

[1] *The People's Religions of Latin America:*

A Study in Cultural and Religious Diversity

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Background

This lecture offers a concise and panoramic vision of the challenges past and present defining popular religions today in Latin America. [2] Inclusive in this presentation is the recognition of diversity that mingles Afro-American and Native American traditions with Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic faiths and other forms of spirituality.

As we start of this presentation, we can anticipate a conclusion, hoping to be able to justify it during our reflection: [3] the religion of the people becomes a critical force against a Church that separates religion, religiosity and faith. It becomes a criticism of a Church, that has remained rationalist, dualist, moralist and refuses to enter into the physical world of people immersed in concrete struggles to live a dignified life and simultaneously to survive spiritually.

Critical Focus

While the range of reference [4] here takes in a wide geographical and cultural ambit from Haiti and Cuba's Caribbean Santeria to the gods and beliefs in nature found in Bolivia and other South and Central American nations as well as Mexico, the focus is upon a single question. [5] What does faith mean today as Latin America looks to the future? The answer resides in us and in what is shared between the Global South and the Global North.

Focus of MacLean Scholarship

As a MacLean Chair (2018-2019), I have enjoyed the benefits of teaching and researching theological currents that pertain both to my vocation as a Jesuit scholar and teacher from South America and concurrently as a Catholic priest serving a global congregation. The intersectionality implied by this latter feature of my identity is at the heart of this second MacLean lecture. Thus, the Americas (North and South) merge in my appeal to share what's happening today in Latin America; as such, my appeal recognizes my audience as majority North Americans who are increasingly impacted by the people and the belief systems of the global South. As with all human crises, what we share is the high moral and ethical ground.

Introduction

[6] Even with the pressure of secular forces at work in contemporary culture in some regions, Latin America continues to be fundamentally religious and to confront the great challenge of moving from its existence in a multicultural moment of its history to being in an intercultural socio-cultural phase. This transformation has given rise to new theologies rooted in the exchange between cultures, deepening the integrity within the respective religions that already exist and setting in motion the recognition of both the damaged and ignored "others"; thus, with the increase of the multicultural, there has also developed a profound theological reflection capable of articulating voices whose marvel springs from the Continent's diverse heritage engaging many peoples and their traditions.

Latin America is replete with forms of religiosity and spirituality, as well as horizons and visions of surprising symbolic and ritual practices that take in a wide variety of systems of devotion and belief. [7] When we discern this multi-variegated culture today, it becomes imperative for us to resist falling into a logic premised in simplistic dichotomies. Because of this, when we speak of religion, religiosity, piety, spirituality or popular mysticism, it is necessary to avoid dualisms based in past judgments, biases and prejudice.

In this lecture, we address the people's religions of Latin America in a summary fashion (and consequently incomplete), knowing that it is impossible to offer an all-encompassing vision of the wide and extensive complexity and richness of popular religions today practiced throughout Latin America.

Significance

What is understood by the people's religion in Latin America? [8] Underlying this expression is an extraordinary diversity of religious phenomena that occur in the life of communities large and small across the grand expanses of land that are impacted by a variety of indigenous traditions and cultures, many of which suffered crucial modifications during the colonial and republican eras of Latin American and Caribbean nations. Clearly the effects of more than 500 years of evangelization and colonization involve an ongoing process of cultural and religious hybrids and integrations that continue merging traditions and peoples of many ethnicities with visible impact. Under the weight of past centuries, Latin America's many religions and faith traditions have been extravagantly characterized as Roman Catholic; today, however, we must attest how difficult it is to sustain this claim without acknowledging the details and patterns of former religions and practices. When one speaks of the People's Religions of Latin America, one must invariably refer to diversity of beliefs, religious practices and convictions held by the people who are grounded in the land and nature of the Continent and have taken shape across a vast and defining history.

To speak of the religion of the people, one must, also clarify what is meant by the term, "people." [9] In the tradition on the Latin American Church, the notion of "the people" is very present. Particularly, by way of the Conference of Bishops in Medellin (see below), the rural poor, indigenous communities and marginalized populations have been the communities named by the phrase, "The People." Subsequently the Bishops in Puebla, with nuanced deliberation and without breaking with the concept affirmed in Medellin, the notion of "the People" was widened generally to apply to all sectors of the poor, without distinguishing or disaggregating the groups identified in Medellin, but clearly understanding "The People" as a singular historical experience which extends to the wide horizon of humanity in Latin America struggling with poverty.

Latin American theology [10] speaks of "The Crucified People" as the poor whose religious and spiritual life takes place "beneath the Cross as those who are crucified by history" for their emblematic meaning as Christians. G. Gutierrez asked: Where will the poor sleep? Maintaining the urgency of that question, we can ask: Where do the poor

pray? What is the religion of the poor? What do the poor celebrate? Paraphrasing I. Ellacuria, we are invited to both “bear the brunt of poverty’s reality” and to “bear witness to it.” As such, this religious sense of engagement with the poor has instilled in a new tone into theological reflection on Latin America.

[11] The importance of the religion of the people in Latin America

Immediately after Vatican II, the Conference of Bishops in Medellin (1968) within the context of oppression of “The People” sees popular religion with certain facets of its magical character, at times fatalistic and at other times selfish. Probably because of this, the expression that has been used in the majority of religious and ecclesiastical writings has been “popular religiosity.” [12] The expression, “Popular Religiosity” (it must be recognized) has always carried a pejorative and derogatory semantic connotation.

In the sense asserted by the bishops in Medellin, they clarified that one may loosely use the term “popular religiosity” with reference to local culture but not with regard to Western culture. Thus, popular religion is considered the basis for a “second evangelization” of Latin American populations but not as much in the spirit of dialogue but as much as a pastoral strategy.

Eleven years later, the Conference of Bishops in Puebla (1979) considers that popular religiosity is rooted in the culture of the people, and this is the source of evangelization. At the same time, popular religiosity is also seen as a form of spirituality and, thus, appreciated as the “sense of God, wisdom, prayer and charity,” and criticized as “ignorance” and “the separation between faith and life.” Also, that it has based itself in “the evangelizing force of the people and their popular religion.”¹

[13] The bishops meeting in Santo Domingo (1992) linked popular religiosity with inculturation, or more specifically with the process of inculturation of faith. However, their reflection upon this particular reflection failed to develop a deep connection with the cultures and social contexts of Latin American communities.²

¹ D. IRARRÁZVAL, “Religión popular”, en I. ELLACURÍA, J. SOBRINO (Eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*, t.II, Trotta, Madrid, 1990, 365.

² J. LYNDON, “Aparecida y la religiosidad popular. Cumbre de un desarrollo de reflexión”, en *Medellín*, vol. XXXIII, n.132 (2007), 545-547.

The Conference of Bishops at Aparecida (2007), going further with this theme of culture regarding the necessity of “purification” or of “evangelization” of popular religion, established clearly a more positive tone. [14] Basing itself in the “evangelical richness” contained in popular religion, the Conference validated “popular spirituality” and explicated that one cannot “deprecate” it or consider it solely as “a secondary form of Christian life”, which would thus mean forgetting “the primacy of the action of the Spirit and God’s free initiative of love”; furthermore, that popular spirituality constitutes an “expression of supernatural wisdom”. Thus, it is a “spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly, which is not thereby less spiritual, but is so in another manner”. (DA 262-263).

[15] In recent years it is evident that there has been a religious transformation in Latin America. Many have transitioned from being without affiliation to an explicit practice or have passed from the traditional Christian faith to no affiliation, from being Catholic to being Pentecostal, from new Churches to Catholicism and from this to spiritualities and religions of the indigenous peoples and vice versa. [16] However, religion of the people of Latin America has always been present in all of these trajectories and situations, but now has acquired new and surprising form, motivated perhaps by the great quantity of migrations of diverse peoples and the situations of social crisis and of violence in many parts of the Americas.

People’s Religion Matrix

With reference particularly to the European Luso-Portuguese and Hispanic Matrices, one distinct quality of the popular religion in Latin America is the matrix of indigenous and African-American faith traditions and forms of spirituality.

[17] The *Amerindian Matrix* is a substratum, which pervasively integrates itself into the people’s religions of the continent. The beliefs and religious rites extend themselves throughout Latin America especially –although not solely—in countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay. The religion of the people today in Latin America cannot be conceived as at the margin of the substratum and as an Amerindian component in the majority of the nations, including countries in which the indigenous population is in the minority, such as Brazil. For instance, the importance of

the presence of the Mapuche indigenous people in Chile and the increasing awareness of the influence of this culture and religion in many popular religious practices of the population as a whole, beyond the Mapuche enclaves is very eloquent.

In general, the symbolic universes of the Amerindian matrix, emphasize a sense of community and the importance of ethics, the devotion to ancestors as well to spirits with powers both splendid and ruinous, the centrality of Mother Earth (*Pachamama*) in celebrations that have to do with the cycle of life and the agrarian world, and have given rise to a process of unfiltered assumptions and reinterpretations of Christianity on the basis of these cultural and religious values.³

[18] The *African-American Matrix* is especially prevalent and extensive in many regions of Brazil, the northern regions of South America and throughout the Caribbean. African-American religion of the people carries the indelible signs of slavery. Years of suffering exclusion and contempt from colonialist societies gave rise to religious practices and ethics focused upon liberation. The trance and the experience of being possessed by spirits present become indicative of the values of integration into the larger world and dignity in society of which slavery has robbed African heritage peoples in the Americas. Beliefs in Orixas and Loas certainly have entered into a symbiotic relationship with Christian figures and have extended notably into the rituals and religious practices of Brazil and the Caribbean. All of these popular religious practices exist in relation to processes of healing and affirmation of the black African identity as a people in solidarity, even though today so many of the Candomblé religion (a faith tradition that African slaves brought to Brazil), the Umbanda (also typically a Black Brazilian religion, synthesized from people's awareness of their Blackness in the first part of the Twentieth Century), and Voodoo (whose presence can be witnessed throughout the Caribbean) do not affect only Black populations but extend to the white and indigenous peoples of Latin America.⁴

³Cf. D. IRARRÁZVAL, *op.cit.*, 351.

⁴ Cf. D. IRARRÁZVAL, *op.cit.*, 351; M. PEREIRA GOMES, *Antropologia*, Editora contexto, São Paulo, 2014, 141-144.

Amerindian Religions

[19] Regarding Amerindian religions, an endless web of theories based in superstition and animism has persisted. From their first contacts with Christian missionaries, indigenous religions have been seen through a series of pejorative assumptions, such as infantilism, pre-logical mentality, and primitivism.⁵ Without doubt, this attitude cannot be distinguished from judgments about traditional African religions or about the aboriginal religions on other parts of the planet. In order to understand and appreciate the religion of the people of Latin America, one must know the religions of Amerindian peoples and liberate oneself from the prejudices about them.⁶

It would be sorely mistaken to try to form a synthesis here of the religions of Amerindian peoples. However, it is valuable to revisit some of the elements that frequently appear in the majority of these faith traditions. For this purpose, we will use the perspective that we know best: the Andean.

As has happened with the greater majority of Amerindian religions, the contemporary Andean religion has become the result of a symbiotic relation between Christianity and indigenous religious traditions. The majority of Quechuans and Aymarans from the Andes consider themselves Christian Catholics or Evangelical and simultaneously live with the persistent feeling for their Andean religion.

[20] *Andean religion* over the course of history has creatively modeled (or shaped) Christianity from the cultural and religious experience of the ancestral beliefs, resulting in a form of Andean Christianity that many regard as originating in a hybrid or mestizo reality. For example, Andean peoples celebrate their patron saints and payment of the Pachamama (or Earth deity) as a routine religious practice and it would be inconceivable for them to make a separation between one and the other. Thus, the experience becomes a single, unique immersion whose continuity is seamless and without nuances that can be distinguished respectively as indigenous or Christian.

⁵ Cf. L. SULLIVAN, *Incanchu's Drum*. An orientation to Meaning in South American Religions, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1990, 2-3.

⁶ Cf. M. HURTADO, "Hacer teología en medio de los pueblos originarios", en *Yachay*, Año 34, n° 66 (2017), 59-78.

Even though the celebration of the patron saint differs from place to place, depending on the saint, the Andean people do not take the patron saint as much as model for their lives, indeed in many cases they know very few details of the saint's life, but they take their patron as a form of mediation between God and the people, therefore, bringing God much closer to the human experience of the Andes. Stories about the saints are transmitted orally and frequently metamorphosize into myths integrating within their narrative surprising stories that have been creatively formulated, so much so that these folk hagiographies contemporaneously reenact their moral within the value system of the "*ayllu*" or community.

[21] In the Andean context, the figure of Jesus Christ, whose life is the primary focus of Christianity also plays a role in indigenous spirituality, but His centrality has been reframed according to Amerindian categories that invite us to re-think Jesus as being more connected with Mother Earth and as having a strong relation to the cycles and practices commemorating fertility in the community. Such is the case with el Señor de Qollariti in Peru and el Señor de Santa Vera Cruz in Bolivia. Therefore, a Christological reflection in that context opens to become enriched and interpreted by the faith and religion of the people.

Both baptism and Christian marriage, fully accepted by the inhabitants of the Andes, have undergone a process of remodeling (or re-shaping). From the Andean religious experience, both sacraments are reinterpreted according to their meaning and within their faith context.⁷ In this way there is a kind of amplification of feeling and generation of unprecedented relationships with sponsors and patrons, beyond the traditional spiritual realm.

Traditional Popular Religiosity

One of Latin America's best-known unifying characteristics is its traditional, "popular religiosity". [22] Much has been written about it, and, in fact, it finds many parallels with the popular religiosity in Spain and in other European countries, especially the religiosity that is present in the Marian shrines, although it is clear that the religiosity of the people

⁷ Cf. M. MARZAL, "The Religion of the Andean Quechua in Southern Peru" en M. MARZAL, E. MAURER, X. ALBÓ, B. MELIÁ, *The Indian Face of God in Latin America*, Orbis Books, New York, 1996, 101-102.

does not just remain solely within the margins of Christianity; it should be noted that it is present in religions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

[23] One aspect of this religiosity that stands out is that the “sacramentals” are more popular than the actual ecclesiastical sacraments of the Church. Known as the “sacraments of the poor”, these popular traditions include: holy water and salt; the candles and the ashes, the images of saints and the processions; the branches and the palms; the flowers and blessings of anything and everything that can be imagined, especially the blessing of the fruits of the earth; as well as the crèches of the families and the blessing of the images of the Child Jesus in the Church during Christmas and the nativity season; the journey to the Cross, especially those in which a procession is supposed during Holy Week to be reaching the tops of the hills, often accompanied by a procession to the holy sepulcher on Good Friday, the Christmas inns, the blessing of scapulars and other objects including trucks and automobiles, musical instruments, examination notes, and computers.

[24] Traditional Christian popular religiosity in Latin America is celebrated through the senses of the people, passes through their skin and is linked to the carnal, physical, visceral dimensions of human experience. Thus, what becomes apparent is that Christianity is a religion of incarnation and that “flesh is the axis of salvation.”⁸ It is through the corporeality of the rituals that the people express their faith in God through their tactile sense of community, and that salvation reveals itself through sentient experience, --the body becomes the historical germ of salvation, since the flesh is the instrument of salvation.

In traditional popular Latino religiosity, [25] it is necessary to reserve a special place for devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. The list would be too long here to innumerate the Marian shrines and invocations throughout Latin America. The centrality of Marian devotion in the religion of the people of Latin America is a defining feature of identity for families, communities, cultural groups and thus Mary emerges as an icon in indigenous languages and legends as well as invocations and her face has assumed an intimate meaning as a reflection of the lives of poor people. The examples are many. From the

⁸ «*Caro salutis est cardo*», Tertullian expression in *De carnis resurrectione*, 8,3: PL 2,806.

Sanctuary of Guadalupe in Mexico to Luján in Argentina, passing through Chiquinquirá in Colombia to that of Copacabana in Bolivia and Aparecida in Brazil, Mary merges and conflates with the history of suffering and hope of people across the Americas. The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe in Mexico, the Black Virgin of Los Angeles de Atocha in Montalbán, Venezuela, the Regla de Cuba, the Negrita de Cartago in Costa Rica, the Aparecida in Brazil and the Catamarca and Itati in Argentina are all women of color and reflect the hybrid or mestizo identity, race, racial history and the economic and social history of the scenes where their story continues to be told with an indistinguishable form the land and the places and communities for whom they are named.

Some challenges and tasks

a. Towards a People's Theology of Interculturality

[26] Interculturality is both an attitude and a form of cultural work. It is an attitude in the reception of the other in which the possibility of encounter is born from and becomes an experience of coexistence. It is work in as much as it is a collective and constant search for the truth that the Latin American people, in their everyday lives, seek to realize. Regarding its theological implications, interculturality supposes a network of connections between cultural and religious traditions of the other and also involves a series of detachments from the intolerance and rigid certainties of one's cultural and religious orientation. The theology of interculturality is a path of critical dialogue along the pathways suggested by the cultures and religions practiced in parallel by the people(s). It has never been a solitary path but has always been traveled by a weaving back and forth between diverse cultures and religions that have shared the same historical itineraries that require mutual recognition so that the Latin American people do not confront each other but find themselves in their diversity and enrichment via a reciprocally defined journey.

The religion of the people in Latin America is a space whose sacredness is made possible by the understanding of diversity as an enrichment, renouncing the puritanical dynamics of some Christian theologians who consider that Christianity has been stained by the symbiotic and hybrid processes. This puritanical perspective has been present in Latin American theology in a variety of expressions, including those that seem innocuous when talking about "evangelizing popular religiosity," or correcting "deviations within popular

piety" or taking into account those "elements" that are judged to be "syncretic" and therefore "not always fully evangelized" in the religiosity of the people.

b. People's Religion as Theological Place (Locus)

[27] Since many times popular religiosity or the religion of the people is linked to the magical and syncretic, to the superstitious and irrational, contrary to what one might think, this is a theological locus. Allowing itself to be saturated by the religion of the people, contemporary theological reflection can become relevant and fruitful, since its starting point will be life itself, the religious practices and devotions of the men and women of this current time.

Because God's presence is assumed and occupies a crucial place in the religion of the people, the people's religion becomes a space where spirituality can be found and encountered. If it is true that revelation is historical and that we find God in cultural and religious mediations, then the theological reflection is also the exploration of the faith and religion of the people. To unravel theologically the wisdom about religious practice and insight of people is an urgent task in contemporary Latin American societies. [28] The religion of the people is the place where the work of the religious intellect and the intelligence of the faith meet and combine.

c. Emerging popular Devotional Practices

[29] Although there is a record of popular devotions since the mid-nineteenth century, during the last 50 years; nonetheless, a surprising variety of "popular saints" have emerged from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. They are also known by a variety of names such as "folk Saints", "miraculous souls", "profane saints", "almitas", "animas", "the miraculous dead", "pagan saints", "informal saints" or "unofficial saints".

These popular saints are deceased people, considered to have miraculous powers and who have become the objects of devotion and worship of a considerable number of people. None of these "popular saints" has been canonized nor enjoyed official recognition by the Catholic Church. Normally these popular saints have experienced a tragic death, and this often works as a catalyst for devotion: [30] a woman murdered in the Argentinian pampas and who after dying has been able to breastfeed the child she carried (La Difunta Correa,

in the Province of San Juan, Argentina), a young pregnant woman murdered by her boyfriend (Shirley in Cochabamba, Bolivia), an older sister who dies to save the lives of her brothers (Euricléia, in Acre, Brazil), a 16 year old girl who dies to preserve her virginity before the attempted rape of police (Sarita Colonia, in Callao, Peru), etc.

Some of these popular saints have wide reach and an enormous number of devotees; [31] such is the case of Difunta Correa in Argentina and Fidencio, a boy in Mexico, whose cults have crossed national borders. However, the vast majority of these village devotions are limited to local or regional spheres. For example, in the valleys of Cochabamba, Bolivia, you can count at least a dozen popular saints and large crowds of devotees. In fact, in each Latin American country it is possible to identify a considerable number of popular saints.

The position of one Catholic theologian, who is less prone to cultural dialogue, considers that "behind all these favors that 'supposedly' are granted to devotees is the devil's hand, which seeks to enslave people."⁹ No doubt this extreme position does not demonstrate a high level of theological reflection that concerns itself with issues of how to speak about God and belief systems in the midst of people who feel disenchanted by the formal Church or the deep crisis of faith that has pervaded many environments.

Thus, theological reflection in Latin America needs to show a vigorous interest in popular saints and fulfills its pastoral purpose by learning and listening to the voice of the marginalized, the vulnerable and those who have been massacred by history. This means discerning and respecting the practice of faith in frequently ambiguous and violent religious contexts. Certainly, it cannot be the intention of the Christian faith to contribute to the hopelessness occasioned by religious fanaticism of some Christians who show intolerance and contempt towards diversity. The popular saints and their countless devotees in Latin America are an invitation to learn to pray to God with hope in the midst of the ruins of contemporary societies in which we live in Latin America. There is a need to start from the bottom, start from below, from the back of the history, from the other side of history and from below economically and socially.

⁹ J. FERNÁNDEZ, "La Iglesia católica prohíbe oficiar misas y expresa su desacuerdo", en *Opinión*, Cochabamba, Informe Especial (27 de marzo de 2016), 3.

[32] What do emerging popular devotions teach us? If in the religion of the people we initiate a consistent search for "Gospel figures", then it is possible to identify experiences of solidarity, exercise of compassion and persistence, determination and stubbornness of the faith of the poor in the midst of religious ambiguity that pervades contemporary societies in an array of forms and permutations. This theological exercise of finding "Gospel figures" in ambiguous religious contexts can feed the weakened body of an agonized humanity, especially in places of extreme violence where uncertainty and doubt are debilitating to the human spirit.

Conclusion

When we talk about the religion of the people, we necessarily touch the culture of the people, their personal searches, the sense of their own being, their identity, their anxieties and fears, their desires and their subjectivity. As E. Dussel has proclaimed, "the phenomenon of popular religiosity must be framed within that of popular culture."¹⁰ If this is true, then real access to Latin American popular culture cannot be made outside of the internal knowledge of the people's religion. This intimate space plays the fundamental role of the threshold of Latin American popular thought and is a crucial and defining locus for theological reflection.

The main actors of the people's religion are the poor, the abject people in the cities and in the countryside, in the looming urban margins, as well as in the jungles and in the mountains. The poor people and their religion, without implying any intention of idealizing them, have the capacity and the resilience to become both the place to discern the signs of the times and the scene through whose communities God passes in the history of Latin America. Outside of popular religion, access to the faith as practiced by the poor in Latin America, there simply is no other way to genuine, authentic reflection that connects with the lives of the people. There are theoretical narratives that remain on the sidelines and distance their judgments from the people; frequently their conclusions lead to judgments inferring the non-existence of faith and/or an absence of Christianity, regardless of the encounter and exchange that Christianity has undergone in its

¹⁰ E. DUSSEL "Religiosidad Popular Latinoamericana (hipótesis fundamentales)", en *Cristianismo y Sociedad* 88 (1986), 103.

transformative story of exchange with the religions and cultures of the Latin American Continent.

[33] Finally, the religion of the people becomes a critical force against a Church that separates religion, religiosity and faith. It becomes a criticism of a Church, that has remained rationalist, dualist, moralist and refuses to enter into the physical world of people immersed in concrete struggles in order to live a dignified life and simultaneously to survive spiritually. The criticisms generated by the Westernized, clerical, macho, patriarchal and hierarchical Church are devoid of the symbolic and ecological sensitivity that people of the 21st Century have expressed as their reality. The criticism sponsored by a Church that fails to respect cultures and religions, especially of Amerindian and African-American religions, is ultimately the arcane product of a Church that has frozen itself in the past, and like the ice that has never been seen or felt in equatorial climates, rapidly dissolves and loses substance.

[34] I would like to thank **John Lavin** for his help on the English version of this lecture and for our conversations about the future of Latin America.