The Church and Indigenous Cultures: Beyond the Violent Encounter with «Modernity»¹

MICHÉL ANDRAOS
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

RESUMEN El Profesor Dr. Michel Andraos inauguró el primer symposium de diálogo intercultural- interreligioso con la ponencia Caminos para una teología descolonizadora de reconciliación con los pueblos originarios. El profesor Andraos basó su ponencia en su artículo en inglés que está a continuación. Este es un resumen de las ideas principales que se expusieron en la conferencia. El encuentro colonial violento de la Cristiandad occidental con los pueblos indígenas de las Américas ha modelado la experiencia de modernidad de Latinoamérica y durante estas últimas décadas, luego de un arduo camino común recorrido entre de encuentros y desencuentros, han surgido espacios de diálogo que abordan la verdad del pasado y los desafíos de futuro. Son estos pasos de acercamiento los que permiten la existencia de espacios comunes que abren la esperanza de un proceso de reconciliación permanente y progresivo. En este desafío no quedan exentas las iglesias del continente pues el reto del proceso de reconciliación con los pueblos originarios también desafía la historia y misión de ellas independientes de su confesión. Por tanto, el compromiso de diálogo intercultural e interreligioso mutuo tomado con responsabi-
lidad desde el presente se hace imperativo para interpretar la propia historia y el servicio de la evangelización propio de su misión en todo tiempo y en cada lugar donde se encuentra. Estos procesos de reconciliación pueden tener consecuencias significativas para las iglesias en relación a sus estructuras eclesiales, teología de la misión y evangelización, y la teología de otras religiones. Mientras en algunas iglesias estos procesos han transformado radicalmente sus estructuras y sus paradigmas teológicos, muchas iglesias aún no han respondido adecuadamente a este desafío de transformar los métodos coloniales de teología y práctica pastoral que ya dejaron de ser aceptables para los pueblos originarios. Por tanto, existe una necesidad urgente por una teología y por prácticas pastorales descolonizadoras, lo cual deber ser un elemento integral de los procesos de diálogo y reconciliación. A la luz del estudio de una experiencia positiva de diálogo en la diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas Chiapas en México y usando ejemplos de otras experiencias, esta presentación explorará algunas posibles aproximaciones para pensar en una teología y ministerio pastoral descolonizador.

Introduction

This chapter concerns church and culture, and will focus mainly on some recent developments in the cultural encounter between the church and indigenous peoples within the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. The pastoral practice of this local church since the 1970s, I believe, presents an alternative to the dominant model of mission theology that was the product of the colonial, violent cultural encounter of Western Christianity and indigenous peoples. This violent encounter, which characterized most indigenous peoples’ experience of modernity, is still part of their lived reality in many parts of the world. Their cultures have been demonized and excluded from the process of constructing the new society, civilization and church.

The main reason for my choice to write on this topic as part of
this collection in honor of Lee Cormie is that I began this research under Lee’s direction in the mid 1990s when I started writing my doctoral dissertation. My research continued since, and my thinking on this topic has evolved in a variety of new directions, which helped me connect the struggle of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas to other similar struggles around the world. I am more convinced today than when I began my research of the relevance of this case study and its potential contribution to current debates on church and culture, as I will explain in more detail below. The story I tell here is one of interaction between «faith, theology and concrete, historical hope,» to use one of Lee’s cherished theological preoccupations. For the most part, this story is still untold, under-studied, and marginalized in the global church.

The first part of this article will examine the stages and context of the developments of an emerging mission theology through exploring the evolving personal experience and theological perspectives of Samuel Ruiz García, bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal between 1960 and 2000. Ruiz’s personal transformation story and his impressive pastoral and theological contributions are a witness to an era of profound change and a movement of hope in the church. The second part will look at some new intercultural experiences of this local church and their potential contribution to the universal church and to current debates on culture as we advance into the 21st century.

An Emerging Paradigm of Mission Theology in Latin America

A new mission theology emerged in many parts of Latin America around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the meeting of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM II) in Medellín, Colombia (1968). The new theology challenged the old colonial models of mission that were operative in the church for several centuries. Wherever the gospel was proclaimed to indigenous people in the «New World,» notes Bishop Ruiz, with it came a new culture, namely the Western culture, and it was im-
posed on people as the only way of living the Christian faith. This imposition, therefore, created a real and visible cultural and religious schizophrenia with obvious symptoms among all the Native peoples in the continent. We realized that their marginalization, poverty and misery were not the result of their free choice but rather were the result of a process in which we are involved and which we need to rethink.

A different approach to missionary work among indigenous peoples that began in the 1970s in dioceses such as San Cristóbal, among other places, informed and shaped a new mission theology. One of the key factors that contributed to this development is the interaction of some missionaries and pastoral leaders, including Ruiz, who was a new bishop then, with the anthropological movement at that time. This anthropological movement critiqued the Eurocentric missionary work of the church in Latin America and developed an alternative anthropology in support of the liberation of indigenous peoples. The interaction between pastoral workers and anthropologists from this movement gave an impetus for the development of a new mission theology. Tracing in the following paragraphs the stages and context of the radical transformation of Ruiz’s missionary approach, particularly as a result of his new understanding of the cultures of indigenous peoples, helps us better understand the significance of this new relationship between the church and local indigenous communities.

«When I came [to Chiapas],» recounted Bishop Ruiz, «I saw the churches full of Indians, but it was only later that I realized the sad reality of these people which provoked my conversion.» «My eyes were open», he said, «but I was sleeping.»

I traveled through villages where bosses were scourging debt-slaves who did not want to work more than eight hours a day, but all I saw were old churches and old women praying. «Such good people», I said to myself, not noticing that these good people were victims of cruel oppression.

This blindness to social realities did not last very long. A few
years later, the new bishop began to ask himself a fundamental question: What has the church been doing during all these years of evangelization, if the indigenous communities continue to be marginalized the same way as in colonial times?

I will turn now to some of Bishop Ruiz’s writings in the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to examine some of the key theological turning points that influenced the future development of his theology and pastoral ministry. One of the earliest available theological works by Bishop Ruiz is a paper that he presented at the Medellín meeting. This paper comprises a critique of the missionary work of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the church’s pastoral approach to indigenous peoples and their cultures.

On the topic of the presence of the Catholic Church in Latin America in general, Bishop Ruiz pointed out that «we must put an end to the myth that Latin America is a Catholic continent. If the Church is a ‘community of faith, hope and charity,’ this vision is not carried out in Latin America.» He pointed to several areas, including religion and culture, where he saw a juxtaposition of opposing social realities.

One aspect of his paper that is particularly pertinent to this essay is his analysis of the «Indian situation.» Indigenous peoples, he argued, are marginalized at all levels. Generally, churches in their pastoral work either support their total integration, which is assumed to mean the death of their culture, or they go to the other extreme, that is, «promote a charitable and welfare-type assistance which does not take into consideration marginality and underdevelopment, and which does not see the necessity of basing this help on Indian values, cultures, and ways of thinking.» The paper also pointed out that the present ways of evangelization were destroying indigenous cultures.

In his subsequent pastoral work and theological reflections, Bishop Ruiz continued to give special attention to the areas of faith, evangelization, and cultures. Since the early 1970s, he beca-
me convinced that divine salvific work is present in other cultures, and that it is necessary for the church to enter into honest dialogue with other peoples and their cultures in order to discover and learn about this divine presence. He began, then, to consider this dialogue as an essential part of the missionary work of the church. In his view, this was the important contribution of the Vatican II document Ad Gentes, and he had no illusion concerning the difficulty of this task. «The missionary church,» he argued, is facing a delicate and difficult work: the study and accurate, positive and sympathetic knowledge of non-Christian religions. The church has to see in these religions a divine element and a presence of God (Vatican II, Ad Gentes, 9 b et 11 b); and more so, to know that the Word of God, before he became flesh in order to save and gather up all things in himself, was already in the world, as the «true light that enlightens every man» (Jn 1, 9 and Gaudium et Spes, 57).

According to Bishop Ruiz, there are not two parallel histories in the world, one sacred and one profane. He learned from his work with indigenous communities that God’s work is revealed in the history of all peoples and that God’s Spirit is present in all cultures—the Spirit was at work in the world before Christ. In Ruiz’s view, this is an important theological foundation for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. Making reference to Ad Gentes, Gaudium et Spes, and to the letter to the Ephesians, he asserted:

If there is only one history of salvation and this history includes all peoples of all times, then God has already acted and is still acting today in all cultures. The presence of God, and the presence of the Word (the seeds of the Divine Word) appear in the multiple cultural riches and values that are rays of the supreme Truth (Ad Gentes, 9 b, 11 b; Nostra Æetate, 2 b; Gaudium et Spes, 38). These values that prepare the way for the gospel, which are either implicitly salvific, ascetic or mystical, were present prior to the preaching of the gospel (Ad Gentes, 3 a; 18 b; Gaudium et Spes, 92 d).

Vatican II, notes Bishop Ruiz, affirmed these theological principles and opened the way for a genuine religious and cultural
dialogue. The church is called to act on this by engaging in dialogue with other cultures to discover their religious and spiritual richness. Part of the church’s work of evangelization, then, insisted Ruiz, is to dialogue with cultures and learn about God’s salvific presence in them. In this sense, the church is called to be a servant to the world, and not to act as its master by imposing a foreign culture on other peoples. These aspects of a theology of history and a theology of culture have been clear in Ruiz’s mind since the early 1970s. They provided a theological foundation that guided and supported his pastoral practice.

It is important to clarify what Ruiz means by «culture» in order to understand the significance of the above claims. Culture, according to him, is the totality of expressions that members of a determined ethnic group formulate in their relationship to the transcendent, to each other, and to their physical environment. He compares culture to the dignity of the human person: culture should be respected in the same way the individual human dignity should be respected. In other words, cultural symbols represent the collective dignity of a people. Following from this, Bishop Ruiz asserts that culture is sacred and that its destruction can never be justified. Cultural elements should never be changed by external agents (e.g., missionaries) without the consensus of the community—even if the changes are minor. Learning to understand and respect another culture is the cross of the missionary, he added.

«What does it mean, then, to evangelize?» asked Bishop Ruiz. «If there is only one history,» he asserted, «it is logical to conclude that God’s work of salvation has always been active in the bosom of each culture.» To evangelize, then, is to discover and affirm this reality. Bishop Ruiz identifies three stages of evangelization: (1) to understand and believe in this salvific presence of God in history; (2) to be personally incarnated in a culture through an authentic sharing of peoples’ experience; and (3) to affirm through internal proper cultural expressions with the community the salvific work of God in its history.
Since the early 1970s, Bishop Ruiz, among many others, concluded that the missionary work of the church among indigenous communities was destroying their cultures in the name of the gospel. Destroying a people’s culture is trampling on their dignity and pride, and humiliating them as a people. This kind of missionary work is not acceptable according to the gospel message and to Christian tradition as emphasized by Vatican II and Medellín. «The missionary may only stay,» asserted Bishop Ruiz, «on the condition of developing pastoral action which promotes the liberation of the people. But that will be something totally different from what is understood as missionary work now.» A new accent emerged in the development of his theology: liberation of the people is integral and it includes the liberation of their culture.

A second key theme that developed in his theology in the 1970s is the salvific work of God in concrete history. This theme is linked to the social role of the church, inculturation and incarnation of the gospel message. The incarnation of the church in a specific culture, he affirms, is also an incarnation in a specific historic process here and now. The purpose of this incarnation is to transform history and make it a history of salvation. «The church,» notes Bishop Ruiz, «does not have as a goal the creation of a universal mono-culture.» This means for the church, he explains, a concrete historic contextual commitment in an alternative process to transform social reality. The Church, he asserts, should not be behind history, but rather moving it ahead.

The story of Ruiz’s transformation outlined above is symbolic of a significant historic moment of cultural change in the church and the world at large. He is a Vatican II and a Medellín bishop who was both transformed by these events and made a difference by becoming a key player in transforming a diocesan pastoral process and mission theology in the Latin American church. The importance of Ruiz’s transformation story is not only that he became an important bishop who made a difference, but that he also became a model of pastoral leadership in the church, particularly
in relation to indigenous peoples. In the following section, I will focus on some areas of transformation in the Diocese of San Cristóbal that are also the result of a cultural dialogue between the local church and indigenous peoples.

**Toward the 21st Century**

In *The Invention of the Americas*, Enrique Dussel notes:

> By controlling, conquering, and violating the Other, Europe defined itself as discoverer, conquistador, and colonizer of an alterity likewise constitutive of modernity. Europe never discovered (descubierto) this Other as Other but covered (encubierto) the Other as part of the Same: i.e., Europe. Modernity dawned in 1492 and with it the myth of a special kind of sacrificial violence which eventually eclipsed whatever was non-European.

What was eclipsed during the last 500 hundred years has been resisting and irrupting again and again, as Dussel notes in the epigraph of this article. On January 1, 1994, using again an example from Chiapas, the Zapatistas made known to the whole world their loud cry: «Today We Say Enough is Enough!» «We are a product of 500 years of struggle,» they said and describe their historical resistance and ongoing struggle for justice against slavery and a sequence of imperial powers, which they consider the main cause of their misery.

Similar voices of protest were also echoed in several diocesan pastoral documents. In 1993, one year before the Zapatista uprising, the Diocese of San Cristóbal had issued a pastoral letter, *En Esta Hora de Gracia* (In this Hour of Grace), which was collectively prepared by the pastoral agents of the diocese, including many indigenous representatives. The letter outlined the history of the struggle of indigenous peoples and the main stages of four decades of diocesan pastoral work, which, despite the efforts of solidarity, failed to bring any significant systemic change that would improve the miserable social, economic and cultural situation of these communities. The document describes the atrocities committed
against the indigenous communities and argues that «in the name of modernization, globalization and free trade, these communities were being deprived of land, justice, education, democracy and the basic conditions needed for living a decent life. Their economic survival has become impossible.»

From the midst of these irruptions of struggle and protest new alternative movements are emerging, both in civil society and the church, which are forcing a dialogue in order to transform the old relations created by centuries-old patterns of cultural violence. The San Andrés Accords of peace that focus mainly on indigenous rights and culture, which were signed by the government of Mexico and the Zapatistas in February of 1996, are one of the best expressions of cultural dialogue for peace between the indigenous peoples of Mexico and the rest of the country. According to Navarro and Herrera, this agreement, which is the result of two years of deliberations between the two parties that included wide and intensive consultations of the indigenous communities and civil society, has as its «central proposal the end of inequality, discrimination, exploitation and political exclusion of indigenous peoples.»

For the indigenous communities, the proposal their representatives presented at San Andrés became an impetus for a social movement for building a new society and new cultural relations with the rest of the world. This movement evolves mainly around strengthening indigenous autonomy and the institutional structures that sustain it in areas such as education, healthcare, economy and culture. Discussing in detail the progress and challenges of this new social project is outside the scope of this article. However, it suffices here to say that in many indigenous societies, in the Americas and other places, the waves of cultural protests, which irrupted over the past decades, are producing several alternative movements that challenge modernity’s exclusion and violence and are opening new horizons for thinking about the possibility of another world in which there is room for all peoples, as one often hears reiterated in Chiapas and elsewhere.
In terms of the Catholic Church in Chiapas, the transformation of the old cultural relations is taking place at many levels. I will mention only two areas of relevance to our topic, which in my opinion also have implications for the wider church. The first area is the development of the concept and practice of Iglesia autóctona (autochthonous church); and the second area is the emergent teología india (Indian theology). A few comments on each area are in order.

«Iglesia autóctona» is the term used in the Diocese of San Cristóbal to describe the ecclesial communities that have a distinct indigenous cultural character and organizational structure for pastoral service and leadership. The documents of the III Diocesan Synod (1995-1999) define in the first section Iglesia autóctona as «a church that is rooted in the place where it is located, that realizes itself and develops assuming the local culture, and not a church that comes from outside, that belongs to another culture, and that only makes external adaptations.» This achievement is the result of a long and arduous cultural dialogue between the indigenous communities and the hierarchy of the local church. The diocese is now committed to promoting this pastoral process and has integrated it in its short term and long term pastoral plan.

The second area is the emergent movement of teología india, which is still in its initial stages. This movement is also the result of an intercultural theological dialogue between the indigenous communities and their theologians, on the one side, and Western Christian faith and theology represented by the church hierarchy and its theologians, on the other. What we mean by teología india, notes indigenous theologian Pedro Gutiérrez Jiménez, is the set of religious experiences and knowledge that we Indian peoples possess and with which we explain our experience of faith, our harmonious [relationships] with others and with all of the cosmos.... These theologies have accompanied our origin and our civilization as peoples, have generated and fed our resistance against projects of conquest and colonization, and have accompanied today our
resistance against the neoliberal system and fed our proposal of a more human and divine society for all. Our theologies seek to strengthen our heart so that we as peoples do not shrivel away under the power of the system of death.

Rethinking the structure of the local church in order to fully include the cultural «Other,» in this case the indigenous, and making room for more than one cultural theology are only two among many other initiatives that are the result of a new intercultural dialogue between the indigenous communities and the local church that has just begun. There are many challenges on the path of this new intercultural dialogue, but the determination of the indigenous communities and their leadership is very strong and is rooted in a broader cultural and historical movement of change, which seems to be irreversible.

Ricardo Robles, a Jesuit theologian who worked and lived for several years with the indigenous peoples of Mexico, suggests that the process that began in Chiapas since the 1960s gave an impulse to creative theological insights and profound inter-religious dialogue about God and history reaching far beyond Chiapas. A broad movement emerged from this pastoral process that has awakened the spirit of other indigenous peoples in Mexico, won their support, and united their efforts. This, asserts Robles, nurtured the capacity of many indigenous groups to proudly and confidently say since the 1990s «We are equal, therefore we have the right to be different.»

**Conclusion**

The current debates on the clash of cultures, religions and civilizations at a global scale, raise central questions to the religions of the world and all of humanity about how to relate to the cultural and religious «Other,» both within the same society (and church), and between states, regions and continents. The violent cultural pattern created as a result of the encounter with European modernity certainly cannot continue. It has been a main obstacle to world
peace and has to change. The story of the emergent intercultural dialogue that has just begun between a local church and indigenous peoples hopefully opens a horizon of hope for imagining a new relationship beyond this violent encounter.

I began this essay by mentioning one of Lee Cormie’s cherished theological questions that inspired this writing, namely, the question of faith, theology and concrete, historical hope. I would also like to end by mentioning what for me has been a profound theological insight I learned from Lee: reading the signs of the times, or in his words, «reading the movements of the Spirit in history.» In my opinion, one of Lee’s important assertions is that theology’s main contribution is to name the old and new experiences of the Spirit in history and recognize the genuine signs of hope for the world in these movements of resistance and hope for another, better world. The story in this chapter is one of many episodes of resistance and hope that another world is possible.