

Mexico and its popular religious tradition

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Latin America has little to celebrate during the Quincentennial of the discovery of America but, inexorably, it should come to terms with the fact that its present configuration: -complex, multiform, mestizo and promising, does derive from that irreversible event, the Conquest. The mere fact of coming to terms with this represents something of a balancing of accounts with actors from the past and something of peace making with itself. Both free the collective memory, preparing it to face the future, its own future.

Any conquest is annihilating, be it from physical extermination or from destroying a people's culture. The conquistador can only fully carry out his aims by annihilating the vanquished, reducing them to nothing. Therefore, the first measure of resistance by the vanquished is to survive, both physically and culturally. That is why the vanquished people's resistance and creativity is of such great importance. It is within that framework that the conquistadors and their victims recreate and reconstruct their very being, reediting their identity within a dialectic into which the processes of conquest and colonization have inscribed them.

Mexican popular Catholicism has been, among other things, a cultural space in which a new (Christian) identity has crystallized for the peoples of Mexico and a number of

mechanisms to resist the dominant culture have been articulated, both in its religious (Official Church), and its civil version.

The following presents some ideas concerning this popular process of creative and autonomous participation in preserving the peoples' collective memory and in organizing their lives.

A concept and a hypothesis

In a strict sense, what we understand by popular Catholicism is the systematic way in which marginal sectors and cultures of each era have reinterpreted and appropriated, though not exclusively, some fundamental aspects of Christianity. Those reinterpretations and appropriations have been developed and functionally systematized based on the culture and social practices of the poor.

One of the fundamental hypotheses that has served us as a stimulus throughout the 15 years we have been studying these phenomena is that, given the fact popular Catholicism has a poor and devout people as its prime historical subject, it expresses, in form and content, the utopia of an alternative social and religious order.

Insofar as the word poor is concerned, popular Catholicism projects a different social order in its own codes, one more just and humane. Concerning the word Christian, it voices a permanent longing for a church that is less clerical and more secular, in which lay people can participate in managing religious goods.

In myths, in legends, in narrative theology in which people come to a realization of their experience and religious tradition, in the autonomous organization with which it directs its own rituals, we have found abundant testimony of this permanent list of complaints which popular Catholic sectors keep alive.

A Christianity of conquest

As in all of the Americas, the Gospel arrived in Mexico in an act of conquest and violence. For us, the recognition of this entry is not merely anecdotal. We believe that one of the main interpretative keys of the relationship that Christianity established with Mexico's indigenous population derives from the asymmetrical relations established between conquistador-conquered and evangelizer-evangelized.

Popular religion has permitted the predominantly poor and indigenous to survive and resist the dominant culture and religion brought by Spanish friars some 500 years ago.

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Moctezuma meets Cortés in a modern Mexican mural.

From the arrival of the Franciscans (1524), Dominicans (1526) and Augustines (1533) in New Spain, the conflict surrounding the Church's plans in the conquered territories grew virulent.

Cortés wanted a "Church of friars," not of bishops. Among those friars, the Franciscans clearly intended an "Indian Church," based on the simplicity and poverty of native Mexicans, guided by Franciscans and inspired in the millenarian ideas of Gioacchino di Fiore, not a "Spanish Church in the Indies."

The Franciscans and Augustines were closest to the indigenous Mexican reality, with greater sensitivity to and, at times, admiration for their cultures. Religious practices were, of course, what attracted their attention the most. Though it is true that until the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the overriding intent was to Christianize the natives and eradicate idolatry, there was an important desire to "get to know in order to evangelize." The monumental effort of Friar Bernardino de Sahagún was carried out at that time. With the influence of Trent and its obsession for orthodoxy, a harder line was taken toward native cultures and religious practices. The new criterion was: extirpate in order to evangelize.

We believe that Trent's influence caused not only a shift in the evangelizers' attitudes toward the

evangelized cultures, but an increase in Indian resistance toward the new religion as well. Indigenous religions were preparing to resist, but new Christians were likewise preparing to continue preserving a good part of their old beliefs. A long process of syncretism began.

Five-hundred years of inheritance

We are aware of the multiform complexity of the above mentioned cultures resulting from the conquest. Therefore, we cannot equate the Catholicism present in lower income neighborhoods of Mexican cities with that of Mayan, Otomí, Nahuá, Purépecha, Tarahumara and Totonac communities.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding their diversity, Mexican popular Catholicism was born and transmitted as a redoubt of identity. Besides the penetration of the conquistadors' nature, fundamental aspects of pre-Hispanic identity were preserved.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is not only the most intensive and extensive example of devotion, but the prototype for the Mexicanization of Christianity down through the 500 years since the arrival of the first twelve Franciscans. To those more concerned with orthodoxy than life, Mexican popular Catholicism would seem impure, because of its syncretism. However, it is in this creative and integrating syncretism, that the most precious thing retrievable from a Gospel that arrived impregnated with violence is hidden.

Generally speaking, syncretism is built up from below. From above, official pastoral plans always seek to

implant dogma in all its purity and without concessions, though not necessarily coincident with the Gospel. It was the people who integrated Christianity into a pre-Hispanic world view better suited to a mystical and participative communion in which nature, society and culture converge harmoniously.

C. Geertz, treating the systematic-integrational nature of life as a whole, presents religion as a "cultural system." Popular Catholicism is a good example of this aspect of religion. In most cases, it is really a radically different cosmography from the one present in Western culture.

Those who see Mexico cloaked in accelerated modernization should not forget that there are many groups in the depths of this country's being not sharing the cultural presuppositions of the West, a West that has converted the world into merchandise. The majority of Indian cultures see the world as a network of mystic relationships in which nature, man and culture are interwoven.

Any economic plan that aims to respect these peoples and their cultures should take into account that, for native Mexicans and many campesinos, to sell their lands is to sell themselves, to lose their lands is to lose themselves. Land, for them, is radically sacred and, rather than saleable property, it is the nucleus of their identity.

Indigenous Mexican groups, "witnesses" to the confrontation of the Conquest, in the words of Darci Ribeyro, have achieved a religious system coherent with their history and with their social position in the subsequent order. But it is not their pre-Hispanic religion nor the Christianity that the friars preached. It is something else. It will probably disillusion both anthropologists with a romantic view of indigenous Mexicans and Christian inquisitors alike, but we find ourselves, irreversibly, some 500 years later.

The native face of the Virgin of Guadalupe was, evidently, not only an aesthetic option. It is a major symbol of those who, through conviction, pressure, violence or inertia, gradually appropriated Christianity and made of it a significant system articulating their lives, their culture and their world view.

The system of religious hierarchy ("cargos") motivated the community, guaranteed its festivals, ritualized idleness and channeled the prestige of those performing diverse community services. Christian saints and their festivals were not only an occasion for ensuring the collective consciousness, but also a "popularization" of the Christian pantheon.

These "minor gods" have often been excellent syncretic bridges interconnecting Christianity with indigenous religions, giving rise to nuclei of syncretic creativity: the Virgin of Guadalupe was shaped in close relationship with Tonantzin; Saint Thomas with Quetzalcoatl; and many other specialized saints for different needs were correlated with competent entities in different moments of life and the agricultural cycle.

However, in addition to the creativity and functionality of popular native religion, we should also point out the exercise of autonomy and popular



Ma. Luisa de la Helguera de Popoca Collection.

Jesús Helguera, Yalalteca.

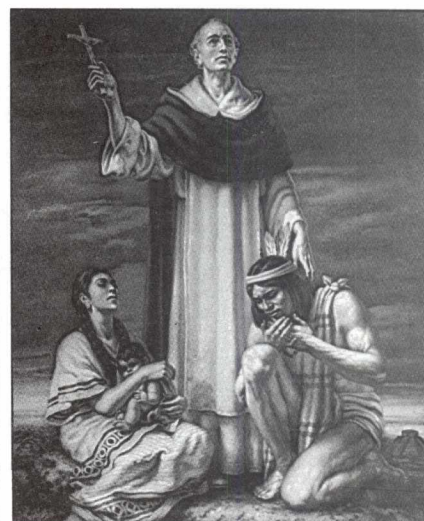
participation in it. The history of official Christianity is a sad one: stripping laymen of mutual responsibilities and concentrating ecclesiastical functions in the clergy.

In contrast, the history of popular Christianity is a history of the implicit or explicit recovery of the status of the layman. Hence, the popular hierarchy, which has always been the driving force behind popular practices. Mexican popular Catholicism is the space belonging to the laymen. Pilgrimages, vows, funeral rituals, family shrines, festivals for patron saints, etc. are some of the important moments in which the people direct their own religious experiences.

Having put these brief reflections into the perspective of the Quincentennial, we would like to end with an allusion to the indigenous movements through which subjugated peoples have tried over and over to shake off the yoke of colonial oppression. They are particularly significant moments in the creativity of popular religion. In the early decades of the conquest, such movements attempted to break with the culture and religion of the conquistadors and return to their long-time gods (revivalism).

It is interesting to observe that there has been a rebellion of symbols before a rebellion of arms in many of these movements in New Spain since the end of the 16th century. What does this rebellion of symbols consist of? Indians reinterpret Christianity from their socio-historical viewpoint, undermining the colonial system's self-attributed religious legitimization and constructing an alternative Christian legitimization for the growing insurgency.

From this new legitimization, which could be a miracle or a reinterpretation of Christian values from the viewpoint of the poor, Indian nations are summoned to rise up against their oppressors. In some cases, calls to rebellion not only summoned them



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Jesús Helguera, Friar Bartolomé de las Casas.

to form a new social order, in which they no longer had to pay tribute, but to participate in a new Church: the native Church.

Conclusions

During these 500 years of Christianity in Mexico, the Hierarchical Church has not been the sole protagonist in the religious configuration of these peoples. Much is due to what is said as well as to what is not said. But during this period, there has also been great religious creativity among Mexican peoples and cultures.

After 500 years, with nuances and adjustments, it may be said that Christianity is an important part of the life of the Mexican people. But, in Mexican popular Catholicism, it is important to distinguish between what comes from the ministry of shepherds and what the people themselves have developed in the dialectical relationship with the "colonial" commitment of a Church that was incapable of becoming Indian.

Mexican popular Catholicism bears the scars of the domination of the body and soul of its people. But it also bears signs of another part of its identity that has always emerged in the midst of military, civilian and religious domination. **M**