

TEOLOGÍA INDIA:

Indigenous Contributions to Theological Thought

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The term *religion* was, according to Jonathan Z. Smith, “first extended to non-Christian examples in the literature of exploration particularly in descriptions of the complex civilizations of Mesoamerica.”¹ In contrast to the form of Christianity imported by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, a complex web of epistemic particularities, including concepts-precepts of gender, time/place, earth/nature, and self/community that are embedded in particular cultural perceptions, constitutes Mayan religious concepts.

We recognize in *Teología India* a commitment far beyond the *preferential option for the poor*, one of the basic tenets of Liberation Theology. Indigenous theology commits itself to build a theological perspective in harmony with the Mayan cosmos. *Teología India*, or *Sabiduría India* (Indigenous Wisdom), as many of the local pastoral indigenous actors prefer to call it, complements Catholic liturgy with practices and reflections on faith influenced by Mesoamerican philosophical heritage.

Teología India, an innovative theological project, is grounded in a serious and respectful relationship with indigenous Mayan communities. These peoples or *pueblos* reside within the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico and are included in its pastoral work. Much of what I will review here stems from a long interview I did with Don Samuel Ruiz, the late bishop emeritus of the regional diocese, who worked in San Cristóbal for more than 40 years.² I will also offer my own systematizations on “embodied thought,”³ along with some lessons learned from my extended presence in the region.

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 270.

² The late emeritus Catholic Bishop Don Samuel Ruiz was a key political defender of the Mayan indigenous populations in his Diocese in the southeastern state of Chiapas, Mexico. He and his collaborators developed a “pastoral indígena” that allowed him to propose and coin the term “Teología India” during his more than 40 years of tenure at the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas.

³ Sylvia Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought: Gender Categories in Mesoamerica,” *Religion* 28 (1998a): 371-382.

Since 1974, when I was first invited by Don Samuel to come to the diocese, I have been loosely but regularly connected to the grassroots projects of Teología India and autochthonous churches in Chiapas.

A fresh Catholic Church, innovative and committed to justice within this cultural domain is emerging. This Catholic proposal is evolving quietly, offering new insights on faith and on how we can live together and respect the earth as well as the plurality of the diverse religious and cultural practices and beliefs present in the area. Chiapas, a small point on earth, is pregnant with hope. These pastoral actions are ever evolving and developing in myriad ways, both in the physical and the reflective domains. I will review here a few of the main characteristics that ground this theological process.

THEOLOGY AS A CONSTELLATION OF PRACTICES: A CEREMONY IN THE FOREST OF CHIAPAS

“O You by whom we live and move, nothing we say here is real. What we say on this earth is like a dream. We only mutter like one waking from sleep...”⁴ -John Bierhorst

“Ipalnemohuani is the God through whom we live.”⁵ -Netzahualcoyotl (13th century Toltec chief and poet)

“Tloquenahuaque” is the Lord of close vicinity, del “cerca y del junto.”⁶ -Miguel Leon Portilla

I arrive invited to the mass in celebration of the eighteenth anniversary of the *Universidad de la Tierra* (CIDECI) in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The *ermita* (chapel) is full! I can see a crowd gathering at the altar. Beside the bishop stand the priests who will concelebrate, and beside them a man and his wife—elderly Tsozil Mayan people. They are *tunnhel*: deacons. Man and woman, as a unit, incarnate the Mesoamerican concept of “duality” and will contribute as co-ministers in the ceremonial mass. Dressed in their local attire, they stand proudly by the side of the bishop. Although only the man has been formally ordained as a deacon, the demands for respect of the Mayan concept of male/female duality, the bishop has created a ritual space for the wife.

The music played in this Catholic mass is the ritualistic sacred music of the surrounding indigenous hamlets. One can recognize the structure of the Eucharist, but can easily be distracted by the splashes of color, the languid repetitious rhythm of indigenous sacred tunes, and the collectivity that ministers the mass. Several priests and indigenous deacons populate the higher space of the chapel. The readers of the Scriptures are women and they read in

⁴ John Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos, Songs of the Aztecs*: Translated from the Nahuatl, with an Introduction and Commentary (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 170.

⁵ Miguel Leon Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 63.

⁶ Miguel Leon Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 15.

three languages: Spanish, Tsotzil, and Tseltal. If one asks, “Who leads the ritual?” The liturgically proper answer would be: the collective. In this very concrete experience, many of the tenets of Teología India and of the project of “autochthonous churches” are perceptible even to an untrained onlooker. They are excerpts of practice.

The pastoral work of the diocese in Chiapas grows and develops ever more toward respect and recognition of the values, spirituality, devotions and ritual practices of the region’s indigenous peoples. In what follows, I hope to present not a finished analysis of a stable reality, but a study reflecting the ambiguity of reality and its concomitant and complex process of ongoing change.

COLONIAL INFLUENCES: A DEBT THE CHURCH SHOULD HONOR

Don Samuel smiles and looks at me challengingly, “The Gospel did not arrive to America with Christopher Columbus’ three caravels. God was here before.” He continues:

One can never overemphasize the importance of indigenous reflection. It initiates a dialogue that never took place in the five hundred years since the first evangelization. A foreign culture was imposed over the indigenous culture in order to express the gospel. There was no reciprocal listening...It was not possible to recognize anything positive in a religion that was not Christian...Simply, that which was indigenous had no value and had to be eradicated. Only now, after Vatican II we are commencing to correct this serious error.”⁷

Don Samuel often spoke about “how the indigenous converted me.”⁸ The evident irony of the power inversion implied in this expression gives a clue into the depth of his commitment to amend the Catholic Church’s presence and evangelization in Mexico.

One should be attuned to the ways in which native peoples adapted to their colonial circumstances, accommodated the Christian hierarchy, and absorbed and synthesized new ideas and beliefs. Today, on the basis of being a distinct people, they assert a common indigenous past, which has been, in part, suppressed and, in part, fragmented by colonialism.⁹ Native peoples participate in the emergence of a cultural revitalization that reunites the past with the present as a political and religious force. We are witnessing the transformation of indigenous religions, not forcedly through conversion and hybridization, and even less through commodification, but through internal processes of conceptual migrations and metamorphoses.

The relationship between the conceptual and the non-conceptual, to paraphrase Maurice Godelier, cannot be construed as the relation between reflection and the reality reflect-

⁷ Sylvia Marcos, “Las Semillas del Verbo en la Sabiduría India,” interview of Don Samuel Ruiz, *Revista Académica para el Estudio de las Religiones* Tomo II (1998b): 33-59.

⁸ Samuel Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron los indigenas*, with Carlos Torner (Santander, España: Sal Terrae Cantabria, 2002), Back cover.

⁹ Kay Warren and Jean E. Jackson, *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation and the State in Latin America*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 13.

ed.¹⁰ Thought does not reflect; it gives meaning to situations born of causes and forces whose origins do not lie solely in the conscious or the unconscious. Thought invents, invests, and produces meaning by constructing systems of interpretation that engender symbolic practices. The importance of analyzing the conceptual factor within Teología India, stems from the fact that thought not only represents society but itself contributes to its production.

THE EPISTEMIC CONTEXT OF TEOLOGÍA INDIA

Knowledge systems pervade our thinking, influence our conceptions of causality and guide our sensory perceptions. At all times, we are immersed in a conceptual system that organizes the way we view the material world around us to “fit” this cognitive system.¹¹ When we approach *Teología India* or *Sabiduría India*, we can discern the underlying conceptual structure, which is intimately bound to indigenous cosmology. Particular aspects of these indigenous religious traditions include an understanding of nature and of the divine in which a merging of transcendence and immanence occurs, a belief in a bi-directional flow of spiritual forces between the realm of the deities and human existence, metaphors as the selected vehicles for conveying hermetic meanings, and beliefs that are *embodied* and, thus, articulated implicitly rather than explicitly. “The word comes and goes, goes and returns, the word walks...to achieve unity say the indigenous.”¹²

Both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have written about the quiet way in which an epistemic configuration can operate and express itself. It “quietly” takes on existence through practices, through actions. The *epistémè* is embodied and thus exists, as “actions can supply moments of reinterpretation and reformulation.”¹³ Belief and thought enact themselves through corporeality. Without physicality, there is no sustenance and foundational reality for ideas, beliefs, and thoughts, especially for reflections on faith. Here we can grasp one of the main tenets of indigenous spirituality and thus of the intercultural project of Teología India. We can call it an “embodied theology,” as bodily practices of incorporated knowledges bind the material and the symbolic indissolubly.

The embodied character of Teología India is also the reason why it is often perceived from the outside as a variable set of practices. Samuel Ruiz affirms that “the indigenous people prefer the term *sabiduría* to *theology*: *sabiduría india*.” He adds, “Theology is systematic, abstract,” and I would add *disembodied*. He continues, “[T]his abstraction is foreign to the Indians...who live a communal life. They nourish themselves from contemplation and reflections on nature, myths, and dreams.”¹⁴

DREAMING AS PROPHECY

Thinking about the meaning and place of dreams in indigenous Tzotzil communities, Don Samuel reflects:

¹⁰ Maurice Godelier, *The Making of Great Men* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 232.

¹¹ Sylvia Marcos, “Cognitive Structures and Medicine,” *Curare* 11 (1988), 87.

¹² Alicia Gómez, “La palabra va y viene, se va y vuelve, la palabra camina...para alcanzar la unidad dicen los indígenas,” in Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 79.

¹³ Henrietta Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Marcos, “Las Semillas del Verbo,” 33-59.

[T]he Acteal local inhabitants who had been displaced from their hamlet; they had decided to return home. But some of them had dreams, premonitions. Actually it was an old woman and old man and three others. The five of them agreed in interpreting those dreams as an omen. ‘This is not the opportune time to return... We cannot go back now.’¹⁵

For the local people, dreams are encoded messages. Don Samuel heard the indigenous interpretations; he understood and valued them in their indigenous context. He even called the dreams “prophetic” and advised to follow them.¹⁶ As a result, the people did not return to their hamlet at that time.¹⁷ Thus, in Sabiduria India, dreams are considered a prophetic connection. Dreams are communications from wise ancestral protecting spirits. They are conceived as channels through which ancestral wisdom is communicated to earth.

MYTHS WEAVING HISTORY

Myths are *history*, a history that gets constructed and re-constructed permanently. Myths are considered facts. Don Samuel tells me about the story of a grain of coffee being given to the peoples there by “el Señor” in the origins of time, to help them in their survival.¹⁸ Yet it is well known that coffee was brought to the region in the early years of last century. How do we interpret this?

[T]hrough a telling or a re-telling of their myths, indigenous people enact a reflection or ‘indigenous wisdom’ that has been transmitted through their elders...the sources from which this presence of God is perceptible spring from within the confines of indigenous culture...the reflection which derives from that is not as among us based in philosophy, but rather in mythology. Myth is a form of “abstract” reflection about things...¹⁹

Paraphrasing Diane Bell, the body of wisdom often called ‘myths’ by outsiders, is a matter of fact for the Mayans.²⁰

EMBODIED THEOLOGY

I analyze now one of the main characteristics of Mesoamerican Mayan thought, a thought that is not built on mutually exclusive categories. This thought does not separate

¹⁵ Ibid., 33-59. Ruiz is referring to the massacre of 45 people, members of the community of Las Abejas, perpetrated by paramilitaries backed by the State government.

¹⁶ Ibid., 33-59.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33-59.

¹⁸ Ibid., 33-59.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33-59.

²⁰ Diane Bell, “Desperately Seeking Redemption” *Natural History* 106, 2, (1997): 53.

matter from spirit, earth from sky, death from life. This thought is embodied or incarnate.²¹ One of its main characteristics is the perception of things in flux, both flowing and “fusing.” This notion of a continuous flux between the material and the spiritual, of a permanent oscillation between the two poles of a duality is basic to a deep understanding of the proposals of Teología India, which can best be perceived as a “constellation of practices.”

These practices include local rhythmic indigenous music, chanting, dancing and rituals like *el caracol* ²²), as well as the veneration of deities inside caves and the rituals of sacred space on mountaintops. These practices of Teología India cannot be fully comprehended from a pastoral perspective inspired by the conventional Christian strategies of “inculturation,” which is defined as part of the missionary project of incorporating indigenous music and art into Catholic liturgy.²³ A deeper effort is now taking place. It includes joint reflection on faith, consultation of elders (women and men) considered the bearers of the indigenous religious traditions.

“Teología India is a way of reuniting the strength of God and of the elders; thanks to this strength it confronts conflicts and heals with hope. It is the indigenous themselves who do this work. It is they who speak with the elders. Each community has a group of theologians who speak with the elders who tell them the ancient words”.²⁴ This commitment is far beyond the *preferential option for the poor*. Indigenous Theology commits itself to respecting the conceptual and philosophical backgrounds of the Mayan cosmos and to building a “theological” perspective in harmony with it. The Christian philosophical/religious tradition that came with the missionaries was plagued by a disdain for matter and rejection of earthly dimensions contradictory to the pristine Christian faith in the Incarnation. Catholics committed to Indian wisdom move away from these disincarnate conceptions, to accommodate a universe where earth and matter are sacred, where natural beings express divinity and where the spiritual and the material are not separated.

According to the Mayan vision of the cosmos, human life is intimately connected with its surroundings. All surroundings have life and are considered sacred. We encounter earth, mountains, valleys, caves, plants, animals, stones, water, air, moon, sun, stars, which share in sacredness.²⁵ Carlos Camarena, a Jesuit at the Bachajon Mission in Chiapas since 1963, notes, “For the indigenous peoples material and spiritual realities are the same.”²⁶ Eugenio Maurer a Jesuit parish priest committed to indigenous populations elaborates:

For the people of Guaquitepec all mountains are “alive” in that they are the font of life: they are the site of cornfields; firewood comes from their slopes; springs emerge

²¹ Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought,” 371-382.

²² In ancient Mesoamerica deep-sea shells were the symbol of new beginning.

²³ Paul Gifford, “The Nature and Effects of Mission Today: A Case Study from Kenya” *Social Sciences and Missions* 20 (2007): 122.

²⁴ Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 79. “La Teología India es una manera de reunir la fuerza de Dios, la fuerza de los abuelos, y gracias a esta fuerza, hacer frente a los conflictos y conservar la esperanza. Son los propios indígenas los que hacen el trabajo. Son ellos los que hablan con los abuelos.” Translation by Sylvia Marcos.

²⁵ Eva Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantan Mythical Poem* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 55-59.

²⁶ Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 88. “Para los indígenas las realidades espirituales y materiales son lo mismo.” Translation by Sylvia Marcos.

from them...they are the dwelling place of important sacred beings...they have power in their own right.²⁷

For indigenous peoples, the world is not “out there,” established outside of and apart from them. It is within them and even “through” them. Teología India expresses this explicitly. It is not an abstract reflection springing from pure spirit or pure mind. It is grounded; it is practices, actions, rituals, devotions, processions, embroidering, dancing and chanting. All of these actions have to be incarnated into bodies that are themselves a vortex of emanations and inclusions from the material as well as the non-material world. As such, carnal bodies are intertwined in the divine and belong to the sacred domain.²⁸

“Here you cannot distinguish between God and the world, between God and his creation.”²⁹ Thus, Teología India has to be found in the myriad incarnated and corporeal ways by which the indigenous peoples express their beliefs. “The indigenous cultures are characterized by their unity,” says Andrés Aubry, including “unity also between death and life.”³⁰ Here again, we find the duality and fluid oscillation between opposed and complementary poles.³¹

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The conceptual source of Teología India springs from local indigenous languages. Aubry affirms that “a language is a conceptual system.”³² He gives the example that in Tsozil there is no word for the Spanish verb *ser* (to be). By analogy, let us consider the Spanish verb *estar* (to be) in its differences with *ser*. *Estar* means “being in relation” to someone else or to a situation or to the natural surroundings (*entorno*). There is no concept in Tsozil for an ontology where a being is conceived by itself, alone, individual, separate: *ser*.

Teología India is greatly enhanced by the use of terms, meanings and syntactic turns proper to indigenous Mayan languages. Teología India in Chiapas could not be grasped without those languages that provide its foundation. The pastoral work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas makes permanent use of one or several of those languages allowing for their particular conceptual meanings to inform its commitments and work.

²⁷ Gary Gossen and Miguel Leon Portilla, eds., *South and Meso-American Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 232.

²⁸ Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought,” 377.

²⁹ Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 63. “Aquí no se puede distinguir entre Dios y el mundo, entre Dios y su obra,” says Andrés Aubry who was a French historian who, since 1974, coordinated and organized the Archivo Diocesano the Archives of Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Translation by Sylvia Marcos.

³⁰ Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 67. “Las culturas indígenas se caracterizan por su unidad...unidad también entre la muerte y la vida.” Translation Sylvia Marcos.

³¹ Marcos, Sylvia, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (Boston: Brill Academic Press, 2006), 13-29.

³² Ruiz, *Como me convirtieron*, 63.

INDIAN THEOLOGY AS OUTCOME

“Teología India is the final result of a pastoral action.”³³ Teología India and its practices do not stem from a project started by the will of the bishop, the priests, nuns and the pastoral agents at the Diocese of San Cristóbal. They did not sit together to discuss and decide how it had to be done. It is the result of their pastoral approach with indigenous communities and of their respect and awe for the indigenous religious universes. These indigenous universes are so elusive and rich, but have been discarded in the past. What we know about them is the end result of many years of getting close to the indigenous peoples and communities with an attuned ear, a respectful attention, and a congenial attitude. Especially vital is the attitude of pastoral actors, listening and learning to absorb indigenous epistemic worlds and how to work with and through them. Perhaps hidden is the idea—that I venture here as my own—that the pastoral agents, nuns and priests and the bishop himself could discover a way of feeling and conceiving God that would also enrich them.

THE COLLECTIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING GOD

Teología India is and must be a collective experience. It is practiced within the collective corporeality of liturgies.³⁴ Historically, Christianity has a strong communitarian sense, and early Christian assemblies have been a model and are always at the background of our hopes for a better Catholic community. Yet, the indigenous lived experiences of community are grounded in a concept of collectivity difficult to understand within a Western mentality. It is easy to be entranced by the ways we see them acting, living and believing through community. It stands out as an ideal. Some of the first Catholic missionaries that arrived in the Americas agreed, describing these communitarian ties as “the Christianity of the Indians.”³⁵

For indigenous peoples, even today, a community is not conceived as a collectivity of individuals, according to the western scheme exposed by Louis Dumont in his *Essays on Individualism*.³⁶ In Western thought, a whole (Greek *holon*) is a collection of individuals (Greek *atomoi*). Accordingly, Europeans, North Americans and westernized Mexicans are trapped in an *atomistic holism* that renders notions of the person as nodes in a network of relations and of one’s place in the world as a *topos in a cosmos*. For indigenous Mesoamericans, full persons always have in themselves parts of the collective: the *calpulli*, the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, the *pueblo*. It means that a part of oneself belongs to the collectivity of which one is a part. The person is not complete without that part. If it were missing, one would experience it as the loss of a ‘limb’ or another vital part without which they lack integrity and completeness as human beings.

³³ Marcos, Sylvia, “The Seeds of the Word in Indigenous Wisdom,” Interview with D. Samuel Ruiz, Ms., Translation by Jean Robert, 2001.

³⁴ This is why don Samuel was adamant about not allowing anyone to interview him alone about Teología India. This is why in his book *Como me convirtieron los indigenas*, he insisted that several pastoral agents be interviewed along his side.

³⁵ Some of these early colonial sources are Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, Fray Diego Duran, and Fray Toribio de Benavente “Motolinia”, who admired the collective cohesion and sharing of the local indigenous peoples they were catechizing.

³⁶ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The embeddedness of the person in the collective cannot be equated with a consideration of the *ego* as a totally separate individual being, a separate body and soul. With our concepts of the unitary soul or unitary identity or unitary subjectivity, we are unable to approach in depth what collectivity means for the indigenous people.

In Catholic faith-based organizations like “Las Abejas” (the Bees), we can detect the kind of communitarianism that pervades the indigenous worlds. Their cellular structure allows for maximum flexibility, as in the case of Acteal (a municipality of Chenhalo). These are some of the most visible outcomes of the pastoral work of the diocese. This cellular collective structure enables the constituent organizations to shift arenas modifying their strategies in response to attacks by the federal and state police and paramilitary forces. It permitted the collective mode of organization to extend to regions. Indigenous peoples in the self-constituted autonomous regions of northern Chiapas and the Lacandón rainforest, as well as the bordering hamlets of highland municipalities (*municipios autónomos*) are, in fact, engaged in the practice of collective autonomy.

The diocesan pastoral work sustains and builds around these indigenous practices. Spirituality is linked to a communitarian sense in which all beings are interrelated and complement each other. These are some of the spiritual and political practices that have been linked to the Pan-Mayan movement.³⁷ The indigenous people are seeking autonomy in daily practice through the Juntas de buen gobierno, operating within an indigenous collectivity governing themselves in traditional territories. Through the practices of “mandar obedeciendo” (We lead as we obey), one could easily think of the early Christian communities being embodied in contemporary practices by these indigenous rebels and their supporters.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Beyond inculturation, the diocesan pastoral work in Chiapas threads a new path to build an authentic intercultural dialogue that we may call *Teología India* or *Sabiduría India*. It is based on a constellation of practices, which have to be understood in the context of the interconnection between matter and spirit, of the embodied sacredness of beings, of earth, nature, and humans and on the epistemic philosophical backbone of the indigenous communities. This is the Catholic Church in Chiapas: balancing faith and politics, theology and justice, devotion and rights, mind and bodies, orthodoxy and inculturation.

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³⁷ June Nash, *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

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