



Atheism and the Critique of Religion in Claudia Piñeiro's *Catedrales*

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“No creo en Dios desde hace treinta años” is the opening line of Claudia Piñeiro’s *Catedrales* (2020), a novel that appeared, not coincidentally, during the debate over the legalization of abortion in Argentina. The novel explores the causes and consequences of the death of Ana Sardá, a seventeen-year-old girl who died of a botched abortion before her body was mutilated to cover up the cause of death, a circumstance which leads Ana Margarita Barandela to write that “la obra es, ante todo, un reclamo a la legalización del aborto” (23). Indeed, abortion is a recurrent theme for Piñeiro, who has used her status as a bestselling author to campaign for its legalization, both through her fiction and through activism, interviews, and social media.¹ However, as the emphasis on atheism in the novel’s opening suggests, abortion access is only part of its anti-religion argument, which dwells on the consequences of religious fanaticism, indoctrination, and hypocrisy. Piñeiro’s recent focus on religion is also

evident in the Netflix series *El reino* (2021), which she co-wrote with film director Marcelo Piñeyro and which explores connections between Neo-Pentecostal religious ideology, politics, women’s and LGBTQ+ equality (including abortion access), and the sexual abuse of minors.²

Known primarily as a writer of crime novels, Piñeiro nonetheless rarely remains within genre expectations, instead producing complex fictions that interrogate social and political issues. Beyond frequently reaching bestselling status in Argentina, her work has won numerous prizes and is attracting increased scholarly attention. For instance, her award-winning 2005 novel *Las viudas de los jueves* has garnered critical attention for its deft portrayal of wealth inequality, while *Elena sabe* (2007), an atypical crime novel that reflects upon motherhood and disability, has also been the object of several studies.³ *Elena sabe* and *Catedrales* both treat the topic of abortion against the background of a predominantly

¹ Piñeiro has faced backlash over her vocal support for the pro-choice legislation that was passed in Argentina in December 2020, allowing abortion up to the 14th week of pregnancy (Rey; Centenera and Rivas Molina).

² See Kaiura, “La Palabra pervertida: Prosperity Gospel, Injustice, and Crime in *El reino* (Netflix, 2021).” Forthcoming, January 2024.

³ See, for instance, Rocha or Griess for studies of *Las viudas de los jueves*, and Varas or Bortolotto and Farnsworth for analyses of *Elena sabe*. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

Catholic Argentina, and while the earlier novel exposes religion's role in the fight against abortion and in the consequences of forced motherhood, *Catedrales* goes a step further, not only critiquing religion, but also plainly advocating atheism as a liberating alternative.

As Barandela has observed, *Catedrales* diverges from the crime novel's typical structure, eschewing the detective protagonist in favor of multiple narrators who each recount their own version of Ana's death and/or its consequences thirty years after the fact (23). Thus, in the majority of the text, there is no detective who gathers information and interprets it for, or along with, the reader until the mystery is solved. Rather, the reader must piece together incomplete narratives, equivocations, and skewed perspectives to reconstruct the crime and its antecedents. Like Ana's dismembered and burned body, the narrative is fragmented and disfigured, with some clues visible and others intentionally obscured. Most of the narrators of these fragments are searching for truth, but they can only tell the story from their limited perspective. There is Lía, the middle Sardá sister, who abandons her faith and Argentina after her sister's mysterious death; Mateo, Ana's nephew, who is marked by the family tragedy that happened before his birth; Marcela, Ana's best friend, who has suffered from anterograde amnesia since the night of the crime; Elmer, an investigator who worked Ana's case as a young detective; and Alfredo, Ana's father, who pens the letter that serves as the novel's epilogue. In contrast to these forthright but incomplete accounts, the two remaining narrators—the oldest Sardá sister, theology professor Carmen, and her ex-seminarian husband Julián—tell stories of concealment and self-

justification that both reveal and reject their responsibility for Ana's death and the gruesome cover-up.

The seven narratives illuminate each other and further subvert genre expectations by revealing key elements of the mystery relatively early on, and through an open ending that leaves readers to wonder if the whole truth will be exposed and if the guilty parties will ever be punished (Barandela 23, 25). This contrasts with traditional crime novels in which the detective functions to restore bourgeois social order by discovering criminals and turning them in for judgement (21). Such an ending does not suit Piñeiro's purposes because, as the novel reiterates, there is no actual murder nor a murderer who can be brought to justice. Ana was not deliberately killed, and while the postmortem mutilation is abhorrent, the novel clarifies that it is not a punishable crime under Argentine law (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 200). Thus, the assignment of guilt is not simple; while some individuals deserve a significant share of the blame, the guilty parties also include religious parents who indoctrinate their children, the Church hierarchy that encourages blind adherence to its beliefs, and a Catholic society that turns abortion into an unspeakable taboo. The open ending and the absence of justice are likely to leave many crime-genre readers unsatisfied and to provoke reflection on this complex web of responsibility and the ways in which tragedies like Ana's could be prevented.

The first part of *Catedrales* is narrated by Lía, who begins with an explanation of her atheism, and near the close of her story, Piñeiro includes a reference to prominent evolutionary biologist and New Atheist Richard Dawkins' 2006 book *The God Delusion* (49).⁴ This allusion is significant

⁴ "New Atheists" is the label that developed for a group of four authors who published books attacking religion and promoting atheism in the first decade of the twenty-first century: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

Though these writers have differing backgrounds and approaches, they "tend to be motivated by a sense of moral concern and even outrage about the effects of religious beliefs on the global scene," and they share a general set of viewpoints: 1) that there is no divine or

because Piñeiro echoes several of Dawkins' arguments as she develops her fictional exposé of religion's ills, which include the misrepresentation of atheists, the indoctrination of children, the Church's teachings about gender and sex, the rejection of evidence and inquiry in favor of reliance on ancient religious texts, and Dawkins' monstrous vision of the Judeo-Christian God.⁵ Alfredo's epilogue reflects on these problems, but also on the difficulty of facing pain and death without faith, and through his perspective, Piñeiro suggests that if atheism is a step too far, one can still opt for freer and more benevolent forms of spirituality.

Lía: Atheism as Liberation

The three Sardá sisters are brought up by a mother who puts "la religión por encima de todo y de todos," and an open-minded history professor (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 328). Lía is the most like her father, and as a teenager she begins to question Catholic teachings. However, Ana's grisly fate provokes an irreparable rupture when Lía refuses to pray at the wake and then echoes the attendees' prayers in the negative: "No creo en el fruto del vientre de ninguna mujer virgen, no creo que haya un cielo y un infierno," etc. (18). Piñeiro provides a symbol that helps explain this leap to atheism: Lía's turquoise ring, an item that Ana borrowed and treated like a lucky charm. At the wake, Lía notices that Ana's friend Marcela has the ring, and she asks herself, "¿Qué importancia tenía en aquel

momento un anillo que no había podido proteger a mi hermana de la muerte?" (16). Likewise, God fails to prevent Ana's death, and Lía abandons belief just as she rejects the invented and useless superstition of the ring. The ring parallels other symbols of religion's vacuousness that appear later in the novel, such as the empty cross—a notable sight in a Catholic context filled with crucifixes—that hangs in the garage where Ana undergoes her abortion (148). The empty cross signals God's absence and emphasizes the ineffectiveness of Ana, Marcela, and Julián's prayers; as Marcela states bluntly, "Rezar por Ana no había funcionado" (144). Similarly, Ana is named after Saint Anne, patroness of pregnant women, who also fails to protect her (280).

Lía begins to question any religious story upheld as truth, and in her present-day reflections, she wonders why others continue to believe "en historias que no resisten la prueba de verosimilitud que le exigimos a cualquier ficción menor" (17). Furthermore, she realizes that her childhood faith was based on fear of negative consequences such as punishment in hell. Ana's death prompts her to ask, "¿[Q]ué cosa más horrorosa podía suceder si yo dejaba de creer?" (19). She discovers that refusing to fear God is profoundly liberating: "Abandoné una neurosis colectiva, me declaré atea. Y me sentí libre. Sola, rechazada, pero libre" (20). She quickly learns that atheism is "una mala palabra" in the still overwhelmingly Catholic society of Argentina circa 1990 (17).⁶ As Barandela notes, Lía suffers "la violencia de la

supernatural reality, 2) that religious faith is irrational, and 3) that there is "a universal and objective secular moral standard" that derives from intuition or evolution, not from a deity or religious teaching (Taylor).

⁵ The analysis in this article does not signify the author's unilateral support for Dawkins' and Piñeiro's critiques of religion, nor does it intend to imply that all Catholics, Christians, or members of other faiths engage in the flawed reasoning and harmful behaviors condemned by Dawkins and exemplified in *Catedrales*.

⁶ A 2013 Pew Research Center study indicated that 86% of Argentine adults were raised Catholic, though increasing numbers are departing the Catholic Church for Pentecostalism or becoming "Nones"—those unaffiliated with any religion ("Religion in Latin America"). A 2019 study indicates that nearly 19% of Argentines identified as having no religion, and of those, 6% were atheists (Cruz Esquivel, Funes and Prieto 6). In comparison, in 1960, only 1.6% of the population was without religious affiliation (3).

exclusión, el castigo del silencio y la invisibilidad social” when she refuses to recant her unbelief (Barandela 25). Carmen stops speaking to her, and her mother nearly slaps her in a scene that resonates with a 2020 headline: “Ateos latinos no le temen a Dios, pero sí a sus madres” (Mejía). The atheists interviewed in the article discuss how difficult it is to be “un ateo criado en una devota cultura católica” and how some of them still fear expressing their doubts about religion to their families, even thirty years after the fictional Lía rebelled against her family’s faith, and in the midst of a significant demographic shift away from organized religion.⁷

The young Lía’s reputation also suffers because, in her cultural milieu, atheists are stereotyped as “personas ‘falladas’” who cannot truly be moral or fulfilled (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 17). Even her father, who understood her decision, urged her to say that she was agnostic rather than atheist (15). This coincides with Piñeiro’s personal experience; as she responded in an interview, “A muchas personas les cuesta aceptar que alguien a quien respetan es ateo. A mí muchas veces me tratan de hacer decir que en realidad no soy atea sino agnóstica” (“Email”). In another interview, she stated, “ser ateo tiene mala prensa: parecería que sos mala persona porque si no creés en nada, entonces no tenés reglas morales o éticas” (“Ser ateo”). These ideas are deeply rooted in Western and Latin American culture; in fact, reviews of psychological literature show that atheism has been treated as abnormal and as a risk factor “de sufrir miserias, psicopatologías y de tener una vida vacía” (Martínez-Taboas et al. 204). However, these assumptions are not research-based; in fact, studies show the opposite—that non-believers have better rates of mental health,

self-acceptance, self-actualization, and cognitive flexibility (204-5).

Lía is hurt by this rejection, but she does not become the bitter, amoral atheist of popular imagination, nor of her sister Carmen’s worldview, in which unbelievers “deberá[n] atener[se] a las consecuencias de [su] vida vacía por no creer en nada” (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 286). Lía’s trajectory and the contrasts between her, Carmen, and their mother refute these misconceptions. Lía moves to Spain and settles in Santiago de Compostela, a somewhat ironic location considering its fame as a religious pilgrimage site. She eventually becomes the proud owner of a bookstore near the cathedral, where she watches the pilgrims pass by as they end their long trek. Later in the novel, Carmen expresses disdain for the Camino de Santiago because it attracts more tourists than religious pilgrims (276), but Lía sees the value of the trek from her secular perspective. Many of the pilgrims are probably as atheist as she is, she reflects, but they walk “con el objetivo de llegar a un sitio concreto, de tener una meta, una certeza. Y probarse que pueden cumplir con lo que se propusieron como un desafío. Creen en sí mismos” (21-22). This atheistic pilgrimage reflects her own life journey, and it also foreshadows her nephew Mateo’s pilgrimage of liberation that will end with her, in Santiago de Compostela. Lía has found her own final destination: “En esta librería voy a morir, no tengo dudas, es mi lugar en el mundo,” she says, communicating not only her contentment in life but also her lack of fear regarding death apart from belief in God or an afterlife (21).

Lía also has a loving partner, Luis, and they have chosen to remain childless, which contrasts with Carmen’s dream of having many children to bring up as good Catholics.

⁷ Similarly, Dawkins claims in *The God Delusion* that “There are many people who know, in their heart of hearts, that they are atheists, but dare not admit it to their families or even, in some cases, to themselves” (26). Religious demographics from Argentina in 2020

also seem to back this up; while 31% of respondents in one study claimed to belong to no religion, only 1.6% went so far as to identify themselves as atheists (“Religion Affiliation”).

Carmen believes that the only way Christian women make their mark on the world is through motherhood, and she holds to traditional feminine ideals despite her status as a respected theology professor (241). Lía has discarded these gendered limitations to find fulfillment outside of motherhood, and she also diverges from Carmen's worldview in another crucial way. As Julián narrates, "Carmen era rotunda, estaba convencida, no tenía dudas" (241). Due to her allegiance to Church teachings and her belief in God's will, Carmen is convinced that she has all of the answers, or if not, that her lack of understanding is part of God's plan. So, instead of searching for truth like most of the novel's narrators, Carmen seeks to impose her version of reality upon others, whether by insisting on her theology and her claim to a perfect family life, or by covering up her and Julián's involvement in Ana's death.

On the other hand, Lía abandons all inherited and imposed "truths" just as she abandons her family and Argentina, vowing never to return until her sister's case has been solved. During the investigation, she and her father were the only ones interested in its resolution, because Carmen and their mother "no hacían otra cosa que rezar para tratar de aceptar 'el designio de Dios'" (45). Intriguingly, between Lía, Carmen, and their mother Dolores, we find three different reactions to the common religious trope that, when tragedy strikes, it is the will of God and the appropriate response is resignation, not questioning. Lía rejects this reasoning, and though she is scarred and mourns her losses, she is able to move on to a new and fulfilling life. Carmen accepts it because Ana's death and the cover-up allow her to carry on with what she believes is God's plan for her to marry Julián and start a family. She also moves on easily because she believes Ana's death was inevitable and deserved, demonstrating a callousness that throws her moral standards and human decency into question. Meanwhile, Dolores, who is nearly absent from the text, turns into "[un] ser

amargo y dañino" (67). The implication is that she could not resign herself to the idea that the God she served devotedly would will such a fate for her youngest child, and that unable to retaliate against God, she took out her anger over this betrayal on everyone else in her life. Therefore, it is not Lía, but true believers Dolores and Carmen who manifest the negative qualities that have often been projected onto atheists.

In sum, Piñeiro uses Lía's success and her intellectual honesty to refute misconceptions about atheism as well as to question the logic and assumptions of religion. As becomes a pattern in the novel, the direct representation of a problem is reinforced symbolically. In this case, it is Elmer who stands in for atheists when he explains how people may distrust criminal investigators and suspect them of being unbalanced because of their macabre work (194). He refutes this by maintaining that they have to be well adjusted to do their job, and that in fact they are "precisos, certeros, rigurosos, detallistas" and "no asevera[n] nada sin prueba objetiva" (194-95). By analogy, if criminalists are more well-balanced and trustworthy by virtue of their objectivity and reliance on evidence, Piñeiro asserts that atheists are as well because they reject superstition and unsupported assertions about the world. Unlike Carmen and Dolores, Elmer and Lía are prepared to accept "verdades no deseadas" that may be discomfiting, but that will lead to closure and healing (209).

Mateo: The Evils of Indoctrination

Piñeiro's second narrator, Mateo, also rejects religious belief, and as in Lía's case, he explicitly defends atheism. He refers to the writers who helped him evolve and cites Freud's assertion that religion deforms believers' understanding of reality, an idea that is personified in his parents, Carmen and Julián (71). However, 23-year-old Mateo's more prominent function is to

illustrate the evils of indoctrinating children. He does not reveal much about the content of his religious upbringing, but he mentions his parents' "vehemencia" (77) in instilling him with their faith and states, "me educaron para que fuera lo más dependiente posible, así se garantizaban mi presencia en el mundo que se habían inventado" (60). He also dwells on how they chose his name based on the calendar of saints rather than on any personal criteria, attributing his birthdate and the corresponding name to "el designio de Dios" as they do for every event, good or bad (91).⁸ He adds that this kind of thinking caused his mother to "cometer arbitrariedades" and to become "el ejemplar más fanático y conservador" among the religious members of the family (91). For Mateo, it is not religion that is the problem so much as this level of fanaticism, which forces him to rebel in order to establish his own identity (77).

The impersonal choice of Mateo's name symbolizes his lack of individual identity outside of his parents' religious worldview and his difficulty in growing beyond it. He is painfully insecure and confesses to being afraid of his mother, to the point that he feels like he might wet himself when his parents come to Spain and nearly catch him in Lía's bookstore (56, 60). In addition to this child-like reaction, he relates how awkward he is with women and how he was unable to perform during his few sexual encounters. This detail suggests sexual repression and guilt were central elements of his upbringing, which makes sense in general given Catholic attitudes toward sex, but also more specifically because having sex with Ana was the great failure that led Julián to abandon the priesthood.

Mateo is a victim of his mother's domination and indoctrination, and although his grandfather Alfredo sets him on a path toward liberation, he is still struggling to become a functional adult when, like his aunt Lía, he flees from his family and their faith. While Mateo tries to work up the courage to introduce himself to Lía, he frequents her bookstore and orders books, including *The God Delusion*, in which Dawkins condemns the way that parents like Carmen and Julián raise their children.⁹ Dawkins asserts that parents should never force their religion upon children too young to make decisions about belief for themselves. He argues that children are evolutionarily conditioned to believe what their elders tell them as a matter of survival, and that this is why people cling to religious beliefs that are unsupported or even refuted by evidence (205). Childhood indoctrination makes one set of beliefs seem reasonable and true, while the beliefs of other religions appear weird and baseless (207). Dawkins also suggests that childhood indoctrination results in believers who "are often chronically incapable of distinguishing what is true from what they'd like to be true," a tendency evident in Carmen and Julián (135). In Mateo's case, though, education and reading—which his mother finds to be a highly suspicious activity (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 285)—have allowed him to see that the perfect life his parents have invented is confining and false, and that their fanatical belief is hypocritical and harmful. However, he has yet to realize the extent of their hypocrisy and self-delusion because he does not know about their involvement in his aunt Ana's death. Nevertheless, like his religious indoctrination, her death and the mystery surrounding it scar him profoundly.

⁸ In contrast, Alfredo gives Lía a name he has specially chosen, and not a saint's name as his wife wanted, and as she got at Carmen and Ana's births (92).

⁹ *The God Delusion* was published as *El espejismo de Dios* by Espasa in 2010, translated by Natalia Pérez-Galdós. The other book Mateo requests is Raymond Carver's

Cathedral (1983), whose titular short story appears in the novel when Lía encloses it in a letter to her father, who in turn shares it and a practice of drawing cathedrals with Mateo. Alfredo also gives Mateo many books, including his first Dawkins book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976) (70).

He cannot initiate a relationship without blurting out the awful circumstances of the family tragedy, and this derails his romantic endeavors as surely as does his inability to perform sexually. His parents have deprived him of identity on one hand by teaching him only their repressive, distorted version of truth, and on the other, by enforcing a silence that conceals unwanted truths, like the liberating path chosen by his aunt Lía and the truth about Ana's death, which would shatter their invented world of piety and family harmony.

Marcela: The Weight of Faith and the Fallibility of Scripture

Ana's best friend Marcela, with her inability to form new memories and think critically, is an example of religious indoctrination gone wrong in a more symbolic sense than Mateo. This symbolism is highlighted by her quasi-religious devotion to Ana and by her reliance on childhood memories and on the notebooks that she uses to keep records and guide her decisions. Despite her limitations and her unreliability as a narrator, Marcela becomes a crucial source of truth through two secular avenues: empirical evidence from first-hand observation, and the use of probability to ascertain truth when evidence is absent. Marcela is the text's primary, though problematic, witness. After recounting how Ana became pregnant by her secret lover and had an abortion, Marcela tells how Ana died in her lap in the parish church. Marcela tries to run for help, but she overturns a statue of Gabriel that strikes her head and leaves with brain damage. Thus, though the young Marcela insists on conveying an important clue—that Ana could not have been murdered because she was already dead—no one pays attention because they assume her trauma caused her to imagine the story. Her testimony is silenced, but this is only after she and Ana have already been silenced by their religious upbringing and its taboos.

Gabriel is the angel of the Annunciation, and his weight, which symbolizes the burden of religious indoctrination and ideology, crushes Marcela just as the discovery of Ana's unintended pregnancy crushes both girls. Marcela is shocked by Ana's announcement because it means that, unlike the Virgin Mary, the teenaged, unmarried Ana has been initiated into sex but has not told her best friend—perhaps out of guilt, fear of discovery, or simply the enforced silence around sex. In addition, the consequences of sexuality that the girls had no doubt been warned of had almost immediately followed, likely due to a lack of sex education. Ana displays no knowledge of how to protect herself from pregnancy, nor of what to do when she suspects she is pregnant. Moreover, she does not think that she can ask her parents for help, and she cannot face the consequences that unwed motherhood will bring to herself and her family. Then, it becomes even more imperative to keep her abortion a secret because abortion is not only viewed as morally wrong in social circle, but also prohibited as a topic of conversation. Alfredo confirms in the epilogue that “‘Aborto’ no era una mala palabra en nuestra familia, era una palabra prohibida” (324), and Marcela also dwells on the prohibition of the frightful word at home and at their Catholic school (140). Because of this silence, Ana is tragically unaware that her father would have helped her deal with her unplanned pregnancy and find a safe way to abort (323). Thus, Ana dies while waiting for Julián to take her to a distant hospital rather than expose her “sins,” and she makes Marcela vow to keep her secrets and protect her family from a truth she believes is worse than death.

Marcela's amnesia also becomes symbolic of religious indoctrination, highlighting the psychological damage it can cause and the difficulty of escaping the effects of such an upbringing. Her lack of memory makes her reliant on what she

experienced and learned before she was an adult, and this grants disproportionate importance to her friendship with Ana. Like a child indoctrinated into a single truth of religion, who cannot question it for fear of the consequences, Marcela is trapped by her vow to Ana and the terrible secret it conceals. And much like Mateo, who cannot help but disclose the story of his aunt's death and mutilation over and over, Marcela is repeatedly traumatized by the truth of Ana's fate. She can remember that Ana died because it happened before her brain injury, but each time she hears or reads about her best friend's body being dismembered and burned, the information is new and she has to experience the horror and grief all over again. This process can be compared to the Catholic communion rite, in which believers reenact the breaking of Christ's body. Besides continually recalling the crucifixion's extreme violence, this practice can also come with a heavy dose of fear and guilt, since believers must confess and seek to make themselves worthy of the Eucharist and the sacrifice it represents. Despite Christian notions of grace, this is can be understood as a practically impossible task; as one Catholic priest recently wrote, "Speaking without exaggeration, all of eternity would not be enough to prepare sufficiently to receive even one Holy Communion" (Broom).

The comparison to the Eucharist is apt because, symbolically, Ana is Marcela's very own crucified deity. Marcela's unwavering loyalty stems from the fact that Ana saved her from exclusion in grade school in a move reminiscent of Jesus's table-flipping in the temple.¹⁰ Ana asked their teacher to rearrange the classroom tables, thus upending the social order and removing the

stigma Marcela had incurred as a new student when she sat in the wrong seat (Piñeiro, *Catedrales*133). Like a sinner redeemed from hell, Marcela felt that she could never do enough to repay her grade school savior. Thus, she supported Ana even when she suspected her friend was on a bad path, disregarded her own fears to accompany Ana to the clinic, and kept Ana's secrets even when she knew she should tell a parent. In fact, it was Marcela who saw the situation most clearly, questioning why the man who allegedly loved Ana refused to take responsibility and see the matter through; like the women who followed Christ to the cross, it was Marcela who demonstrated her love and faithfulness by remaining with Ana during her frightening and ultimately fatal ordeal.¹¹

Marcela can remember that her own silence played a small role in Ana's death, and as a result, she carries that guilt, along with Ana's secrets, for 30 years. She longs to be freed of this burden, writing in her notebook, "¿Podré algún día decir lo que le pasó a Ana? ¿Cuándo? ¿Quién me liberará?" (171). Alfredo and Elmer also realize that Marcela needs to be freed; that is, liberated from the religion that has crushed and silenced her for so long. Elmer, now a private investigator, does this by piecing together the evidence to determine Ana's real cause of death. The clues had been there all along, but the taboo surrounding abortion led some to cover up the signs, while the possibility never occurred to others—it was literally unthinkable.¹² Elmer finally breaks this prohibition, and Marcela is relieved that she no longer has to carry the burden of Ana's secret. However, the weight of indoctrination is not that easily shed. Just as an adult Mateo is still afraid of his mother,

¹⁰ Versions of this gospel story can be found in Matthew, chapter 21, and John, chapter 2.

¹¹ While almost all of the male disciples flee, the gospels name a variety of women who were present at the crucifixion (Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 24, and John 19).

¹² This is the case with Alfredo (217), and Julián states that abortion as an alternative was "impensada" for himself and Carmen, although they later facilitate Ana's decision and abortion (266). It also never occurs to Carmen and Julian that Ana could die from a clandestine abortion (303).

and Lía asks herself why she still writes “Juicio Final” with capital letters (18), Marcela will never fully be able to let go of Ana and her secrets. After all, though she may write it in her notebooks, Marcela will forget that Elmer and Alfredo have learned the truth, and her process of reading and “remembering” this fact will always be accompanied by the traumatizing rediscovery that her best friend was dismembered and burned.

Marcela plays another key role in Piñero’s critique of religion by symbolizing believers who place unquestioning faith in religious scriptures, a practice which Dawkins condemns. Focusing his criticism on the Christian Bible in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins points out conflicting, and sometimes irreconcilable, aspects of scripture such as the differences in Matthew and Luke’s genealogies and accounts of the birth of Jesus (30-31).¹³ He appeals to New Testament scholar Bart Erhman, who has written numerous books on biblical textual criticism for general audiences. Erhman details scripture’s many contradictions and demonstrates how the loss of original texts, errors and intentional changes by scribes, and the complexities of translation make a daunting task for those wishing to understand the original words and intent of biblical authors.¹⁴ In light of this evidence, Dawkins can only assume that those who believe in the Bible’s infallibility have not truly read it (383). His argument regarding childhood indoctrination is also operative here since it helps explain why people may hold “with passionate certitude” scriptural beliefs that contradict each other and empirical evidence (202).

Before exploring Marcela’s relationship to this theme, it merits considering how the devout believers in *Catedrales* demonstrate the kind of behavior that Dawkins criticizes. Carmen, for instance, echoes Lía’s opening

line in reverse at the beginning of her narrative: “Creo en Dios. Soy creyente de una manera cabal, íntegra, apasionada. Brutal si es necesario” (275). Her use of the adjective “brutal” recalls Dawkins’ criticism of believers who will go to any lengths—even violence—to defend what they believe and foreshadows the callous desecration of her sister’s body in the name of God’s plan (202). Carmen considers herself an absolute believer in the literal truth of scripture, and when she criticizes her father, she demonstrates the inflexible and uncritical views that she inherited from her mother: “Es que mi padre fue un creyente a medias, tomaba lo que le convenía, y lo que no, lo ponía en discusión. No pudo aceptar que para un católico no fuera posible una libre interpretación de la Biblia, por ejemplo. La leía, pero la discutía. Mamá ya ni lo escuchaba” (Piñero, *Catedrales* 286).

However, Piñero gives us clues that Carmen’s understanding of scripture is neither consistent nor accurate. When she is devastated by Julián’s news that he slept with Ana, Carmen looks for answers in scripture and imagines Ana as the tempting serpent in Eden.¹⁵ In the middle of her scriptural reflections, though, she inserts a phrase that she often heard from her mother, “Errar es humano, perdonar es divino,” which is a translated quotation from the English poet Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*. This well-known aphorism is not quoted or paraphrased from the Bible, and furthermore, it is an example of the alteration of an ancient text, which brings to mind Erhman’s and Dawkins’ criticisms of the reliability of biblical texts and translations. Piñero emphasizes this alteration by having Alfredo correct his wife with the Latin original, “Errare humanum est, sed perseverare diabolicum,” that is, “To err is human, to persist in the mistake is

¹³ See Matthew, chapter 1, and Luke, chapter 3.

¹⁴ The specific Erhman book that Dawkins uses is *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible*

and *Why* (2005); the ideas mentioned here are introduced on pages 10-12.

¹⁵ See Genesis, chapter 3.

diabolical" (296).¹⁶ The juxtaposition of scripture with the Latin aphorism speaks to the alteration, misunderstanding, or misapplication of ancient texts and also comments on Julián's role in Ana's pregnancy. Though Julián might be forgiven for giving in to temptation when Ana first approached him, his guilt and the consequences are exacerbated because he could not stop himself from having sex with her multiple times even though he knew it was wrong.

Not only does "To err is human, to forgive divine" not appear in the Bible, but it also conflicts with the story Carmen is pondering. Adam and Eve were not forgiven, but rather punished by being exiled from the garden to a life of toil that included sexual shame, pain in childbirth, and, later on, blood sacrifices for atonement. Nevertheless, Carmen asks herself, "¿Era capaz de perdonar como sentía que Dios me lo pedía?" (296-97). She manages to forgive Julián because he is essential to her own plans, but despite her apparent belief in divine forgiveness, she does not forgive Ana and depicts her sister as an unrepentant criminal who is punished – not forgiven – by God (283). Likewise, even though Carmen repents of failing to prevent Ana's abortion and claims that God is "pura misericordia" (283) to those who confess, she still believes that God punished her by making her barren after Mateo's birth and may punish her further in the afterlife. With these details, Piñero reveals the assumptions and contradictions that undermine Carmen's "truth" about what the Bible says and how God supposedly works.

While Carmen focuses on scripture, Julián demonstrates a similarly problematic allegiance to Church teachings, but he does not have Carmen's strength of character or conviction. He doubts whether the Church is right to force priests into celibacy (226), but

he does not have the courage to challenge the practice nor the self-discipline needed to follow it through, which results in hypocrisy and blame-shifting. He notes that Jesus never required celibacy, and he understands that the Church's views on sexuality are harmful, stating that sexual repression has made priests and seminarians feel "culpables, sucios, irrefrenables. Hasta en casos extremos, como [el suyo], [les] mancharon las manos con sangre" (227). Julián is in some ways even more monstrous and reprehensible than Carmen because he sees the illogic of the Church's teachings and yet decides to accept them anyway, and when he fails, he blames the Church for everything, including Ana's death.

Indeed, Julián explicitly rejects reason, admitting that his decision to become a priest went against his own logic, calling it "un misterio" and even an "insensatez" (228-9). Moreover, despite his doubts about celibacy, his calling is connected to the repressive views of gender and sexuality that he inherited from his father and the Church. Julián could not forgive his mother for leaving the family to be with another man, and he decides to become a priest after feeling called to absolve her and other sinful women (230). He is unconscious of his own hypocrisy when he questions how the Church could force men to live a life without love even while condemning his mother for refusing to remain in a loveless marriage. According to Barandela, Julián displays his "verdadera personalidad misógina" in this inflexible rejection of his mother and his association of sexual sin and temptation exclusively with women (33). Like Carmen, Julián reflects on divine forgiveness and the Christian directive to forgive, but he applies these concepts in self-serving and inconsistent ways. He insists that God has pardoned him for his sexual transgressions while believing, like Carmen, that Ana's

¹⁶ This Latin maxim is attributed to Cicero, though sources disagree on its origin (Fellmeth and Horwitz).

death is a punishment for her sin (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 269). Furthermore, despite his moral failures, he never mentions reconsidering his condemnation of his mother, nor does he forgive Ana, whose death he treats as another trial that she, the temptress, is putting him through (270). Rather than apply Church teachings consistently or reject those that he thinks are wrong, Julián uses his beliefs to condemn others and to minimize his own actions and their consequences, creating an unmistakable depiction of the illogical, harmful, and even monstrous religious behavior that Dawkins attacks.

Returning to Marcela, in addition to symbolizing the problematic nature of religious indoctrination, she also embodies the fallibility of scripture and its interpretations, further throwing into question the foundations of Carmen and Julián's faith. To cope with her amnesia, Marcela's doctors taught her to write down anything she needs to "remember" in what becomes an enormous collection of notebooks and a database. Marcela uses this record to fill in the gaps of her life experience and as a source for her narrative. As Barandela notes, much of Marcela's story is filled with questions to herself, consultations of her written records, and confirmations of facts (30). She sometimes cites the number of a notebook like one might cite the chapter and verse numbers of a religious text. There are over 4,000 notebooks, but Marcela begins with a blank slate every day, so there is no way she can ever have a full grasp of this voluminous record. She describes her daily process: "abrir todas las mañanas la libreta [más reciente], hojearla en un repaso rápido y aleatorio, detenerme en lo resaltado, asociar, simular que pienso" (113). This parallels the way many believers use the Bible: they focus on key passages here or there without ever having a firm grasp on the entirety of their scriptures or the history of those documents. According to Ehrman, this is one reason why many Bible readers

fail to see its inconsistencies, but even though some literalist readers do notice contradictions, they tend to accept and repeat inherited wisdom about how these can be reconciled (*Jesus* 21, 29). Thus, like Marcela, these readers *simulate* thought rather than evaluating evidence and thinking independently. It is not that religious scriptures are evil or useless—even Dawkins defends the teaching of sacred texts as literature and praises Jesus as an ethical innovator (284, 383)—but rather that believers endow them with unquestioned authority.

Barandela describes Marcela's notebooks and database as "un refugio seguro y confiable para la memoria" (30), but while they are an indispensable tool, we must ask whether this "scripture" by which she lives her life is reliable. Marcela describes how she recopies the most important facts into the beginning of each new notebook, a process that requires a rigorous selection of what is to be included or omitted (Barandela 29), and that is likely to introduce changes and errors over 4,000+ repetitions. Furthermore, she refers to the time before she learned to "anotar," between her accident and the first notebook. For those memories, she has had to rely on her parents to tell her what happened so that she could transcribe it, second hand, into her notes. Therefore, her recounting of the hours after Ana's death is not fact, but supposition: "Tiene que haberme alterado. '¿Quién se ocupó de Ana? ¿Le avisaron a los padres?' debo haber preguntado casi con desesperación. A los gritos, tal vez. O tal vez no, es probable que no lo haya hecho" (107). She also admits that, when memory fails her, she invents things to fill the gaps and make a coherent narrative (104), which is comparable to how the gospel writers made inventive choices to craft Jesus's life story from oral traditions and other sources. Like scripture, Marcela's narrative is filtered through the orally-transmitted memories of others, fleshed out by her own imagination, copied and

recopied, and interpreted before reaching the reader. Her annotations are fragmented and often without context; for instance, we see that Marcela can read something in her notebook—like the reminder that she has an appointment with Alfredo—but cannot remember why it is there. She has to ask her mother to help her make sense of the entry, and she doubts whether she wants to go, but in the end, she feels like she must follow the notebook's instructions (157). Her memory record, like the novel itself, is an incomplete and imperfect text that needs to be pieced together and interpreted each time it is read, yet Marcela has no choice but to rely upon it, just as believers might rely upon scriptures they do not fully understand to interpret and engage with the world. Piñero, once again following Dawkins, suggests that for most people, there are better ways of knowing and interpreting reality.

Notably, it is not Marcela's notebooks that solve the mystery of Ana's death, and neither is it Elmer's records from the criminal investigation, which are also incomplete because some pages have become unreadable and because of the original investigation's inefficiency. Two factors contribute to the case's resolution, and both, according to Dawkins, represent better ways of knowing or making decisions than reliance on religious scriptures as symbolized by Marcela and Elmer's records. The first is empirical evidence as the basis for knowledge (Dawkins 19). Marcela's disregarded testimony contains the evidence of Ana's cause of death: her suddenly coppery-yellow skin, followed by pallor and the blue of cyanosis, a combination caused by a systemic infection from a septic abortion. The evidence was hidden for 30 years because the police listened to the parish priest, who urged them to leave the crime unsolved to protect Julián and supposedly spare Ana's family from the truth. Thus, the "truth" was mediated through religious authority and another

equally suspect power—a corrupt and inefficient justice system.

Once Ana's cause of death is determined, the next step is to identify the man who got her pregnant and left her to deal with the consequences. Unfortunately, Marcela cannot provide hard facts, and no physical evidence such as DNA remains. There is no way to prove the father's identity, just as there is no empirical evidence for or against the existence of God, the heavenly father. So, what does one rely upon when there is no evidence? Piñero's fictional solution echoes Dawkins' second way of knowing, or at least approaching, the truth: probability. In the case of God's existence, Dawkins argues that the lack of evidence does not mean that there is a 50% probability that God exists and an equal 50% that God does not, making either position equally logical (70-74). Rather, if one considers the evidence that life evolves from simple to complex and could achieve this evolution without divine intervention, the probability of God—the most advanced of beings—pre-existing all other life decreases dramatically (143). While one may or may not agree with Dawkins' reasoning, probability becomes a source of truth in the novel. It is not equally probable that any man in Ana's life was the father of her baby, and Marcela had tried to figure out the secret lover's identity by making a list and assigning numbers to each man based on his likelihood as a candidate. Marcela thought he was a married man, but Elmer and Alfredo realize there is another option: a priest. Elmer says, "Tal vez la persona que buscamos no estaba comprometida con nadie real, concreto," suggesting not only that there was no other woman involved, but also that the object of this commitment—God—is not real (Piñero, *Catedrales* 222). Just as the evidence of the septic abortion leads to a rapid unveiling of truth, this realization based on probability does the same. The parish priest, Father Manuel, was "un asco" according to Marcela, and the only other logical suspect is Julián, who was still

in seminary when Ana died (222). Although Alfredo and Elmer have no proof, their educated guess is correct: when Alfredo confronts him, Julián breaks down and confesses that he was Ana's lover. Thus, where religion and superstition fail in the novel, evidence and probability-based reasoning succeed.

Carmen: The Monstrous God

However, in his confession, Julián conceals Carmen's involvement by attributing the mutilation of Ana's body to the unknown abortion provider. Therefore, the closest that this crime novel comes to exposing a murderer is the disclosing of Julián's sins and hypocrisy to the family. But Julián is not so much an evil villain as he is a weak and opportunistic follower of others, first of the Church and then of Carmen, who found the abortion clinic, coached him on how to encourage Ana's decision, and made the plan to mutilate Ana's body. It is through his obedience to Carmen that Julián moves from weak and hypocritical to truly abhorrent. Indeed, it is the egotistical and possibly sociopathic Carmen who becomes Piñeiro's stand-in for the "monster" God that Dawkins finds in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (Dawkins 68). Dawkins writes that the Judeo-Christian deity is a "fiercely unpleasant God, morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions, with the smell of charred flesh, with his own superiority over rival gods" (58), a description that resonates eerily with Carmen, from her prudishness and her desire for superiority over her sisters, to the fact that she chars her sister's torso in a kiln located in her family's own backyard. Evidence throughout the novel testifies to

her egocentric, authoritarian, and duplicitous nature. As the oldest by five years, she was the head of the trinity of sisters and was deeply jealous of Ana and Lía, whom she viewed as competitors. She saw herself as inherently superior and dominated them (Piñeiro, *Catedrales* 291), deciding what games they would play and punishing insubordination "con el silencio, la burla o el destierro infantil a los lugares más solitarios y oscuros de [la] casa" (23-24). Hence, she behaved like the deity that she grew up to worship, making plans for everyone's life, assigning gendered roles (Lía was always the unwanted "tía soltera," 23), and punishing anyone who defied her will by casting them into an isolation reminiscent of the gospel of Matthew's "outer darkness."¹⁷ As Mateo and Lía both observe, Carmen, like the divine creator, makes her own reality, which she expects and at times forces others to accept and enact.

The force of Carmen's will makes her an object of fear for most of her family members, including her father (166) and her husband, who is subordinate to her despite her belief in traditional gender roles. She is feared in part because, like the God that she represents, she is Janus-faced. As noted earlier, Carmen's deity is contradictory, reflecting traditional views of God as both loving and forgiving and capable of damning souls to eternal torment, an incongruity noted by many critics of Christianity, including Dawkins (52). In fact, clashing depictions of God between the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament and the Christian New Testament have historically led some believers to affirm that the deities of the two testaments are actually two different gods.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, it is Lía

¹⁷ Being cast into the "outer darkness" (often rendered in Spanish as "las tinieblas de afuera") appears as a punishment three times in the gospel of Matthew (chapters 8, 22, and 25) and has generally been interpreted in Christian tradition as a reference to hell. See translations of Mateo 22.13 as listed in the works cited.

¹⁸ This notion was developed in the second century by the theologian Marcion and was denounced as a heresy (Ehrman, *Misquoting* 33), but a simple internet search on the "God of the Old Testament versus the God of the New Testament" reveals how frequently these apparent contradictions are still noted and discussed by proponents and opponents of Christianity.

who first gives the reader a clue about this similarity between her sister and this two-faced deity, remarking that the punishing, fear-inspiring Carmen “era otra cosa” outside of the family home: “carismática, agradable, seductora,” making her appear to be “dos personas muy distintas” (Piñero, *Catedrales* 24). Mateo and Marcela both corroborate this duplicity in their narratives (62, 153). These repetitions throughout the text serve to confirm the experience of the novel’s truth seekers and truth tellers against Carmen’s and her follower Julián’s narratives, in which they conceal or distort facts to make themselves look better and to excuse their actions. However, one must ask if Carmen and Julián are conscious of their own hypocrisy, or if, as Dawkins claims about the religiously devout, they are incapable of distinguishing between what is true and what they want to believe (135). The novel suggests that Dawkins is right, because Carmen and Julián cannot seem to separate personal desires and choices and their consequences from what they perceive to be God’s immutable will.

Carmen plays God over her sisters and further places herself in the position of God or Christ, which leads her to confuse her own desires with God’s will. For instance, she puts her greatest competitor, Ana, in the position of Satan, depicting her as the serpent in Eden and calling her “el mal en el cuerpo de una niña” (260). Ana is Lucifer, who competes with God and then justly falls to her damnation.¹⁹ Then, during the cover-up of Ana’s cause of death, Carmen bizarrely places herself in the role of Christ, as if her act of dismembering and burning Ana’s body was her own crucifixion rather than Ana’s, as suggested symbolically in Marcela’s narrative. Carmen identifies herself as the only innocent person in the affair, who had to get her hands dirty “sin cometer ni delito ni pecado” (277), and she insists afterwards that “no [se] hacía

reproches ni sentía culpa” (317). Moreover, she cites Jesus’s prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane twice, “Padre, si es posible, aparta de mí esa copa; pero no se haga mi voluntad, sino la tuya’ (Lucas 22:42)” (283). She returns to this idea at the close of her narrative, claiming, “Dios quiso, esta vez quiso. No apartó de mí esa copa, pero yo hice su voluntad, no la mía. Nada más que su voluntad” (318).

Carmen conflates her own desires with God’s design, and Piñero emphasizes this by repeatedly referencing Carmen’s plans and lengths she goes to in carrying them out. When Julián confesses to the affair, Carmen tells him, “no voy a dejar que la envidia de mi hermana arruina mis planes” and he realizes that she already has “un camino de acción, una estrategia” (261). Later, he refers to how Ana’s pregnancy threatens “el proyecto de Carmen” as well as his own plans (266). Julián, however, at least considers the possibility of changing his plans and taking responsibility for Ana’s baby because “la alternativa del aborto era impensada” (266). Carmen never wavers; she takes control and decides that her plans for a family with Julián can be saved if Ana chooses to abort: “¿Y si el pecado lo comete otro? . . . No es necesario que compartan el peso de este pecado mortal. Si mata esta vida, será un pecado del que ella no podrá librarse. Vos sí” (266-67). Just as in common versions of Christian atonement theory, God demanded Jesus’s sacrifice to save humanity from its sins, Carmen demands that Ana be sacrificed to save Julián and to redeem her plans. Carmen does not expect Ana to die, but according to her theology, abortion is a mortal sin, and thus, god-like, she chooses to condemn her sister to hell, a fate worse than death. Then, after Ana dies, Carmen plans the burning of her body (“yo ya tenía un plan” 307), and when the rain foils her, she has to think of a “plan ‘B’” (309). She assumes that in her decisions, she is

¹⁹ See Isaiah, chapter 14, and Revelation, chapter 12.

following the will of God, and she cannot understand why it isn't easier to do: "Si bien me entregaba a su designio, no terminaba de entender qué me quería decir Dios con tanta adversidad" (310). She never assumes that the obstacles may mean that she has made bad choices, or that God may be giving her signs to that effect.

Despite his better judgement, Julián follows Carmen's plan just as he accepted the vow of celibacy, even when she decides to dismember Ana's body, which he screams is "aberrante" and "monstruosa" before Carmen slaps him and he capitulates (310). In retrospect, he also decides that everything that happened was God's will, and he implicitly suggests that the cover-up was God's way of giving him "una nueva oportunidad" (256). If Carmen is Piñeiro's representation of the monstrous God, then Julián is the willing worshipper of this heinous deity. He too accepts Carmen's orchestrations as a reflection of the divine will, and his reasoning is self-serving and illogical. Julián avoids guilt by attributing the decision to abort and its consequences solely to Ana, but then he adds, "Ana decidió, y Dios, no sabemos por qué, así lo quiso" (256). Julián has convinced himself that God's plan was for Ana to die, and that she would have done so with or without his and Carmen's involvement. But even more striking, he also believes that it was God's plan for Ana to choose abortion. This reasoning contradicts itself: it is Ana's decision and she bears the consequences alone, but it was also God's decision, which implies that God—the ultimate source of morality—decided to cause this unspeakable, unthinkable mortal sin that deserves death and eternal punishment. God himself is the abortionist, and Ana pays the price despite logic that should absolve her and everyone else of responsibility for choices that are ultimately not their own, but God's. Julián and Carmen, unconscious of their illogic, attribute everything to God's plan and start over, so that when Carmen

and her mother pray to accept God's will, it is really the consequences of Carmen's plans and Julián's weakness that they are praying to accept. These two characters demonstrate how the followers of a contradictory, monstrous God become monstrous themselves, unmoved by the suffering that they inflict on those around them.

Alfredo: A Benevolent Faith, or, Drawing One's Own Cathedral

Following Dawkins' New Atheist arguments, Piñeiro paints a damning picture of dogmatic Catholicism in *Catedrales*, from the damage inflicted by religious indoctrination, to the problem of accepting Church teachings and scriptures without question, to the evils that occur when believers have a distorted perception of reality or when they internalize the qualities of a judgmental and contradictory deity. By the end of the novel, while justice may not be served with arrests and trials, the reader is able to reconstruct the facts of the crime and to see that, like Ana's body and the narrative itself, guilt and responsibility are fragmented, with pieces pertaining to society at large, to the Church, to Carmen and Julián, and even to Alfredo, who uses his epilogue in part to confess his own guilt over failing to educate and support Ana as well as he should have.

However, despite the novel's overt stance against religion, in Alfredo's epilogue, Piñeiro parts ways with Dawkins to offer an alternative to atheism: a faith based in personal responsibility, truth, beauty, and love. Dawkins allows no such middle ground; in his opinion, the existence of more progressive forms of faith still helps validate harmful religious beliefs, and hence all forms of religion should be discarded (323). In contrast, Piñeiro defends atheism and yet recognizes the difficulty of facing painful circumstances and death without faith. She affirms in an interview, "es más desolador no creer. Creer que después de la

vida hay otra cosa te protege contra la desolación que provoca la muerte. Pero en pos de no sentir esa desolación, las religiones nos exigen demasiado" ("Ser ateo"). In atheism, Piñeiro finds freedom from religion's demands, especially its limitations on gender and sexuality, but in the novel, she also makes space for those who cannot accept this unvarnished view of reality and the finality of death.

This idea is developed in Alfredo's epilogue, which is a letter that Lía and Mateo read together after his death. It reveals only the partial truth, leaving them to take the final leap that will entail pain, but also offer closure and liberation. Alfredo likely guessed the whole truth, but chose to reject it because it was too painful. He knew that Julián was not brave enough to have mutilated Ana's body himself and that Carmen had the means to dismember and burn her sister's body in her art studio (326), but he stopped investigating before making the obvious final leap: that his oldest daughter was guilty of mutilating the corpse of his youngest. Alfredo writes, "Creo que cada uno de nosotros llega a la verdad que puede tolerar. Y, parado allí, no se atreve a dar otro paso" (327). Like Dawkins' claim that many atheists will not even admit their true beliefs to themselves, Alfredo stops short of admitting what he almost certainly intuitively knows to be true.

After losing one daughter to death and another to self-imposed exile, Alfredo cannot entirely reject Carmen, just as he cannot completely renounce faith and join his "ateos queridos" in their unbelief (331). In contrast to the devout members of the family, however, Alfredo sees and acknowledges the harm that indoctrination and zealous faith cause when they prevent people from thinking for themselves. Furthermore, he does something else that sharply differentiates him from Carmen and Julián: he takes responsibility for his choices and their consequences. While he rather graciously states that his wife "hizo lo que

pudo con tanto precepto que le metieron en la cabeza acerca del bien y del mal," Alfredo knew better, and he should have taught Ana to believe in herself and trust her own judgement (324). He writes:

Debí haberla educado para que no sintiera vergüenza por no estar de acuerdo con todo lo que pregona la religión que le inculcamos . . . Ni con respecto al aborto, ni con respecto a ninguna otra cuestión en las que las religiones te obligan a pensar en una sola dirección, de una manera colectiva e irracional. Por lo que debí haber hecho y no hice, yo, su padre, soy responsable de la muerte de Ana. (324)

Alfredo confesses his sin of omission, which helped create and maintain the silence around sexuality and abortion that led his daughter to hide her pregnancy and its termination even as she felt herself dying.

Though Alfredo rejects much of religion's ideology, he despairs to think that he will die and never see his beloved Lía, Mateo, and Ana again. And so despite his doubts, he hopes that after death, there will be "Un lugar creado por el dios que sea, de la religión que sea. O por nosotros. Un lugar donde encontrarnos otra vez y para siempre. Puede ser el aire, o el agua, un atardecer o el corazón de los que quedan vivos. Que a ese 'dios,' o como quieran llamarlo, cada uno le construya su propia catedral" (330). He imagines each of his loved ones in a cathedral that reflects their essence, made of butterflies, drawings, books, or even interlocking question marks. His imaginings bring the reader back to the other crucial reference that appeared early on in the novel, alongside Dawkins' *The God Delusion*: Raymond Carver's 1983 short story "Cathedral." In the story, a man draws a cathedral so that his blind companion can trace the outline and "see" it for himself, a process that leads to a transcendent experience as the drawing takes shape and

the sighted man moves beyond the need to see what he is drawing. He experiences an opening of the senses and says, "My eyes were closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (Carver 234). Carver's protagonist transcends the concept of "cathedral" just as Lía, Mateo, and Alfredo transcend the rigid structures of religion through truth, beauty, and love. Although they are all at differing stages of their (non)spiritual journeys, they all find meaning outside of Catholicism: Lía sees how the pilgrimage to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela can have meaning even if it is not religious (21-22); Mateo is awestruck by the man-made beauty of the cathedrals he had sketched with his grandfather (78); and Alfredo, discarding notions of hell and punishment for unbelievers like Lía and Mateo and "sinners" like Ana, finds hope that somehow, some way, love and family will survive death (330).

Mateo writes, "mi abuelo me educó en la posibilidad de ser libre" (70), and the drawing of cathedrals is the prime symbol of this education. In refusing to accept a photograph, with every detail already filled in and fixed, Alfredo and Mateo choose to draw their own outlines, deciding what to include and what to omit, and even what counts as a cathedral. They fill these outlines not with dogma, but with human stories and artistry, with beauty and inspiration, and with love and hope. Their structures of meaning are free from vindictive gods and stifling moral codes that lead to the hypocrisy and self-delusion represented by Julián and Carmen, to the shame and trauma experienced by the religiously indoctrinated like Mateo and Marcela, and to tragedies like Ana's premature and preventable death, which occurred not coincidentally within the confines of a brick-and-mortar church. Thus, in *Catedrales*, Piñeiro defends atheism as a logical and liberating path, exposes the harm caused by fanatical, dogmatic religion, and yet leaves her readers with a sketch of what

a more benevolent and beautiful spirituality might look like, encouraging them to draw their own cathedrals and grow beyond religion's limitations.

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