

Reflections on the Protestantization of Hispanic America

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Religious Pluralism and Popular Religion in Latin America.

Religious ideals and practices are at the heart of the various cultures that have interacted in Latin America. An experiential or inductive approach to Christianity in Latin America requires that we begin with the reality of a religious pluralism and of a popular religiosity. In Latin America, “religion” takes on a variety of forms, which fall into the two main categories of “popular” and “official” (linked more to official leaders or hierarchy). Today, New Age movements are also influencing Latin American communities, and in several countries we note the presence of Eastern and Middle Eastern religions. The Latin American people tend to be open to all forms of religion. They relate to popular symbols and combine them in ways that go beyond the standard Western approaches (Catholic or Protestant) to orthodoxy.

“Popular religiosity” refers to the way in which many Latin American Christians—Roman Catholic and Protestant—interpret and practice their official religions. Popular religious approaches in Latin America have historically been a way of resisting the impositions of the Catholic Church but also of Protestant churches in later times. The historical roots of “popular religion” can be found in indigenous, African, and European cultures that go back many centuries, particularly in the case of Roman Catholicism. There is a medieval, baroque Roman Catholic stream as well that has blended with other currents to create a rich pluralism.

Religious ideals and practices are at the heart of the various cultures that have interacted in Latin America. There is also a growing form of popular religiosity linked to the indigenous cultures, to the African religions (such as Candomble, Umbanda, Yoruba, Santeria, Voodoo, etc.), and in forms first imported from Europe such as Spiritism. In the indigenous and African worlds there is a holistic approach to religion that does not separate religion from daily life. In all of these cultures, women play a

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key role in preserving and transmitting the oral traditions from one generation to another.

Protestant “popular religiosity,” which has become apparent during the final decades of this century, is a consequence of the rapid growth of grassroots Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. A different kind of “popular religion” can be found in the “Charismatic Renewal” under the impact of modernity and the omnipresence of the electronic media. In this, one can perceive the imposition from outside powers of alien social, economic and cultural values.

Christians face a dilemma and a challenge in the face of the new phenomenon of religious pluralism. How do we deal with syncretism, in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism? (Latin American Group, CWMC).

Proselytism: Definitions

Theological. “Proselytism is... used to mean the encouragement of Christians who belong to a Church to change their denominational allegiance, through ways and means that “contradict the spirit of Christian love, violate the freedom of the human person and diminish trust in the Christian witness of the church”. Proselytism is “the corruption of witness” (from Orthodox Consultation on “Mission and Proselytism” Sergiev Possad, Russia, 1995). On the surface, proselytism may appear as genuine and enthusiastic missionary activity; and some people involved in it are genuinely committed Christians who believe that they are doing mission in Christ’s way. It is the aim, spirit and methodology of this activity which make it proselytism.”²

Experiential. “A small group of church workers were gathered in a Christian campground to discuss Christian communication. Divided into study groups, we went out into the village next to the seaside camp to learn as much as we could about the situation of the inhabitants, then report back to the entire body. The next morning, at prayers, we found an unexpected guest: a gnarled old villager. The worship team asked us to converse with him about his life situation.... Suddenly, a pastor (he was the camp manager) blurted out: “Sir, are you a born again Christian?” When the peasant looked puzzled and mumbled an unconvincing reply, the pastor pulled out his Bible and began to preach, urging upon our bewildered guest a decision for Christ. After his embarrassed colleagues managed to quiet him down, the worship leader turned our attention once more to the halting story of our unexpected guest. We learned that for many years he had been a fisherman in a village of self-sustaining fisherfolk. What had happened to the fishing? we asked. “Many rich folk have come here and taken over all of our shoreline and dirtied our water, so we no longer have any place to fish,” he told us in his thick brogue. At some point, someone thought to ask our visitor what he knew about the place in which we were meeting. “I don’t really know,” he said. “Lots of city people come here. We hear singing coming from inside and we know that they are called “embangelicals,” but that’s all we know about them... because I’ve never been invited to come in.” Not even to fish? “No.” As we stared past the bowed head of an embarrassed Baptist camp manager to the beautiful beach beyond, it slowly dawned

upon all of us that this place where we were supposed to be learning about communicating the Gospel was, in fact, physically standing in the way of the Gospel in its fullest sense, at least for the people in that small village.

The experience taught me, a conservative evangelical, that when Christian witness is done in a spirit of vulnerability, service and openness to others, it is evangelism. The people who respond to this call often come from churches (Catholic and Protestant) where the message is proclaimed in a self-serving manner, or who already have turned their backs on the church. Proselytism, in contrast, is motivated by a spirit of churchly pride which goes against the grain of the Gospel. Proselytizers are often overbearing. They assume that only they possess the truth and that it is therefore the duty of the unregenerate to accept it without question. They usually do not take the time to find out where their hearers are. And because they are not vulnerable, they miss the chance to be evangelized by others.”³

The Latin American Churches—Three Testimonies:

From a “mainline” church executive. “The major force shaping the religious landscape in Latin America is the rapid growth of Pentecostal Christianity. Many scholars have predicted that early in the 21st century Latin America will have an evangelical majority. Even now, in terms of church participation, ‘practicing’ evangelicals (92 million) may already outnumber ‘observant’ Catholics (40 million) (taken from S. Escobar in Woodbury and from Escobar in Cook, 1994)... There are many explanations for this growth” (sociological, psychological and pastoral). At the risk of oversimplifying, [the] “‘secret’ for the growth of Pentecostalism is that this movement has been able to make the church and the God-experience relevant for the popular masses. For many years... the experience of God was mediated by the church and interpreted for them. What Pentecostalism has offered to the people is a new and ‘direct’ experience of god and a community in which the person who sits at the pew has the same participation in the life of the church as does its leader (priesthood of all believers or the ministry of the baptized)” The author goes on to speak of factors like a “thirst for God” and the “relevance of the Christian faith (which has been sacrificed for the sake of logic in both Roman Catholicism and in Historical Protestantism). Here we find the reason for its growth. It has been able to reach people where they are, in the midst of their suffering, poverty, marginalization and alienation.” After offering several criticism of Pentecostals, the author, who was a bishop of his church in Puerto Rico, concludes: “...This kind of Pentecostalism, native and with its feet on the ground, presents itself as a great challenge to Roman Catholicism and Historical Protestantism. It is an explosive and subversive combination; the power of the Spirit articulated in a Theology of the Cross and rooted in God’s grace” (Rafael Malpica-Padilla, Director for L.A. & Carib., Division for Global Mission, ELCA. Status Paper, CWMC).

From a Catholic sociologist. At a meeting of twelve hundred pastors of one branch of the Assemblies of God in São Paulo, “The number of pastors equaled the number of Catholic priests in the area... Most of these men were mulatto—some were black, but few were white. A Catholic clergy gathering would be made up of Europeans and

Brazilians disproportionately from southern Brazil, which is mainly white. From the looks of these men it was clear that they were from the poor strata, although not the most desperate... In one respect, however, they were similar [to an R.C. gathering]: there were no women in the group..." (Phillip Berryman, *Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits in Latin America*, Orbis, 1996, p. 17).

From a secular newspaper. "The decline of the so-called historical churches... and the growth of the Pentecostal sects can be seen as the consequence of the disillusionment of urban Brazilians who do not find in them where and how to spiritually compensate for the bitterness of their daily lives. Disillusionment largely explains why five churches from 'new denominations' appear in Rio de Janeiro every week. This is a religious phenomenon of great consequences, if one pays attention to the recently converted mother who remarked: 'We grab whatever religion is closest to us.' The more dehumanizing that life becomes in urban spaces it would seem that the less space there is for acceptance of historical religions... The poorer the population of Rio becomes the less Catholic it is" (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 21 Feb. 1993).

Pentecostals and Ecumenism.

Overview. "Many observers have tended to think of Pentecostalism both as a religion of the alienated and as alienating in itself... [In the eyes of both Catholic and secular researchers] Pentecostals have seemed too preoccupied with the next world to be concerned about relationships in this one. However, the same research has documented the activity and involvement of countless grass-roots Pentecostals in movements of resistance and social change, together with Catholics, Protestants and professed atheists... From their earliest beginnings, Pentecostals have been dismissed by the mainline denominations as sects, implying a lack of ecclesial validity. [Yet] Pentecostal's sectarianism... may be a necessary function of their search for identity... And social involvement is one of the chief routes to ecumenical awareness. Indeed, ecumenism is already apparent, broadly speaking at the two extremes of the movement among the highest leadership, ecclesiastical leaders and theologians, and at the very grass roots of religious life, where it is multifaceted, experiential, and even interfaith."

At the height of the political violence in Central America, for example, ultraconservative Protestants and "progressive" Christians (both mainline Protestant and grassroots Roman Catholics) "set aside their theological and ideological differences for a common... cause." And again, "Pentecostals have had considerable growth among the Amerindian populations of Central America and the Andean region. This is perhaps because their churches are similar to the native village structure which combines a sharing community with authoritarian or patriarchal leadership... 'The social practice and the theology of the Mayan [Protestants] are shaped by the membership to both the inner circle of the church and the outer circle of the indigenous community.' (H. Shafer, pp. 89, 90)... "In the Maya heartland... Pentecostal ecstasies may be responding to the millennial mystique of Maya religion, which is still very much alive among the highland peoples. In the words of a prominent Pentecostal leader, 'We Pentecostals are very suspicious of anything that smells of the ancient cult. We con-

sider it paganism; but we would like to think that Pentecostals are closest to the ancient Maya religiosity of any Protestant movement' (G. Cook, in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino, 1997, pp. 78-79, 81, 84, 89-90).

Grass roots "syncretism". In Brazil, "confessional distinctions tend to blur the closer one gets to the grass roots... On certain sacred days a Brazilian *camponés*, "peasant", will take candles to the padre for his blessing one of the few times he steps into the parish church, because this is a function that only a priest is deemed powerful enough to perform. The remainder of the peasant's day will be taken up with religious observances where unauthorized practitioners play a prominent role. This same *camponés* may attend the tent meeting of a grass roots Pentecostal healer in order to resolve a physical problem that the *santos* [saints] were either unwilling or unable to address. Or he may seek the services of a local *macumbeiro* whose magic has been found to be powerful in specific instances... The lay pastor of a grassroots Pentecostal sect aptly summed up the general attitude of his peers toward religious differentiation: 'I pick up everything on the radio that comes my way; mass, spiritist service, everything'. This eclectic attitude is not so much syncretism as a characteristic folk attitude toward the supernatural a willingness to resort to any being or force that might have the power to resolve what they themselves are powerless to attain. In the words of one folk practitioner: 'As long as it is religious and it is for our good, it is all the same thing'" (Adapted from C. Rodrigues-Brandão, *Os Deuses do Povo* [the gods of the people], Rio de Janeiro, Editora Brasileira, in G. Cook, 1985, p. 56).

Inculcating Faith in Life.

In exploring worship and cultures, there are two perspectives which are both complementary and contradictory. On the one hand, it is essential that Christian communities be (re)educated to receive anew the ancient and universal symbols. Too often Christians are unable to understand the fullness of the rich tradition with which they have been gifted. Many worshippers are unaware of the full meaning of the symbols which adorn their sacred spaces, and do not reflect on the significance of, for example, the hymns; thus they are not fully prepared to meet God in the traditional symbols and rituals.... On the other hand, churches which have emerged from a colonial history have much work to do in reclaiming the symbols of their own cultures and relating them to their present experience of the sacred." When so-called Christian societies conquered territories, they violated local peoples, destroyed their life and culture and took their land. "Too often, what was holy for many communities - music, gesture, language - was put away from the churches. This calls churches to repentance for a history in which the indigenous experience of encounter with the divine has been suppressed and rejected" ("Local Congregations in Pluralist Societies," Duraisingh, C., p. 55).

"Elements of the religion of our ancestors which, in God's sovereignty, managed to survive until today, had an evangelical side to it - it was good news to the Maya people' (Ku Canche, Yucatec Maya Presbyterian theologian). "This faith in the God of life, the result of his loving purposes which he revealed throughout the history and

cultures of our peoples, and which our grandfathers and grandmothers have carefully preserved in their ancestral traditions, is the root of our indigenous theology today” (Fr. E. López-Hernández, a Zapotec Catholic theologian). “If only those who interpose themselves between Jesus and the Maya - who label us pagans - would recognize that he speaks to us, walks with us, and shines upon our pathway. We feel somewhat like the blind man who cried out to Jesus to have compassion upon him while the multitude repressed him. Undeterred, he cried out even louder; Jesus healed him and he went on his way singing. We Maya experience the same thing as the blind man. We have heard the voice that tells us that our faith is saving us. We follow him and glorify his name. We want to deepen our knowledge of the Jesus who held people spellbound, who exalted the nobodies, welcomed the marginalized... and who condemned the proud and the sinners. Because he does the same today, we are eager to meet this Christ whose voice enralls us and does not make us afraid” (Antonio Otzoy, Kaqchikel Maya Presbyterian theologian.)⁴

Idolatry and Syncretism.

Idolatry and the capacity to imagine. “Every religion, including the christian religion, needs symbols to represent realities that go beyond the believers’ comprehension. Every religious system, christendom not excepted, needs myths to justify its existence. Every form of religiosity, including that of christianity, has ways of manipulating its deities or idols. This is called magic.... How many Protestant Christians use the Bible and its contents, Christian community and worship, the structures of the church and Christian conduct in magical and idolatrous ways?” (G. Cook, 1997, p. 309).

“Idolatry, according to Fromm, is not simply about worshipping many gods nor even alien gods. How many times, he asks, did not the veneration of God become the worship of an idol dressed up as the God of the Bible? What is the difference between the human sacrifices that the Aztecs offered to their gods and today’s human sacrifices that are offered in war to the idols of nationalism and the sovereign state?” Or, we might add, to the idols of neo-liberalism and gods of consumerism and materialism? (E. Fromm, *And You Shall be as Gods*, adapted in G. Cook, p. 309).

Syncretism and the capacity to adapt. “Juan Sepúlveda, a Chilean Pentecostal missiologist wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject of syncretism. He did so after he found himself and his spirituality dismissed as ‘alienating’ by indigenous leaders. He began to question why the pentecostal movement - a syncretistic form of the Christianity which came to Latin America from Europe and the United States, finds it so difficult to contextualize or inculturate the gospel in other cultures?” His research lead him to the history of the term “syncretism” rather than to its technical etymology. He discovered that Plutarch traced the term to Crete, whose inhabitants “spent a lot of their time fighting among themselves. But when they were attacked by outside enemies, they put aside their differences to combat a common enemy. ‘And that,’ says Plutarch, ‘was it which they commonly called syncretism’ (*sugkretismós*, from *sug*, ‘together,’ *cret*, ‘Crete’, and *ismos*, ‘ism’ or system). “Concludes Sepúlveda, ‘together-Crete-system means something like to unite or to federate, as did the Cretan.”

Syncretism is an act of fraternal solidarity. Erasmus in the sixteenth century, when he is introducing Plutarch to his contemporaries interprets “‘together-Crete-system’ metaphorically to signify ‘common interest even when sincere love is lacking.’” Applying the proverb to concrete situations, he urged Melancton to set aside their differences and, “Cretan with Cretan stand against the foe.” He even applied the proverb to the methodology used by Jesus and Paul. Theologically, Sepúlveda suggests, “syncretism,” as used metaphorically by Erasmus, sounds very much like “incarnating oneself into the characteristics of those whom one wants to address.” Subsequently, the term was made to derive from *sugkrêtos* or *sugkratos* (‘mixed together’). One suspects that ideology, as well as theology, has had something to do with this negative exegesis. Racial and cultural hybridization has long had, in Northern Europe and North America, a negative connotation which in our present world of mass migrations we can no longer empirically defend (Cook, G., 1997, pp. 311-312).

Recommendations

1. In the words of Kenneth Cragg, our first task in approaching another religion is to “take off our shoes,” realizing that we are approaching something that is sacred to many people.
2. Any form of religiosity, including that of the evangelizer, may need transformation when placed in the light of the Gospel, while at the same time respecting the strong religious orientation of the people.
3. We need courage to hold the tension between respect for the religious heritage of the people while struggling to remain true to the Christian message.
4. We need to dialogue with the existing cultures, listening to them, learning from them, while being true to our understanding of the Gospel. The reality of pluralism requires a dialogical attitude that reflects the same approach used by Jesus Christ in his interaction with others. Christ dialogued with his own culture, particularly in terms of the metaphors, symbols and values that appear in the parables. Jesus stressed relationships with others rather than adherence to doctrines.

Some further considerations

1. New ways must be developed to identify what it means to be an authentic Christian in each of the Latin American cultures, regardless of the particular denominational affiliation.
2. Christians need to struggle with the question of how to be a community of faith in Latin America in a more authentic way.
3. The phenomenon of adherence to more than one religious family needs more attention.
4. Modern culture, through mass media and the market economy (globalization), powerfully influences some of the religious values of the people. Christians must constantly evaluate this influence in light of the Gospel (Latin American group, CWMC).

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Endnotes

- ¹ These reflections, reformatted from the point form in which they were presented, draw heavily on the materials of the Latin American Colloquium of the Congress on the World Mission of the Church (St. Paul 1998) of which the author was a member.
- ² *Towards Common Witness: A call to adopt responsible relationships in mission and to renounce proselytism*. Geneva, WCC, 1997
- ³ Guillermo Cook in *A Monthly Letter on Evangelism*, No. 8/9, August/September 1998, pp. 1, 2.
- ⁴ The three quotes are taken from Cook, G., 1997, pp. 303, 304, 260-262.