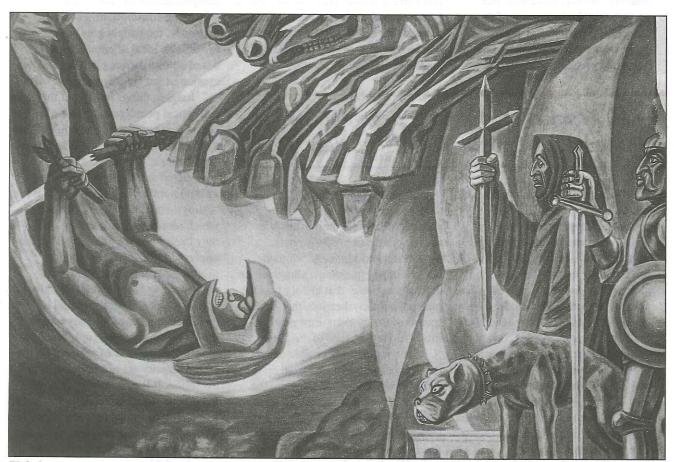# On national identity and postmodernism

José Luis González M. *

With the conquest, a new faith was imposed in place of indigenous religions.
(*José Chávez Morado,* Cuauhtémoc and the conquest, detail.)

The reasons for rupture

Those of us who observe society and history first-hand, before they are converted into books, run the risk of losing perspective. Our closeness to events may prevent us from perceiving the precise shape of the processes of which they are part.

On the other hand, given that this era is the only one we live in, we cannot resign ourselves to relinquishing it to those who will come after and who will have a better vantage point from which to view us, within what F. Braudel calls a long duration. Therefore, despite all the risks that people have run throughout time, we must concern ourselves with our era.

In attempting to characterize our era, many thinkers detect symptoms of a historical change of scene which would permit, if not demand, that we think in terms of a new historical period. Some of them call it postmodernism.

"We speak of postmodernism because we think that, in some essential aspect, modernism has ended."[1] And it has ended, at least in terms of the unquestionability of those values that constituted its ideological underpinnings:

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[1] G. Vattino, et al., *En torno la posmodernidad*. Editorial Anthropos, Barcelona, 1990, p. 9.

● Human history can no longer be understood as a progressive process of emancipation, as an ever-ascending and ever more perfect realization of the ideal man. The tattered state in which we have arrived at the close of the second millennium does not allow us to maintain the ingenuousness that prevailed at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, whose prophets predicted universal and unlimited prosperity.

20th centuries), have demolished the idea of a unified history, clearly demonstrating the ideological character of these concepts.

The dissolution of modernism in this regard logically implies that images of the past arise from different points of view. It is illusory to think that there is a supreme point of view, a comprehensive perspective unifying the wide diversity, synchronic and diachronic, of the many branches of human experience.

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66 *The mass media have been decisive in the birth of postmodernist society* 99

● Following from this first premise, it was taken for granted that everything considered to be more civilized was more human; hence anything that was more advanced, or further along towards the goal, closer to the end of the process, was assumed to be more valuable: the West as the model. The spectacle of the Earth Summit and the cowardice with which the advanced countries approached the survival of the planet and indeed humanity itself, should have been quite sufficient to disqualify the wealthy West from its self-declared role as a model.

● The concept of history as a progressive realization of authentic humanity could be maintained only on one condition: that it be understood as a unified process. Only if history (one history) exists, can one speak of a recognizable lineal progress.

"According to the hypothesis which I propose, modernism ceases to exist when the possibility of continuing to talk about history as a unified entity also ceases to exist."[2] Philosophy, and to a greater extent anthropology (those of the 19th and

Yet the crisis affecting the idea of a unified history also places the concept of unlimited progress in a similar predicament. Positivists, historicists and Marxists, while at odds on many questions, all agreed on at least one thing: that history was the realization of civilization, that is, the spread of the modern, European lifestyle over the face of the Earth.

This was an indefensible dream: the peoples who were civilized by the West have risen up and shattered the illusion of a unified and centralized history. The European ideal, transplanted with all of its exclusionary thrust in the United States and Canada, and with relative success in Latin America, can no longer demand — without violence— the right to embody the true essence of human culture and the prototype of a human way of life.

Another decisive factor must be added to this ideological emancipation: the advent of the communication society. The mass media have been decisive in the birth of postmodernist society, among other things, because of their role in eroding the "great stories."

The wide array of cosmovisions offered when cultural and ethnic minorities step up to the speaker's platform has broken the apparent unity

of events, while the fragmentation caused by an infinitely-varied journalistic treatment of reality has dismembered the apparent unity of the "story," opening the door to an infinite number of stories.

In this way, instead of an emancipation ideal based on the comprehension of reality and a subjective consciousness of its existence, the path begins to strike out towards an ideal of emancipation based on oscillation, plurality and the erosion of the "reality principle" itself.

Judging things in light of the great theoretical paradigms, a "loss of sense" has come about, although it has distinct emancipatory and liberational implications: the universal and centralized sense is lost, while an infinite number of local senses arise —provincial rationalities, dialects which rescue their rationality since they break with the framework of the oppressor mother tongue; ethnic groups have come into their own, emancipating themselves culturally (if not politically) from the model of nation-state with which they were intended to be "mixed (up)," etc.

In fact, notions of national or ethnic identity are not immune to this evolution. It is precisely in view of these new evaluative criteria that seem to characterize postmodernism that we wish to discuss the religious evolution of Mexican society during the last decade of this century.

Loyalty or betrayal?

In an earlier issue of this magazine (No. 21, October 1992), we discussed some of the indicators of important changes occurring in the religious make-up of Mexican society. Starting with the Spanish Conquest, New Spain began to shape itself as a Christian society —through the imposition of a new faith upon the indigenous religions— and a Catholic society, as a consequence of the Spanish religious and political position vis à vis the Protestant Reformation.

2 Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

There is nothing strange about the fact that this religion gradually became part of the particular profile that the new society went on to develop. Officially, modern Mexico was born Catholic. Nevertheless, things were much more complex; the shadings were richer and more varied. In the religious sense, the emerging society was a stage for many different actors:

● First among the more marked contrasts, in the officially Catholic, nascent Mexico, a politically *Criollo* [3] Catholicism co-existed with indigenous religions; this arrangement was sufficiently well-tuned to survive and maintain its functionality. These first actors on the Mexican stage were as foreign to each other as the "benefits" which the two social groups derived from the process of independence were distinct.

● In second place, we can now see the results of the interaction of the different factors in play here. Consequently, a *mestizo* and syncretic form of Catholicism began to take shape that, in the long run, would come to be a predominant trait. The religious

the Virgin of Guadalupe in the formation of the Mexican national consciousness, as described by J. Lafaye. [4]

Independence and the foundation of the liberal Mexican state during the 19th century did not substantially modify religious social composition, although it did affect the hierarchical structure of the Catholic church.

Generally speaking, this hierarchy —colonial and

appeal to Catholicism as an essential part of Mexican cultural identity meant shearing the state of legitimacy. In theory, the state had opened society up to religious tolerance and freedom of worship, although in practice, it showed itself to be an enemy of the Catholic church.

Religious pluralism arrived in Mexico as the natural and logical result of the liberal principles of modernism. Moreover, the fact that this outcome

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monarchist— was unable to orient itself towards the new independent state. The conflict came to a head when a liberal and non-secular ideology was officially adopted. Historically, the Reform crisis (1859) marked the first time the official Catholic circles used a Mexican Catholic identity as a weapon in the

figured among the tactical considerations of those who felt the need to counteract the social weight of monolithic Catholicism in no way invalidates the causal relationship between the two facts. This situation allows us to understand the particular belligerent nature of Catholic identity within Mexican society.

In a certain sense, it is as an end product of this historical trend that we have witnessed a phenomenon some have termed the "explosion of the sects" —the invasion of a large number of churches, creeds and religious groups, which have begun to proselytize intensely in all fields.

An example of the process mentioned above is the religious evolution that has taken place in Xalapa. Between the 1970 and 1980 censuses, the total population grew by 40%; during the same period, the Catholic population increased by 30%, while the Protestant population expanded by 174%. [5]

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phenomenon that developed around the Virgin of Guadalupe is a part of this feature and testifies to an intense cultural creativity. We know of no case comparable to the overwhelming influence of

open confrontation between the Catholic hierarchy and the state.

At this point, little attention was paid to other religious creeds, virtually nonexistent and insignificant in sociological terms at that time. To

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[3]   *Criollos* were people of Spanish descent born in the Americas. The term came to apply to that which was Latin American rather than Spanish. (Editor's note.)

[4]   Lafaye, J., *Quetzalcóatl y Guadalupe: la formación de la conciencia nacional en México*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1977, p. 374.

[5]   Vázquez, F., *Protestantismo en Xalapa, Estado de Veracruz*. Xalapa, 1991, p. 41.

In overall terms, in the space of fifty years (1930 to 1980), the non-Catholic Mexican population went from 2.3% to 7.4%. In southwestern Mexico, this process has been even more rapid. According to the 1980 census, in the states of Tabasco and Chiapas, the non-Catholic population stands at more than 20%, although not all those represented in this figure are Protestants.[6]

The theme of Mexican cultural identity and its accidental, historical or essential relationship with Catholic tradition is therefore a recurring topic. Cultural identity is a complex, debatable and controversial theme.

With all the arbitrariness and subjectivity needed in this case, we understand identity as no more nor less than the constellation of elements allowing us to be included in an "us" group and to recognize the others who belong to this "us" group. A man's death involves us in a mourning ritual because we belong to the "us" group (family, clan, community, neighborhood, municipality, etc.) where the deceased played a meaningful role.

When a Mexican village celebrates the feast day of its patron saint it is aware of sharing religious and social sentiments identifying (and therefore distinguishing) it from its neighbors. Identity is, among other things, a network of mutual belonging covering its participants. If we bear in mind the pace of cultural changes, collective identity has always remained relatively stable, although this stability is never more than a certain continuity within the inevitable and constant process of cultural change.

It is clear that the recent religious evolution of Mexico's population has affected the traditional levels of cultural integration and cohesion. There have been many cases where small communities that had

6 Cardiel, C. and Villalobos, M., *Religión y sociedad en el sureste de México*, Vol. VI. La Casa Chata, Mexico, 1989, p. 64.

functioned as social and ceremonial units were divided, thereby generating serious internal conflicts, as a result of the establishment of new religious denominations which gained converts. From this moment on, there are two groups of worship in the affected community, two ethical codes, two cosmovisions, etc.

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> **"** *Human history can no longer be understood as an ever-ascending and ever more perfect realization of the ideal man* **"**

To top this off, the dividing line frequently runs through, and separates, the family itself.

Events like these are empirical facts of daily life in the Mexico of recent decades. The problem arises at the moment of evaluation. If the group's identity is understood as something absolute and immutable, the change occurring throughout Mexico will be a negative factor, posing a threat, at some profound level, to Mexico's innermost being.

From this point of view, the only option is radical pre-modern intolerance: war on the enemy! Anthropologists, politicians, the Catholic hierarchy, rural teachers, etc. are all united —at least tactically— against the "sects" and the new religious movements, because they are enemies of Mexican identity.

However, another attitude may be adopted in the face of this issue. If by identity we understand the relative (but real) synchronic and diachronic "continuity" of meanings, values, motivations and attitudes shared by a social group, then the evolution of identity must be situated within the logic, if it may be called logic, of all cultural change.

Whether through violence or commerce, curiosity or chance, whether intentionally or accidentally,

cultures have offered themselves to one another as available, different options. Nowadays, despite these different possibilities, the preferred way of bringing about change is through the free interplay of supply and demand. This appears to be the option most consonant with our present legal framework.

The compulsive expansion of the "sects" essentially falls within this dynamic. Nevertheless, since the offensive of "new supplies of religious products" comes, in most cases, from the field of Western culture, it also produces more sophisticated penetration mechanisms.

In reality, Mexican society (and the same can be said of Spanish society) has not changed more in the field of religion than it has in the areas of consumer preferences, dress style, artistic tendencies, etc. With regard to all of these aspects, one can say that "things are not like they were before," but they have not yet posed problems of identity.

Certain areas of culture form "fields," inasmuch as a body of institutionalized experts has monopolized the power to manage the goods involved.

Religious change wouldn't be a problem if it didn't consist of "leaving one church" and entering another. Each time a person changes religion, one church wins, and another loses. When the one that loses has a long historical tradition and a large presence in the society in question, then it will, quite probably, turn its loss into a "loss for the nation," unleashing accusations of theft, usurpation and perhaps even betrayal upon the winner.

Is a different future possible?

It is likely that the fragmentation of a national religion into innumerable denominations, movements, groups and experiences will be part of the process of paradigmatic breakdown characterizing postmodernism. At any rate, in our view this has a clear postmodernist component.

who, as the only alternative, concentrates on the "passingness" of everything as if everything consisted of a sort of uncertain vagabondage, is incapable of historical consciousness and memory. He remains in an eventual experiment (*evenentiel*, in Braudel's terminology) without the depth of a long nor

for teaching them (or obliging them?) to coexist without tearing each other to pieces. The gods, ironically, had to depend on secular society to teach the faithful the virtue of tolerance.

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> **❝** *The Catholic church made the mistake of gagging the most creative imaginative force existing in its Third World churches: Liberation Theology* **❞**

Strangely enough, the Enlightenment arose as the audacious quest to emancipate one's self from all "paternal" control (Freud). It questioned the Father and consecrated "the fathers." Postmodernism is now the incarnation of rebellion against the fathers of that project. This is mainly a result of disenchantment with the unfulfilled promise (liberty, indefinite progress, justice, rationality, etc.).

The Enlightenment not only left promises unfulfilled; after almost two hundred years of the "secular city," it also has left us with a planet wounded to the point of death. It is for this reason that postmodernism presents itself as a critique of enlightened reason, and as disenchantment with the results of the "disenchantment of the world," according to the classic terminology of Max Weber.

There is a real risk that postmodernism may become post-Enlightenment, entailing suspicion and mistrust of all universalization due to its implicit threat of coercion.[7]

Someone who has turned away from dogmatic generalizations and

medium duration and, consequently, lacks critical judgment.

The result is a subject without any capacity for commitment to others, to society or to history: humanity without plans for liberty nor justice.

Among the new cults and religious movements, there are some which appear on this side of extreme irrationality, converted paradoxically into fundamentalist dogma.

It would certainly be an unpardonable error to identify the current growth in denominations and religious movements with these extreme cases. However, it is indeed worrisome that although extreme, such cases constitute one of the possible logical developments of the new criteria emerging from the crisis of modernism.

It is true that the abundant religious pluralism taking root in Mexican society is related to the collapse of the religious paradigms offered by mainstream churches. Although these churches (the Catholic church, among others) originally opposed modernism with hostility —only to modernize later, and tardily— they are not exempt from the postmodernist criticism of modernism.

Despite everything, the churches will always have to thank modernism

However, accommodation to modernism does not appear to have been the most important factor. Christianity —the Protestant, Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches— certainly was not up to the fulfillment of its highest calling: the construction and liberation of the human condition. Comfort and the "concordat" lulled the churches into somnolence. They were left without anything to offer a humanity which, in the second half of the 20th century, had already descended from the optimistic heights of modernism. The Catholic church even made the mistake of fencing in and gagging the most committed and creative imaginative force existing in its Third World churches: Liberation Theology.

For this reason —among others— we can now detect an effervescence in religion, together with a decline of the churches and their credibility. The movement of the traditional church towards new alternatives, more attuned to the precariousness of the present day, is part of this paradox.

Every modern nation-state has turned out to be a conglomerate of collective and individual identities that share a historical legacy of unequal depth. However, even when received with respect and veneration, or when it imposes loyalty, this "legacy" does not exempt them from the unpostponable need to provide responses to the demands of the present.

No past determines the future of free men. For this reason, an authentic Mexican identity, with a religious profile differing from traditional perspectives, is conceivable. What will remain of the past? All that which can win a place for itself, within the will to live and this society's ability to provide responses **Ⓜ**

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[7] Lyotard, J.F., "Reescribir la modernidad," *Revista de Occidente*, No.66, Madrid, 1986, pp. 23-25.