

EMERGENCIA INDÍGENA AND ACCOMPANIMENT

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In Spanish the word *emergencia* has two meanings: (1)“emergency” - a crisis brought on by some disaster; or (2)“emergence” - the appearance or coming forth of something, be it an idea, a new baby, or a people gaining awareness and self-confidence. An indigenous Mexican Catholic priest, Eleazar López, writes of the *emergencia indígena*, saying that both meanings of the first word modified by the second are worthy of reflection. “Indigenous emergency” speaks of the condition of Latin American indigenous peoples being pushed to the point of extinction, now more than ever, the very survival of their culture being put at risk. “Indigenous emergence”, however, speaks of the recovery of strength and voice, in order to say NO to the neoliberal project and YES to collective rights, in order to dream that another world is possible where all can live with dignity.

López was the resource person at the annual retreat, in late July, for workers in Catholic ministries to indigenous peoples in Paraguay. Over the years, members of our Mennonite team in northern Argentina have been invited to participate in this event; this year Gretchen and I were able to attend the event for one day. The written and spoken input of this articulate theologian was illuminating and hope-building for us.

The two meanings of *emergencia* are not unrelated. The “emergencies” provoked by the conquest, by colonial domination, and now by capitalism and globalization have all produced strategies of “emergence”, though not all have been equally beneficial. Armed resistance, says López, generally resulted in the near annihilation of numerous peoples, especially the great indigenous civilizations. In contrast, strategies of “self-marginalization” by smaller groups of nomads and semi-nomads permitted autonomy and survival, until recent decades. The new crisis, provoked not by annihilation but by assimilation, especially in urban settings, is also producing new strategies of “emergence” among indigenous peoples. One such strategy is what López calls “critical

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integration”; by that he means an involvement in the dominant society without being absorbed by it, maintaining a true bilingualism, in language, culture, values, and faith. Obviously, this is not an easy path, but then no path in the present circumstances is easy.

What to me is the most illuminating insight of this indigenous brother is his perception that the current indigenous emergence has a Kingdom of God-like relevance for our times. Unlike previous experiences of emergence, today’s new indigenous consciousness of, and response to, denied ancestral rights and values is influencing others in the wider society. The first step, he says, has been the dawning recognition of many nonindigenous poor that the indigenous reality is similar to their own: “Ah, the Indians are our brothers and sisters.” The next step is the sense that external, global forces “are making *us* into Indians too”, that is, people without rights, refuse, throw-away people. But, upon drawing close to native peoples, the more recently disenfranchised discover that the long history of suffering and survival has given indigenous peoples values, strategies, wisdom, and identity that offer hope to others, that “another world is possible”. One can hardly miss the parallel of this perception to some of Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom: hope springs from the smallest of seeds and least likely sources.

This isn’t an entirely new perspective for me, but it offers a fresh confirmation of what I’ve dared to believe. So what difference does this make, if I’m invited to believe more firmly what I already incline toward? In other words, what if there *is* a movement, a ground swell of indigenous consciousness (or “conscientization”), that is emerging in Latin America, or perhaps all around the world? Will I be able to affirm its shape and trajectory? Will this slow tide really conserve traditional indigenous traits, such as the interrelatedness and sacred animism of all creation; the mythic immediacy of dreams, ancestors, and all relationships; a bias toward associational, rather than strict cause-and-effect, logic; a preference for present health, well-being and celebration over progress, accumulation, and prosperity; suspicion of institutionalized commerce, medicine and education? As carriers of these traits engage modern culture, will there be a process of sorting, integrating, and synthesizing? Will it be a “critical integration” or a wholesale assimilation, and what criteria will guide it? What will happen to the Christian faith and practice now embraced by many indigenous believers?

What Eleazar López offered his listeners was a larger picture of the indigenous world than what we generally observe. Engaged in local communities, with specific churches, persons, and issues, we often lack the perspective of time and scale. The concepts of *emergencia* offer us a way to assess the immediate situations we confront. On the one hand, we see the crises of indigenous life and culture, the gradual disintegration and demise of families, of spirituality and optimism, of traditional values related to wisdom, the elderly, life skills, collectivity, language, and nature. On the other hand, with the language of “emergence”, it is possible to discern the signs of persistence and renewal. The large migration to cities is a prominent face of emergence, provoking both crisis and new strategies of survival. Most dramatic of these has been the increasing engagement with political power, both as antagonists--opposing policies and demanding rights by forceful, usually nonviolent means--and as protagonists--as elected or appointed officials in local and provincial structures. The pursuit of education and vocational careers, primarily as auxiliary teachers, nurses’ aids, and low-level government functionaries, is another sign of integration and a strategy of survival. Yet another mark of emergence is the increased, though still small, use of communication media, mostly radio and print media. Both agricultural production and cultural production, especially the marketing of manual crafts, music and dance, whether through expositions or tourism, still depend largely on the promotional efforts of NGO’s or governmental agencies.

All of these strategies of survival involve some measure of integration in the surrounding society. Perhaps the crucial question is whether it is a “critical integration” that conserves deep elements of native tradition *or* is largely a capitulation to the dominant trends and values, preserving only the appearance of indigenous culture. All of the expressions noted here have the effect of presenting a face of indigenous existence to the surrounding society, of adverting to a reality largely hidden and unknown to the wider population. The impression made is of an “emergence”, or resurgence, of indigenous vitality, both within native communities and especially in the broader context. At the risk of seeming arrogance or depreciation, I would suggest that the strategies of indigenous survival and “protagonism” noted so far simply do not have in themselves the depth or strength to truly sustain the bilingualism that López envisions, and I think he himself implies as much.

My conviction is that the heart of any culture is its spirituality, its often unconscious world view, system of belief, mode of thinking, priorities and values. Only insofar as the various strategies of emergence noted above draw deeply on the spirituality of their indigenous practitioners, might they indeed represent a viable indigenous emergence and produce the kind of critical integration that offers a future alternative to aspects of dominant local, national and global cultures. In our context of the Argentina chaco, the principle expression of the spirituality of indigenous peoples are the myriad small, evangelical churches, ubiquitous in their communities. True, this "institution" is not itself indigenous to these peoples, but it has been so absorbed and inculturated in the last 75 years as to become the self-acknowledged expression and guardian of their spirituality. While not all aspects of traditional spirituality have fit comfortably within the borrowed form, nonetheless the new receptacle has proved to be sufficiently flexible as to "hold", or at least not reject, almost every feature of indigenous spirituality. Part of the reason for this successful synthesis has been the relative absence of outside, non-indigenous "keepers of doctrine" with the will and authority to impose and safe-guard their own particular orthodoxies. Hence, evangelical Christian churches "belong to" and are the principle carriers of the spiritual legacy of these indigenous peoples.

All this is not to say that the "synthetic spirituality" of the indigenous peoples of northern Argentina is uniform and stable. Throughout its short history it has mutated into a small variety of forms, a development and diversification that continues today, but with an apparent underlying coherence. The current resurgent and evolving *alabanza* movement throughout the region, with its strong attraction of young people and evolving dance forms, is one clear sign of the vitality of this evangelical indigenous spirituality. But so is the vigorous disagreement and debate that it has generated. A noteworthy absence in this debate is any voice calling for laying aside of native identity, spirituality, or world view. And the arguments on both sides are articulated in the native tongue. One has the impression that in this indigenous context, traditional spirituality has melded with pentecostal Christianity in a profound and persistent way.

Returning to the theme of emergence in our context, clearly the indigenous church has a significant influence on the face of emergent native

reality, that is, what the surrounding world sees. Individuals involved in political activity, as well as in education or communication endeavors, often identify themselves with the church, or are themselves church leaders. Public protest gatherings, or meetings to plan them, may well pause for prayer. Several years ago, an indigenous group blocking a highway for a week held open air evening worship services on the highway. White political candidates or government officials who know something of the indigenous reality cater to native pastors and church leaders, or at least seek their counsel. Television or other media occasionally feature the unique worship expressions of urban indigenous churches. Non-indigenous evangelical churches frequently invite native music groups to sing in their churches.

In turn, the new indigenous emergence also affects and influences the church. Some young people, newly exposed to the more secular contexts of work or education, leave the church, often along with their native identity. Others, though still very few, seek a recovery of indigenous identity that predates the evangelical influence. Still others, exposed to white evangelical churches, wish to adopt practices they associate with “proper” (i.e. white) church life, with respect to dress, worship and preaching style. Native leaders who attend Bible schools or seminary courses, offered by diverse protestant or evangelical institutions, begin to learn something of “correct” doctrines, critical Bible study, and hermeneutics, often with little help in contextualizing these teachings. These influences begin to be seen in indigenous church life, sometimes in ways that seem irrelevant to ordinary members. White evangelists or pastors have begun to appear with more frequency in indigenous churches, especially those associated with white denominations, and are often treated with much deference, since they seem clearly to bear, and sometimes claim, authority.

What has been the influence of Mennonite workers on the new “presence” of native life? While indigenous emergence in northern Argentina certainly did not depend on the work of Mennonite missionaries, without doubt the handful of workers over six decades has affected the shape of the movement. Several strategies are especially noteworthy, and that they were implemented relatively early in the life of this movement is likewise significant: (1) The decision to abandon the establishment of denominational Mennonite churches and to encourage the incipient impulses toward autochthonous church

development surely helped to establish the very consciousness that gradually blossomed into what today can be called emergence. (2) The decision to dignify the native languages of this region, by putting them into writing, facilitating the translation of Biblical texts, and teaching literacy, must have helped to shape the emerging indigenous consciousness and its spirituality. The subsequent accompaniment presence of fraternal workers (now known as Equipo Menonita) has largely built on these two strategic choices. This on going presence, while no doubt important, has probably had diminishing significance in recent years as the indigenous population and its geographical extension has increased, along with the number and influence of other missions and NGOs specifically oriented toward indigenous groups.

The question of “influence” on large cultural shifts is of course a vexed one. Even at the micro level of communities, specific congregations, or individual lives, influence is hard to identify and measure. Yet we feel compelled to ask the question, and we develop our answers*,¹ perhaps with too much assurance. What were the influences that impelled indigenous groups of northern Argentina to identify with the Christian gospel of pentecostal or evangelical expression? Was what happened in the 30’s to 50’s of the last century truly a “people movement”, the beginning of what we are now calling indigenous emergence? Did the early Catholic missionaries, then Anglicans, and later Nazarenes, Baptists, Mennonites, and Pentecostals all “influence” the shape of the indigenous spirituality that has emerged? Or was it, more profoundly, choices based on the accumulated survival wisdom of hunter-gatherer peoples that motivated and shaped their resurgence? We expose our narrowness if we understate indigenous protagonism in their survival and developing their own spiritual culture.

With respect to the specific Mennonite “contributions” mentioned above--encouraging an autochthonous church, and literacy--we really ought to imagine, if there is no record of, dissenting voices within the indigenous community. Surely there were those who resisted, on the basis of tradition, the “people movement” oriented toward the Christian gospel. Surely there were those who

¹ One Argentine anthropologist, Silvia Citro, attributes to Mennonite team workers *more* influence than we have claimed, rather than *less*. See “Repensando el movimiento del evangelio entre los Toba del Chaco Argentino”, http://www.naya.org.ar/congreso2002/ponenciass/cesar_ceriani_cernadas_silvia_citro.htm

distrusted the whole literary enterprise, who foresaw the losses to a living orality. In other words, we might imagine a *process of decision-making*, carried out in a particular cultural modality, with a weighing of risks and losses, rather than a simple-minded capitulation to outside, modern “influences”. Perhaps “our” influences are really very small in comparison to native contributions of intelligent discourse, stored wisdom, dreams and visions to the communal choices eventually made.

In this light, we have to be sober about our on going role as accompaniers of *emergencia indígena*. In spite of the emphasis, here, on the “emergence” phenomena, we dare not forget that much of current native existence is better characterized by “emergency”. Albert Buckwalter’s fear that future Mennonite workers would be engaged largely in holding the hands of a dying culture has not yet been disproved. It is at least clear that the cultures of Toba, Pilagá, and Mocoví peoples will never again be what they once were, though of course this is true of any living cultures. That there is a parallel movement of emergence is certainly welcome, though its direction can neither be entirely discerned nor determined. Surely Mennonite team workers in Argentina will be engaged in accompanying both those who grieve the passing of something unique and precious and those who imagine and participate in the shaping of new indigenous realities.

Is there an on going role for Mennonite accompaniers in this context, a compelling reason to be here? If “influence” is our goal, then as always, it’s a dubious enterprise. If, however, our goal is accompanying those who are suffering and disillusioned, as well as the daring and hopeful, with all the compassion, courage, humility, and wisdom that we’re given, then perhaps, yes. “Perhaps” because the question may not really be an objective or institutional one, but a personal one. I think there are objective reasons for an on going presence in the Argentine Chaco, not least of which is to witness the Kingdom parable that may be acting itself out here. And yet, the history of this mission shows that workers who’ve come, and stayed, did so in response to a personal sense of necessity, be it identification, calling, longing, or hope. That makes the matter of the future of indigenous accompaniment in this context about as indeterminate as the trajectory of *emergencia indígena*. In this, we place ourselves at the mercy, and within the mystery, of God’s Reign.