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## **CHRISTIAN WITNESS WITHIN INDIGENOUS FAITH**

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On the basis of indigenous spirituality that pays attention to the signs of our times, we wish to eliminate impoverishment, for the sake of human well being that is in tune with the environment. This confronts self centered consumerism with its idolatrous characteristics.

In our latinamerican multicultural contexts, people seek and encounter sources of Life. Aboriginal peoples stand out. Throughout centuries they have been treated as objects within socio-political and church programs. Nevertheless, aboriginal population continues to reconstruct its paths, and also to develop its own theological voices.

We are dealing with wisdoms that are rooted in daily life and in processes' of inculturation in each region of the American continent. *Myth* and *utopia* are types of language and also bearers of religious pluralism. I want to underline that myth has been and is today a way of knowing that can dialogue with Christian tradition (in a similar way as modern science interacts with religious language). May I also underline my condition of apprentice and non-indigenous participant in a dialogue among Indigenous persons and communities who are authors of their theologies (1)<sup>1</sup>

The human condition of Indigenous peoples was denied due to colonialism; their spiritual values were labelled religiosity as pre-modern. Christian institutions systematically assaulted Aboriginal religions (by treating them as animism, as unreal myth, as lacking revelation). An

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(1)<sup>1</sup> There has been a series of Latin American Conferences on Indigenous theologies: first Congress in Mexico (Mexico: CENAMI, 1991), second Congress in Panama (Mexico: CENAMI, 1994), third Congress in Bolivia (Cuzco: IPA, 1997); fourth Congress in Paraguay (Belem: Mensageiro, 2003); Guatemala: AK Kutun, 2004); fifth Congress in Manos, Brazil, in 2006 (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2008); sixth Congress in Berlin, San Salvador in 2009. The most outstanding theologians are Domingo Llanque (*Vida y Teología Andina*, Cusco: CBC and IDEA, 2004) and Eleazar Lopez (*Teología India, Antología*, Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000); and see a comprehensive work by Nicanor Sarmiento (*Caminos de la Teología India*, Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000). My essay is grounded on what was experienced and discussed during the IV Latinamerican meeting (held in Paraguay, 2002); its concern has been how Christian communities dialogue with indigenous forms of wisdom.

arrogant christian civilization has been blind and deaf to the Sacred present in the midst of our peoples.

Today there is a growing acknowledgment of spiritual creativity among all peoples, and how this contributes to a multi-faceted human future. We appreciate different paths leading towards the Mystery of Life. Are these paths due to the Spirit that reveals membership in the Body of Christ?

Christianity took on the function of evaluating the “pagan” world. In some cases it only saw seeds of truth. Now we also acknowledge flowers and fruits of Truth. Each person may learn from what is put forward theologically by Aboriginal peoples. Something similar may be said about theology among Afro-Americans and among “mestizo” peoples; and it may also be said about belief patterns and insights of women, of youth, and of various latinamerican communities.

### **1. Discernment of Myths and of Utopias.**

In the Latin American context, what stands out is the power of money that supposedly provides happiness. This global fantasy affects each human culture. For example, Chilean population shows lack of confidence towards each other, and has an attitude of competition and of material success.(2)<sup>2</sup> Having in mind the modern context, what is the meaning of myth and utopia among Indigenous people? Such meaning may be compared with contemporary myths (personal success, technological progress, etc.), and it can also be understood from the point of view of our faith in Christ. One has to try to understand meaning within each culture, and develop a Christian discourse that does not distort Indigenous cultures.

In terms of theory, one may see the difference between myth (that interprets a reality) and utopia (that points towards the future). In examining Latin American stories(3)<sup>3</sup> one sees that they refer to what exists and also to what is desired. In various ways, they cross over between

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(2)<sup>2</sup> See PNUD, *Desarrollo humano en Chile*, Santiago, PNDU, 2002, 393-331; a survey of 3600 people in 13 regions of the country. Question 120: “in general terms, may I trust other people?”. Responses: 24% say yes; 73% say they can not trust other people; 2.3% do not respond. Question 107: “the world today is like a race”. Responses: I try to win and be the best: 23%; I do not want to be left behind: 38%; I prefer to go at my own rhythm: 36.3%; no response: 1.7%. Question 104: “How would you like to be remembered?”. Responses: as committed to others and loved by them: 18.4%; as moving ahead against all odds: 23.4%; as living according to my own goals: 24.1%; as doing my duty: 32.5%; no response: 1.5%.

(3)<sup>3</sup> I will comment on stories from Mexico, Mayan popularior, Paraguay (Guaraní people), Amazonic and also Andean peoples, and Mapuche’s in Chile, that were read and dramatized during the IV Congress of indigenous theologies (held in 2002). Basic resources in the study of Mexican myths are Miguel Leon Portilla, *Literaturas indigenas de Mexico*, Mexico: FCE, 1992, Enrique Florescano, *Memoria Mexicana*, Mexico: Joaquin Mortiz, 1987. For Andean mythology: Jesus Lara. *Mitos, leyendas y cuentos de los quechuas*, La Paz: Amigos del Libro, 2003, Xavier Albó, Felix Layme, *Literatura Aymara*, La Paz: CIPCA, 1992,

what is lived and what is hoped for. According to Margot Bremer, myths are like roots that renew the meaning of life.(4)<sup>4</sup>

In Mayan forms (5) of explaining the beginning of everything, there is a symbiosis between Nature and Humanity, between past and future. According to the thousand-year-old *Pop Vuh*, divine beings called *Tepew* and *Q'uj'kumatz* formed our first mother and father from yellow and white corn. Today, Maya people say: We are father-mother but at the same time we are *k'ak'alab*;<sup>5</sup> we are young grains of corn. Children therefore represent new life and growth in the community and the people. According to the Mapuche world view(6), at the beginning of time a dangerous water-snake, *Kai-Kai*, is confronted by the mountain-snake, *Tren-Tren*, who saves people. By means of a ritual of sacrifice, water and mountain achieve a way of co-existence. This symbolism is the underpinning of current Mapuche ritual.

Many myths show why there is evil and why there is a good life. Daily bread, which is corn, goes away from the child who does not nourish its hungry mother (Ch'ol story). The bloodthirsty sun is transformed by faithful *Xólotl*, a dog that is happy and makes others happy. From then on, the warmth of the sun caresses people, animals and plants (Náhuatl story). The beloved spouse that had died is revived by the smell of the flower of seven colors (Mixteco story). The serpent that devours children is sent away by an organized population that throws hot stones into its mouth (Raramuri/Tarahumara story). The spirit of the earth punishes those who do not work making pots from the soil (K'iche' story by Catarina Ixcoteyac Joj). The god of the mountain gives carnations to the poor brother (who thus has food and cattle), while the rich brother remains empty-handed (Andean story).

There are thus several ways of understanding cosmic and human dramas. Each story has meaning within a specific symbolic universe, and they all face the very heart of the human enigma concerning evil, on one part, and the miracle of life, on another part. Myths usually take into account violent realities, and also explain just and harmonious forms of living. What is said about the beginning of everything allows us to deal with the present and the future. It seems to me that indigenous stories about "origins" shed light on the interaction between malicious and benign forces. All this helps us to question modern progress (often naively understood only as positive), and it also allows us to confront (through mythical narratives) evil that harms everyone.

Let us consider a Mayan tradition that is helpful to challenge violence that has fallen over Guatemala during several decades.(7)<sup>5</sup> The indigenous myths show the dreams of ancestors and how God has dreamt the earth given to humanity. Moreover, war is considered to be God's nightmare. War is confronted together with globalization, since it hurts Mother Earth. In terms of hope, there is justice, reconciliation, organization; likewise there is hope because the dead look up to the sun, and they prepare a banquet for all.

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(4)<sup>4</sup> M. Bremer, *La Biblia y el Mundo Indígena*, Asunción: CONAPI, 1998, 28 ("myths are like roots that give new meaning to one's life when one is at a boundary").

(5) See *Popol Vuh*, Bogota: FCE, 1952; and *Tierra y Espiritualidad Maya*, Guatemala: Voces del Tiempo, 2000.

(6) See Rolf Foerster, *Introducción a la religiosidad Mapuche*, Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1993, 162-163.

(7)<sup>5</sup> Guatemala's contribution to the IV Congress has presented "myths of the origins of our Mother Earth; and we have collated them with the report, Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI)." It underlines "the earth without evil that God wants for us" (page 1). They add: "massacres and clandestine cemeteries meant that the most sacred of our culture was violated... Our loved ones were denied the right to continue living even after their deaths, they denied them the right to rise again," (page 6). It is a sharp theological discourse: social violence in Guatemala is confronted with mayan myth/utopia centered on corn.

These myths also have some elements that are a way of dreaming the future. There is a utopian conviction. This is not something that happens all of a sudden; it springs from the beginnings, from the origin of things; it is shaped now and tomorrow.

In Paraguay and the surrounding guaraní areas, there is a nomadic form of life, and its spirituality has the character of pilgrimage. The guaraní myth/utopia of the “Earth without evils” means that people are pilgrims, walking and also traveling by rivers. The longing for fullness is found here in the Earth; this is like a beautiful body. There are economic interactions showing reciprocity, and forms of celebration where each person gives and receives. Today this shapes Guaraní music, song and dance. There are few words; rather there is plenty of body movement and beautiful melodies; they represent the “Earth without evils.” It may be said that such myth and utopia becomes a paradigm, arising from our indigenous and dark America. It may also be said that such paradigm is useful for humanity that today thirsts for viable dreams.

Another major paradigm comes from Nahuatl people. It is now meaningful in all of Mexico and in areas of south and north America. We have a Mother; and in her roots she was named Tonantzin/Guadalupe. Mario Pérez describes her arrival on the summit of the mountain called *Xochitlálpan* or “Land of flowers”. It represents the land of nourishment, of flower/wisdom, of having an encounter with Life. In that place appeared the Náhuatl Divinity; she had a symbiotic relationship with belief in Mary, the Mother of God. Another significant story is that of a Mayan leader, Xnuc Mani. It speaks of a very long rope that unites various peoples. When this rope is cut, blood flows out so that it reaches all people.

Each one of these narratives has its particular place in history, and its meanings in a particular symbolic system. Therefore such narratives are not well understood in universal terms. However, there are some common features, and I wish to underline the dream concerning a new reality.

In this sense, let us go back to the link between mythic and ritual languages, and especially to celebrations of life. The Mapuchan *Nguillatún* ritual with its abundant sharing of food and drink and with its prayers in favor of Life is like a synthesis of the human journey and its projects for today and tomorrow. The Mexican festivals with dancers who make offerings to the Virgin has a meaning of people joyfully dancing with God. The Totonaca ritual to the spirit of the Earth, called *Puchina*, when building a house; they mean -according to Magdalena Garcia- that “the houses of our people are intended to be transformed into small houses of God, to become an earth without evils....”

Each daily event, like building a house or holding a festival, has a mythic and utopian depth. Something similar happens today in social networks that are patiently constructed, and in events like the World Social Forum. Courageous hope is thus celebrated. Thousands of persons cry out: “Another world is possible!” This courageous attitude has an Indo-American background.

## **2. Christian dialogue leads to a holistic mission.**

Our dialogue pays attention to the roots of the human, cosmic, spiritual condition; likewise attention is given to utopias, to human projects, and to intimacy with God. There is no point looking at isolated religious facts, nor to simply juxtapose what is Christian and what is Indigenous. Rather, what is important is that each person and culture in Latin America recover their roots and their projects of life. This includes a critique of evil, and in a positive way, it leads to courageous action.

In the case of the voracious serpent -the Raaramuri/Tarahumara story- the bearers of the myth said during the IV Congress of Indigenous Theologies that the snake represents the voracity of evil. By this they mean conquerors of the past, and the neo-liberal system of today. This system is strengthened at the price of devouring the wealth and memory of people, symbolized in the life of small people who are the guarantee of the future of Indigenous peoples. They add that sharing a festival turns the dream/utopia of the Tarahumara people into a reality, since everyone eats and drinks, all respect one another and help each other. God, Father and Mother, makes the people strong when they organize celebrations so that there may be unending life.

These and other reflections by Indigenous Christians make the dialogue between religions possible, since dialogue begins from within the Indigenous-Christian context (and not from a superior Christian vantage point that is placed above a “natural” religion). Such an interaction enriches both sides. Thanks to the Raramuri myth, the Christian imagination is enriched with images of Father/Mother, the self-affirmation of peoples who are discriminated against, and an understanding of salvation in terms of social and joyful strength. With respect to the Guaraní story about the Earth without evils, Bartolomeu Melià notes that such a non-Christian language in fact evangelizes us. He adds: The “Earth without evil” is the condition for being able to give and to be fulfilled in giving. Thus the Gospel of the gift of Grace is inculturated in a Guaraní way. At the same time the work of

Christ and His Spirit is brought into the Guaraní world, into its specific history and into its relationship with the rest of humanity.

When there is dialogue between religions, each side takes seriously what is brought by others. On the one hand, it is most important to understand feelings, tasks, ideas, beliefs of an Indigenous population. In the case of myths, one has to broach the dimensions of the story (the textual organization), the etiology (the function of myth in society and religion), the symbolism (spaces and energies), and the religiosity (manifestation of the holy and of God represented in the myth).<sup>(8)</sup> On the other hand, we have a plural and rich tradition about Jesus Christ, in the four Gospels and other New Testament writings, that constitute the basic sources of faith, and the implications of being the church of Christ. Those sources offer a marvelous contribution to Indigenous peoples' journeys. Further down, in reference to myth and utopia, I will comment on Creation and Eschatology. These doctrines form part of the experience of salvation offered by God to each people. It is in moving along a journey that we encounter Jesus and that we find ourselves among brothers and sisters.

Peoples move ahead, in the midst of obstacles and threats, that come from outside and also from within the Indigenous context. As Eleazar López explains, "Our suffering but strong hearts have been touched, and we have been renewed from within.... With God, Mother-Father, with Jesus Christ our Brother, and with the strength of the Spirit, we take up the task of continuing along the path toward the Earth without evils, a land of flowers, a land that flows with milk and honey and that makes possible a new world that is plural and worthy of all humanity." Thus, faith is both transcendent and concrete. In short: different paths blend and join hands, in a journey towards life given to us by God.

In Indigenous reflection and ritual there are plenty of flowers. Strong Christian institutions (and their theologies) are confronted by weak and resistant Indigenous flowers. In Paraguay a person told us: "We are like flowers whose petals are being pulled off; it's like we were in autumn" (in the midst of globalization). External and internal threats surround us, and we are also threatened by a loss of identity especially among Indigenous youth. Nevertheless, inner energies are not eliminated. It seems to me that it is good for Christian organizations to dialogue with Indigenous religions, to caress their flowers and petals. Christian theologies can value flowers different from ours, and at the same time, we may offer our own. Together we can praise the True God. The Mexican delegation told us, "We are a bouquet of different flowers that are offered to God and that we share with

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(8)<sup>6</sup> See J. Vidal, "Mito" and "Mitos modernos," in P. Poupard (director), *Diccionario de las Religiones*, Barcelona, Herder, 1987, 1205-1210, 1224-1226, and M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris, 1968.

our brothers and sisters in other places of the universe.” Such sensibility characterizes a common journey, toward the Land of Flowers, being faithful to Tonantzin/Guadalupe, and following the footsteps of Náhuatl Juan Diego who received flowers from Mary. In other words, each Christian community can be part of the universal journey toward *Yvymarae’ij* (the guarani way of speaking about Earth without evil).

For the sake of human well-being, we give witness to salvation in Christ. It is a salvation that the Spirit imprints on creation and humanity. It is not a human product. Rather, it’s a question of something new and different from Indigenous cultures in themselves. However, this is not happening because of a Christian superiority that discriminates the Aboriginal. Quite to the contrary, the new love of Christ enters the heart of Aboriginal peoples who have cultivated many and beautiful flowers, and due to this spirituality peoples of this earth are open to being saved through Christ.

It seems to me that the process of salvation happens in the midst of each concrete human journey. With respect to the fragile and resistant Indigenous population, there are very clear signs that Christ strengthens them and that His Spirit animates them in their search for the Land without Evil. Thus God acts with them and with all humanity. As it was said in Paraguay, Indigenous people share their flowers “with other corners of the universe.” They give witness that Salvation is always concrete and universal, because of the Incarnation of God’s universal Love. Furthermore, the very special flowers of Indigenous spirituality and wisdom contribute to and challenge the universal Church.

### **3. Directions in Indigenous Theologies**

Christianized Aboriginal peoples have carried out their inculturations of the faith. For that reason, theology arises out of those journeys of faith (in a plural sense, and not according to a unilateral Western understanding of “one faith”). Moreover, reflection done within Indigenous communities is meaningful primarily in their lives (and also on the experience of those of us who are not indigenous). People give greater importance to a joyful faith, and to a corporal and cosmic celebration. This is meaningful for persons of other cultures; and certainly for theological discourse that is intercultural. This fact deserves to be underlined; because if Indigenous reality is isolated it would be a way of killing it. Moreover what is at stake is being human due to our roots –where Indigenous myths give their contribution- and in our common human potentials –where Indigenous utopias strengthen all our journeys-.

There is a widespread attitude of praise towards Indigenous people. However it is often done as if they belonged to the past (and thus it is a denial of their meaning for today and tomorrow). I share the point of view of many who walk in the midst of Indigenous people. They are utmostly important today as meaningful for a fully human and Christian future. The

Mexican delegation (in the IV Congress) put it this way: the God of life calls us to seek the land that flows with milk and honey, the land of flowers, the land without evil. It is God's dream and also our own dream.... We may reground our history when we are nourished by indigenous and mestizo world views.

May I also say something about Christian dimensions of creation and eschatology. They are different (but also in tune with) Indigenous spirituality and wisdom. These realities –autochthonous faith, christianity- are not synonyms. Rather they are different kinds of language, with characteristics that enrich each other due to dialogue.

The Bible speaks about salvation within creation, that is to say, when God saves He recreates all that exists. Creation is loved by God, and it reveals the work of God. As we all know sections of the Bible were written in terms of people who underwent persecution and exile. In these contexts, there is an obvious concern for evil, and on creation that wishes to be liberated.

Let us move over to indigenous myths about the beginnings of reality, about the foundations of everything. They allow us to contemplate with new eyes the creative presence of God, in the midst of the paradoxical human condition with its evils and conflicts. An indigenous vision of reality is most aware of sacred beings within reality. The world is considered sacred, and it participates in God. Therefore it is a spiritual-cosmic-human vision; and not an anthropocentric perspective. On one side there is an accent on creation as being good, and on God's presence. On another side there is an accute awareness about resolving evils and catastrophes, and about reaching Salvation.

I believe that Indigenous world views help us to appreciate once again the sacred and salvific dimensions within creation. It helps us to avoid reducing reality to "objects", and to be suspicious of any "consumption" of reality. It rather encourages us to interact with creation, and to realistically confront evil in the world (evil stands out in Native South American myths). Moreover, it allows us to go beyond scientific and technical absolutes, that pretend to explain and manipulate everything. This problem of totalitarian explanations and actions have been introduced into modern forms of christianity; they need to be confronted; they need to be resolved by means of a healthy relationship that Indigenous cultures have with the environment.



In terms of eschatology, biblical traditions are like hoping for the impossible and for what is beyond human eyes. Due to the work of the Spirit, humanity participates in the mystery of the Resurrection (see Romans 4, 18; 8, 10-11.) Such a down to earth eschatology operates in the present and in the future. Hope is grounded on God, and is not due to human omnipotence. There is a new creation; there is a Passover of creation.<sup>(9)</sup><sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, writings on eschatology have been concerned about individual salvation or condemnation outside of this world. This is not the key dimension of christian eschatology. Today we are recovering down-to-earth-hope.

Indigenous utopias do not make the individual a divine being, nor do they run away from time and history. Rather, these utopian attitudes are relational. The present context includes what has been lived before as well as the human and cosmic future. This concentration of time (the “now” includes the past and the future) is expressed in ritual and in celebration where there are utopian signs. The goal of an Earth without Evil is a collective and permanent search for a new reality. It is not the product of an omnipotent human being. In the framework of such a collective spiritual and cosmic goal, the modern utopia of progress may be re-understood with proper roots and projects.

It can be said that Indigenous utopias and Christian eschatologies challenge each another. The former points towards a radical transformation, so that a population exhausted by misfortune might find the fullness of life. It thus may be linked to an incarnated eschatology, where life in its fullness is not displaced into another world nor does it foster dualism. On the other hand, our message of hope has Christ the Savior as its foundation; and it acknowledges salvation both as already present and also as not-yet fully realized. It is not something under the ownership of human beings, rather it comes from God who saves us from evil and sin. There is thus something radically new in the Love of God that transforms people, history, creation.

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(9)<sup>7</sup> J. Ruiz de la Peña, *La pascua de la creación. Escatología*, BAC, Madrid, 2000, 30 and 118: “the World begins to be a ‘new creation’ by its transformation”; see also J. B. Libañó and M. C. Bingemer, *Escatología Cristiana*, Paulinas, Madrid, 1985. For an indigenous spiritual understanding of the earth (“Pacha”), see Victor Bascope, *Espiritualidad Originaria en el Pacha Andino*, Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2006.

Furthermore, there is a rediscovery of the many images of God in creation, in the human condition, and in each historical journey. A plurality of religions brings with it a theological pluralism. Indigenous people use several names (or signs) for the sacred and for God. This moves us not to use theological unilateral absolutes when we speak about God, in order to be faithful to the Mystery with its rich manifestations. Another crucial issue is that eschatology -as lived by suffering Indigenous peoples- does not support Western anthropological omnipotence; it is rather closer to a humble Indigenous co-responsibility with divine creation.

### **Conclusion.**

We acknowledge and are nourished by many kinds of mythical and utopian languages among South American peoples. Such languages are most significant in a Christian witness and its theological discourse. Such languages explain the beginnings or foundations of reality, marked by evil, and they also show forth utopias that mean concrete happiness. This is relevant for humanity today when it becomes critical of globalization; since global factors tend to be homogeneous, and to neglect differences.

Theologies of liberation in Latin America and in other parts of the world are benefited by questions raised by Indigenous reality, by their myths, utopias, rituals, ethics. Thus, our discourse is not reduced to its own realm, but it is rather concerned about all efforts towards a full life with its spiritual symbols.

Faith is the matrix of theology: above all it is the faith of common people (Luke 10, 21). We are all concerned about unfolding solidarity within today's world, and this goes hand in hand with the well-being of nature that is God's creation, and with the spiritual qualities of common people who hope on Life.