

# Culture and religion in Latin America

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OUR RAINBOW OF FAITH CONFRONTS global factors that tend to be totalitarian. Often we are being told to believe in one way and not in another. However, in Latin America there are many forms of Christianity, manifested in so-called people's religion and spirituality. Inculturation (often understood as a new concern in the Church of today) has been carried out throughout the centuries, by *mestizo*,<sup>1</sup> Afro-American, and indigenous peoples. All of this is significant for churches in other regions of the world, since a deep human desire is to be persons of faith, within different cultural paths, and in a common praise for the gift of life. We would wish these links be not an unbalanced relationship between North and South, West and East, but rather a co-responsible search for a new humanity that loves this earth and longs for heaven. This aim needs to motivate the communication between us, so that we appreciate our differences and can build an authentic global reality. In this process, the poor are experts in transforming our ambivalent human condition and in taking care of the earth, the loving mother that excludes no one.

## *A joyful Christianity*

Within and beyond the modern framework, people give priority to celebration and to spirituality. Thus I characterize contemporary culture and religion. The heart of our people is full of joy, music, humour, mystique, which put pragmatism and money in a subordinate position. But modern elements are introduced in our *fiestas*, and spirituality becomes more subjective and interpersonal (particularly through new popular devotions and through fundamentalisms).

People's faith, sensibility and socialization are basically a celebration of life.<sup>2</sup> This is often misunderstood. Research on Latin American religion underlines its ritualism (which is true of any symbolic system), or considers celebration as only a part of reality. Rather it is its soul. This is true in urban lower and middle strata of society, aboriginal groups, and in Afro-Latin-Americans. The leading Christian expressions are pilgrimage, dancing in religious festivals,

sharing of food, drink and friendships, and corporal manifestations of the faith, at the same time we have solemn ceremonies, such as the ones in Holy Week. In this, as in all of day-to-day religion, there are numerous phenomena; our reality is heterogeneous and rich.<sup>3</sup> Here I only make four comments.

Modern progress has its own secular rituals, that are supported by certain Christian elements. For example: in seeking the patronage of 'god-parents' acquired at baptism or marriage, the poor perpetuate their own subservience. The ritual relationship of god-parenthood promotes aspirations of upward social mobility, rather than expectations of solidarity among people of similar social disadvantage. Another example: in religious festivals and in massive centres of worship (*santuarios*), many prayers are motivated by the desire for abundant material goods (in a Bolivian-Peruvian centre of worship, pilgrims ask the religious specialists to bless their miniature dollar bills). This kind of faith has a capitalist orientation.

A second comment: many Christian habits have become inculturated in daily existence. Throughout our continent people celebrate in many particular forms their birth, marriage and death: that is, the cycle of life is meaningful for the individual, the family and the community. In these celebrations we experience the saving presence of the Lord of life and death. It is also noteworthy that in many places and sacred moments of the year, small groups and multitudes venerate Catholic images. Saints, and particularly Mary, mother of God, are protectors and heavenly friends of believers.<sup>4</sup> Around Mary there is more inculturation, in comparison with christological liturgies (where there is greater clerical control). In people's relationship with sacred icons we find spiritual, ethnic, generational, gender and social traits of each region of Latin America. Through these and other symbols, habits that began in the colonial periods are being transformed and reoriented within the modern framework.

Thirdly, modernity and people's festivals interact among themselves. The modern believer is pragmatic and rational; people's celebrations are communitarian, joyful, liberating. Here we find contrasts and co-relationships. The *fiesta* gives new meaning to contemporary existence; for example, priority is given to spending resources for the benefit of the community. On the other side, modern factors are introduced in people's religious celebrations; for example, persons who are successful in business and politics play a greater role in religious ceremonies, and the socially marginalized remain in that position in a spiritual context.

A fourth aspect: youth (who make up more than half of our population) are creating their own version of the modern paradigm; this is manifested in the realm of celebrations. I would add, in terms of background, that the modern interpenetration of people's concerns and religion is fairly recent. It is true that modernity has been present since the sixteenth century through the élites who enforced colonial structures that benefited European expansion. As regards the ordinary people, modernity has affected them deeply only since the twentieth-century phenomena: growth of cities, migration, education, economic networks, media, people's determination to obtain progress. All of this has had a strong impact on religious realities; ordinary people's ways of being Christian incorporate modern planning, rationality, subjectivity, and moral principles such as autonomy. Who are bearers of these changes? Everyone, since modernity is a global process. But I would emphasize that it is young people, who are mostly Christian believers, who are the ones who bring greater changes in popular Catholic celebrations. On these occasions the laity has more room for social and spiritual initiative and leadership; and here young lay persons are leading the way in changes in traditional religious practices.

### *Inculturated spirituality*

Once again I underline modern forms of Christianity among ordinary people in Latin America. Global influences have had a crucial impact on Christian ways of belief and behaviour. We have moved from colonial to modern social stratification and voluntary associations; so in spirituality there is a growth of all kinds of groups and movements. Politics is undergoing a radical crisis. Ecological, gender and ethnic concerns are becoming stronger. There is growing disenchantment with material progress, which does not benefit everyone, and which many see as an idol. Material success does not satisfy the human heart. Common people once again are very sensitive to the day to day presence of the mystery of life.

The faithful do not agree with the liberal élite, nor does the élite understand the poor.

In their campaign in favor of a more pure, rational and less superstitious religion, liberal people built another intellectual barrier vis à vis popular catholicism of poor indians and *mestizos* who were the majority of the people.<sup>5</sup>

This problem is found not only among liberals; today most social activists and scientists are at odds with ordinary people. For example, they seek to purify (that is, to control) the religious culture of Latin American peoples who are supposedly steeped in myth and prone to magic. Our enlightened élites (which include many church leaders) discriminate and reject the spirituality of the poor. But those who look at this reality with the eyes and the heart of those who love and share life notice different strands within people's religions and their types of inculturation.

One strand is a fundamentalist spiritual experience, which has a monolithic and intolerant identity. Most people move inbetween several cultural systems. In Latin America and the Caribbean region, Christianity has many developments and is inter-religious. Both daily behaviour and spirituality is heterogeneous. We have several forms of *mestizo* Christianity, and Afro-American and indigenous developments of the Christian faith and Church. For example, Andean people (among whom I live), have a concrete and mystical bond with Mother Earth, they adhere to the Catholic ritual, and they also affirm the sacredness of money; people believe in these different (and in a sense contradictory) realities. So we have to examine these different emphases and orientations.

### *Three types of spirituality*

The many spiritual expressions may be summarized in this way. The first is *devotional alliance*. Its traditional form is a direct and permanent contact with a holy image, which is prayed to and celebrated in special occasions. It may be the area saint of a village or city who has local or widespread devotion. Another form is a modern individual and family devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Virgin of Lourdes or of Fatima, Legion of Mary, etc. Each one of these alliances, or relationships, has a particular history and meaning; but a common element is the deep interaction between believers and a sacred benefactor. This mystical interaction has concrete implications in terms of healing, of resolving interpersonal and economic problems, and other common needs.

Secondly there is *Christian praxis*. We have a variety of associations and forms of spiritual experience that are chosen by an individual; they involve being an active member and following certain guidelines. Examples are: sacramental membership in a parish and/or in a small Christian community, participation in a biblical or in a

catechetical association, Christian social action in today's world, and membership in lay movements of a local and international character. In these cases, inculturation is brought about by a modern-thinking person and movement, and in a way that offers personal renewal and a contribution to social and spiritual transformation.

Finally we have *occasional spirituality*. Many Catholics make a selection of church activities and of popular devotions, in which they participate occasionally. Ceremonies involving the dead are of great popular importance; and also rituals against evil and bad luck, prayers in emergency situations, and use of objects that mean protection. Middle-class Christians are very creative and syncretic; today one sees many eastern religious elements together with European and Amerindian traditions. In human terms, people seek personal success and economic well-being. There is an informal and pluri-religious inculturation. Most call themselves Catholics; they are reconstructing the Christian heritage with a combination of religious traditions.

These three ways of living the faith usually have links between them, particularly devotional alliance with occasional spirituality. They are different, but in people's minds they do not exclude each other (with the exception of certain movements in Christian praxis that have a sense of being the 'saved' and these discriminate against other people). Here I am only summarizing general trends; there are certainly more than three models of Latin American spirituality. I am underlining different forms of inculturation that in a sense are connected among themselves; they are mainly the product of people's stories of faith (and secondarily of official church programmes).

### *Global orientations*

In the last section I considered types of action. Now I deal with the spiritual orientation; not the contents, but rather the human relationship with the sacred. It seems to me that Latin American forms of Christianity are characterized by *relatedness*, *modern beliefs* and *material absolutes*.

A major spiritual reality is what may be called relatedness. On the basis of fundamental daily human needs, Christians have a very strong relationship with symbols of life. It is an incarnational-inculturated spirituality: seeking bread and health, bonds of love, ways of dealing with fear and conflict, and links with the dead, with ances-

tors that are present. In the midst of uncertainty and weakness, middle-class and poor people alike discover spiritual bonds that in a sense are human alternatives to the status quo.

A second global orientation: belief has a modern framework. Fundamentalisms seem to be against the contemporary scenario, but they are really a modern phenomenon, a symbolic evasion-acceptance of modernity. An individual's attachment to the Bible, to an image, to a ritual system, to a sacred association, makes everything new in a miraculous way, and thus one accepts reality without changing it. Fundamentalisms are also dualistic, and make an implicit critique of this valley of tears; but they are easily manipulated by the structures of this world. Another modern phenomenon is consumerism in the global supermarket of spiritual goods. The Peruvian Imelda Vega says that Catholics consume 'goods of salvation offered today in a widespread and heterodoxical manner; thus we have religious syncretism . . . that does not contradict official religion nor modern ways of living'.<sup>6</sup> Another important reality is ethics within our historical process. This type of Christianity is lived not in an ecclesial style but rather in terms of doing justice to oneself and to others, of being pragmatic and pluralistic. In a few words, these beliefs (fundamentalism, religious consumerism, humanistic ethics) are inculturations of the faith in agreement with the modern spirit.

A third basic direction: material goods are sacralized. Apparently this has nothing to do with spirituality. But the fact is that things become absolutes. Usually the poor are only expressing their wishes and aspirations, since most Latin American people remain marginalized and many are radically excluded. The materialistic mystique has a Christian legitimation; a Spanish proverb is that 'God helps whoever gets up early to work', that is to say, whoever has economic success. Many saints in Catholic devotions are a guarantee for business success and for becoming rich.

### *Assimilation and resistance*

In summary, in Latin America, culture and religion are joyful and spiritual (in many inculturated forms). Thus poor people survive and transcend their daily and painful stories. We see how popular religion partially assumes modernity: accent on the person, on reason and technological development, on a global human order. At the same time we see forms of resistance, spaces and moments of spiri-

tual renewal, relationships which offer meaning, that are alternatives to the status quo. So, some inculturations of the faith are signs of life; other forms of inculturation reproduce modern dehumanization. In order to evaluate such inculturations, one has to examine their major orientation (whether towards fundamentalism, religious consumerism, or a humanistic ethic).

The human condition today is going through a global crisis and dilemma. The Brazilian philosopher H. de Lima Vaz describes the problem as 'the crisis of the human subject that pretends to be the center of reference for all that reason says of reality'.<sup>7</sup> I consider that a resolution of the modern dilemma is found within people's spiritualities: we give priority to relationships, and to a joyful and spiritual contact with the sacred (and not to private absolutes). People's religious symbols are reasonable, but they are not imprisoned by the dominant instrumental logic. It may be said that the deep crisis of modern civilization has been in a sense resolved through religious inculturation produced by ordinary people. Not all popular religion does this. Some of its expressions are a belief in life for all, by means of relationships, celebration, mystique.

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#### NOTES

1 *Mestizo*: people of mixed race.

2 See my chapter on *fiestas* in J. L. Gonzalez, C. Brandao and D. Irarrazaval, *Catolicismo popular* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1993), pp 131–159.

3 In each region of our continent there are specific forms of inculturation. For example, in Maya and Tarahumara areas: E. Vogt, *Ofrendas para los dioses* (Mexico: FCE, 1983); W. Smith, *El sistema de fiestas y el cambio económico* (Mexico: FCE, 1981); P. de Velasco, *Danzar o morir* (Mexico: CRT, 1987). In urban realities: V. A. Campana, *Fiesta y poder* (Quito: Abya Yala, 1991); X. Albó y M. Preiswerk, *Los señores del Gran Poder* (La Paz: CTP, 1986); C. R. Brandao, *Sacerdotes de viola* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981).

4 For detailed studies on devotions to the Virgin Mary, see R. Vargas U., *Historia del culto de Maria en Iberoamerica* (Buenos Aires: Huarpes, 1947); VV.AA., *Nuestra Señora de America* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1988).

5 J. Klaiber, *Religión y revolución en el Perú, 1824-1976* (Lima: Universidad del Pacífico, 1980), p 42.

6 I. Vega Z., 'Sistemas de creencias', *Nueva Sociedad* 136 (1995), p 60.

7 H. de Lima Vaz, 'Religiao e modernidade filosofica' in M. C. Bingemer (ed), *O impacto da modernidade sobre a religiao* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1992), p 121.