty peasant farmers had gathered, and thus far sat attentively as the agricultural team and the alcalde spoke about the projects they had accomplished during their time in office. The election was only a month in the future, and the group was giving a technical talk in lieu of attending a rally for their political party, Lista X, that was taking place in Guaranda, the provincial capital.

Assuring folks that the meeting in Sinche was not a political event, a municipal extensionist took the floor and explained that the municipio used to work only in infrastructure, in “cosas de cemento” (cement things). Now, however, they had begun to work in agriculture, directly with farmers. He then asked what the people gathered for the meeting thought they needed, commenting that it is better to respond to actual needs than merely to divine what those needs might be. “We’re here,” he said, “because we won’t accept conditions as they are.” At the same time, he continued, “we’re not bringing anything new, not inventing anything. We’re here to help you change and become what you want to be.”

When he had finished, a middle-aged woman in indigenous dress spoke from the back of the crowd. Her voice rising in frustration, she explained that this kind of meeting and talk of agricultural progress was all well and good, but the real problem locally was the lack of a viable road. The municipio in San Marcos had promised the people of Sinche a grader and a bulldozer to make repairs. Where were they? Why didn’t the people of Sinche have a route to the highway?
Blessed among Women

Leaving town, the members of the Santa Anita Catholic Women’s Association were exasperated, confused, and angry, upset at the turmoil that had delayed their departure and the relaxed and happy atmosphere of the previous afternoon. The women were headed to Guayco, home to a Catholic shrine marking an apparition of the Virgin Mary, and on this day, to a celebration of International Women’s Day sponsored by the Salesian priests who oversee the cooperative’s parent organization, Promoción Humana (Human Promotion). The bus they had hired, however, had not arrived to pick them up, canceled by the cooperative’s president when it appeared that not enough women wanted to attend the event. Only a great deal of scrambling and the aid of family connections to a bus owner restored the possibility of vehicular transport to the occasion. While the group was well organized and profitable in their knitting and cheese-making endeavors, events such as Women’s Day often sent tempers flaring with additional work, time commitments, and administrative hassles.

The tension on the bus was palpable until a cooperative member broke the general silence by suggesting that the group sing a song to the Virgin. Hesitantly, the women did so, asking for the Virgin’s blessing in a simple rhythm. As they neared the top of the hill on the way out of town, the song ended and the same woman began a compressed Hail Mary, her voice low over the growl of the struggling engine. “Hail Mary, blessed among women, pray for us today and in the hour of our death.” She repeated the petition, quietly, until most of us on the bus joined with her, creating a delicate concordance as our voices came together: word with word, breath with breath.

All of these scenes—the birth in Puyupamba, the meeting and agricultural talk in Sinche, and the cooperative trip to the Women’s Day event—are snapshots of the way development, and often religion, deploy in Marqueños’ daily lives. In homes, at meetings, on buses, development and religion are part of the social fabric of San Marcos, woven into events as singular as birth and as mundane as organizational
meetings and bus rides. Development and religion are global forces, but they are experienced and recreated locally.

Indeed, these snapshots illustrate some of the ways religion and development interact on the ground, as Henry put it, in “positions.” In particular, they highlight desire, community, and tensions between “cement things” and “becoming” as sites of negotiation created by the interplay of religious and development discourses; as sites where actors employ those discourses to shape social and physical manifestations of “progress.”

The Runa man’s desire for the presence of an American medical doctor even though it was not required and the woman’s plea for a road point to desire as a foundational experience of development, one that is simultaneously facilitated and proscribed by religious institutions and beliefs. Negotiations around desire—its necessity, utility, and dangers—are central as Ecuadorians position themselves in the spaces of bedrooms, institutions, and economies. They are also negotiations that highlight “community” as an important and often troubled ideal, something demonstrated by the cooperative members’ use of a religious trope to regain harmonious relations among themselves, the self-conscious denial of political community by the extensionists, and also by the indigenous woman’s resistance to “community” and communal “becoming” as an idealized development goal at the meeting. Flexible, political, and often transient, idealized notions of community often drive development and religious projects, and require negotiations about the nature of community in planning sessions, applications, buildings, and the private spaces of bedrooms and kitchens as food, sex, and clothing mark group identity and affiliation. In a similar manner, the tension between the need for “cement things” such as infrastructure and roads, and social development, marked by the extensionists in Sinche as “becoming,” highlights similarities between moral, participatory aspects of religion and its counterpart in more recent “alternative” and “participatory” development discourses. Negotiating in planning sessions, bedrooms, and congregational meetings, Ecuadorians work to balance physical needs with social histories and questions over definitions of a “good life” (buena vida/vida mejorada).

While questions about what constitutes “progress” are one theoretical axis, tensions between local spaces and global forces are another.
Desire, community, and the tension between “becoming” and “cement things” are both locally positioned and the result of globalization and modernity, imagined as universal processes. Each of the three scenes we just visited took place “on the road” not just in a physical sense, but also in the way that the possibility of their occurrence depended upon a play of ideas and actions that spread beyond national borders and strictly held notions of self-evident cultures and places. The reality of an American doctor proclaiming that he had no training for “this position” at a Runa birth is one made possible only through the advent of development as a certain kind of global practice, one that in this case depended on a particular reading of Christian mission. In a similar manner, the fact that the women’s cooperative is supported by Salesian priests, many from Italy, speaks to a deployment of development that is nothing if not global, part of what Manuel Castells called a “space of flows” that links continents, people, ideologies, and desires. To speak of religion or development in Ecuador is to speak of religion and development, and of their concomitant political complexities, in the United States, Japan, the European Union, and Africa. It is to recognize the fluid interplay of global forces that encompass everything from college mission trips to neoliberal capitalism in local settings.

To best reflect these kinds of combinations and fluidities, I have invented and employed my own brand of hybridity. I have closely combined my home field of religious studies with cultural anthropology, and have also pulled from political science, cultural studies, history, Andean studies, and economics in order to examine the multifaceted ways in which actors construct and experience religion and development as ideologies, discourses, and practices. This hybridity allows sufficient theoretical amplitude to examine scenes such as the agricultural talk in Sinche not only in the context of the sociopolitical realities that infused the meeting with certain tensions (or inspired the meeting as a political device), but also with an eye to the global economic forces that drive government involvement in development projects. It is a hybridity that contextualizes the woman’s request for a road, as well as the reasons she was compelled to make such a request.

Necessarily, this approach is also informed by on-the-ground training and experiences from my time as a development worker. My personal and professional “routes,” as James Clifford so aptly describes
them, have resulted in a proliferation of networks that often link contrary or conflicting schools of thought, most notably a sharp critique of development in the poststructural vein with direct involvement in development projects, based in my experiences both as a former Peace Corps volunteer and as a researcher. In my work, I have had to do what I argue rural Ecuadorians, as well as religious and development personnel, do: negotiate workable hybrids of ideologies, discourses, actions, and analytical tools. The result is a critique of both the poststructuralist position, which sometimes overemphasizes a discourse of power and underemphasizes genuine human need, and the blind faith in development that Rist and Escobar outline.

Reading Development Religiously

More than anything else, however, this book takes religion seriously. If there is something unique it is not the use of history, economics, or anthropology as disciplinary lenses appropriate for the study of development. Rather, the use of these methods in concert with the techniques of religious studies—most notably an emphasis on experience and aesthetics rather than on more sociological models favoring social status or moral functionalism—better reflects how religion and development are related in contemporary ideologies and practices. This means reading the Ministry of Transportation and Public Works billboard proclaiming there is only “one way” toward the development of the country, and development more generally, religiously. The institutions, encounters, and social structures that development produces are examined with an eye toward the religious imagery and histories that underlie their design. Without such a reading, the development depicted on the sign in words and colorful images is too easily reduced to a rhetoric of modernity and progress, too easily subsumed into a single, exclusively Western genealogy of state formation and the consequences of a colonial world. By “reading” the billboard—and development—religiously, by using an expanded genealogical gaze to include a multitude of trajectories, many of them outside formal state structures, one can begin to see the places where both development and religion are produced,
disappear, change and, more than occasionally, come together. Reading development religiously, it is possible to engage the subject in every sense of that word: with care, dedication, and openness to the possibility that religions, as institutions and networks of belief and practices, remain in the picture.

In its subject and its methodology, then, this book necessarily entertains broader inquiries about the nature and study of religion in the twenty-first century. To examine religion as a part of development, and to admit that development may influence religious ideologies and practices, is to recognize the embedded nature of these discourses and also their ability to travel. Religion is not only a “global flow” that carries information and ideas in and of itself. Rather, religion is also a hitchhiker, piggybacking on other ideologies and movements as they run through new and well-worn channels of government, goods, tourism, and trade. Like these global forces, it is negotiated locally, in the spaces of cheese factories, bedrooms, parks, and community centers. This study takes such movement—and such alliances—seriously, arguing that understanding how religion moves, and paying attention to the company it keeps, is vital if we are to understand the evolving role of religion in the contemporary world.

Chapter 1 emphasizes this kind of movement as it traces the religious origins of development, working to unseat overly secular explanations of its beginnings or operations in the contemporary world. The second chapter then begins the work of positioning with an ethnographic description of a fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration. It elucidates family networks and a greater history of place as it explores modes of development, modernity, and Christianity in San Marcos. Chapter 3 examines development ideologies and practices as they relate to power, concentrating on the “participatory/alternative development” emphases on pedagogy and integration as they manifest in the training of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. Chapter 4 continues to incorporate economic and ethnographic modes of analysis as it plays on Enrique Mayer’s extensive studies of Andean household economics. It focuses on the household as a point of contact between many development projects and religious practices, and gives special attention to the role of desire and agency. Chapter 5 extends this idea by exploring
the ways development networks create religious/development hybrids in projects such as the creation and dedication of the Santa Anita cheese factory. This chapter also includes a discussion of community as an idealized form of infrastructure in development discourses. Chapter 6 returns to the three scenes presented in this introduction, offering an interpretation that considers the “wholeness” rhetoric of evangelical missionaries in the light of development and modernist discourses of completion and separation, and their local incorporation and rejection in San Marcos. The conclusion returns to the theme of negotiation in the context of development, assessing agency and the possibility of a truly indigenous, localized paradigm of progress.

Finally, the interaction of religion and development is the product of a certain kind of modernity, one that has, in Latour’s words, “never been [fully] modern.” In examining development as a platform where hybrids are created and rejected, as a space of flows where various networks come together and break apart, I am exploring a certain perception of, reaction to, and reformation of modernity. Doing so with a particular emphasis on the ways that religion and development interact in the lived experience of Ecuadorians, and in the lives of aid personnel and of people working in the mission field, challenges Latour’s assertion that the God of modernity must be “crossed out.” Rather, for many Ecuadorians God has come to dwell—sometimes quietly, sometimes with great fanfare—in the cinder blocks, ledger books, bandages, and earthworms of which development is made.