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DECOLONIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF SYNCRETISM: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY AND CULTURAL AUTONOMY IN OAXACA, MEXICO

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INTRODUCTION

My first experience was with the Icots brothers, in a culture different from our own Zapotec culture—it was with the Huaves, close to the sea. I was there with other priest friends a year and a half. All of us together had an initiation experience that told us that this is definitely the right path. That is, I learned also to follow a slower rhythm, not to reject all the knowledge that the Huaves have, and to ground myself in existence in the daily contact with the people. I learned with them the work of fishing, because they're fishermen....It's a hard life, with a lot of suffering...that of living day-to-day, with only what's necessary for that day. And I learned that you can't say, 'Let's come together to pray'—instead you have to go to where they are, so that also our language and what we want to share can be understood. And for me it was a real wake up.

-GM, Catholic priest and Zapotec from Juchitán, Oaxaca, 1995
(Interview with GM, Tehuantepec Diocese, October 1995)

These words of a Zapotec indigenous priest working in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca encapsulate the defining ethos of a pastoral program guided by the philosophy of "indigenous theology" (*teología indígena*), a praxis advocating the concerted syncretism of Roman Catholicism and indigenous religions. Indigenous theology and its translation into a pastoral program called the "indigenous pastoral" (*pastoral indígena*) have traditionally been the distinctive agenda of southern dioceses like Oaxaca in particular, and a practical orientation directed explicitly at the special needs of working with the most marginalized social sectors, the indigenous communities which in this region made up 18.3% of the Oaxaca's state population and roughly a fifth of Mexico's total indigenous population (Fox, 1999, p. 26). The socio-economic conditions of rural Oaxacans—the vast majority of whom are indigenous, small-scale subsistence

farmers—has become even more precarious since the onset of neo-liberal economic re-structuring (privatization) over the last few decades, spiraling inflation, the continuing deterioration and exploitation of the environment, and government policies favoring large-scale agro-industry.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Oaxacan Catholic Church, with CE-DIPIO, the Diocesan Center of the Indigenous Pastoral, as its driving force, was a ferment of liberation theological teachings and practice. At that time, well-known (now retired) bishops, Bartolomé Carrasco in the Oaxacan Archdiocese of Antequera, and Arturo Lona in the neighboring Diocese of Tehuantepec, were adamant advocates of the teachings of Vatican II and the creation of a Popular Church pressuring for social justice and for clergy's direct insertion in the realities of the poor as inspired by liberation theology. Along with their like-minded colleague, Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the neighboring southern state of Chiapas, the Bishops adopted a mode of pastoral praxis known as the *Pastoral indígena*, or indigenous pastoral. In spite of a backlash within the Church to liberationist theology that emerged in the late 1980s and sharpened through the 1990s, in Oaxaca the indigenous pastoral remains a favorite element of the discourse of pastoral planning. In part this is due to the huge and diverse indigenous population in the state, which resides mostly in small communities dispersed throughout rural Oaxaca. Indeed, roughly 70% of the inhabitants of the state are of indigenous origin, giving Oaxaca the highest proportion of Indians in the country: about 18% of the nation's total indigenous population (Bernal, 2001). While the largest indigenous groups in the state are Zapotecs and Mixtecs, there are also Triquis, Chinantecs, Chontales, Mixes, Chatinos, Mazotecs, Chochos, Cuicatecs, Huaves, Zoques of Tacuates, Ixcatecs, Amuzgos and Nahuas. There is also a small but significant Afro-Mexican population.

One might readily assume that the intersection of a politicized, progressive Catholicism with indigenous spirituality offers unique possibilities for religion to operate in popular and indigenous communities not as the ideological opiate that secular leftists have commonly identified as its fundamental ontology, but as an important weapon of resistance to hegemonic forces of sociopolitical oppression—or even as a significant contributor to the decolonization of indigenous culture in the current struggle for cultural autonomy. Indeed, along such lines of argument, much scholarship on Latin American indigenous theology identifies in the fusion of progressive Catholicism and indigenous “popular” belief systems and practices, a powerful transformative catalyst for a profound political conscientization and empowerment of indigenous people. Often written

from the perspective of theologians and scholars sympathetic to liberation theology, these accounts are inclined to suppose a fairly transparent relationship between theology and practice, seeing the Church and its representatives as largely autonomous and as organic “popular” defenders of the rights of indigenous communities (Carrasco, 1994; Cook, 1997; Irarrazaval, 2000; Judd, 2004; López Hernández, 2000; Shorter, 1988).

Yet there is a problematic and significant analytical elision in such perspectives. As many have discussed, any comprehensive understanding of the phenomenology of the interaction of distinct knowledge systems in a context of cultural confrontation demands cognizance of the political conditions impinging on a particular instance of cultural mixing; nor should these conditions be considered separately from the positionality of the discrete social actors or groups involved in the process (Mignolo, 2000; Stewart & Shaw, 1994). Indeed, Church-driven initiatives in Mexico aimed at a conscious, concerted blending of indigenous and Roman Catholic religious systems such as the current campaign of Indigenous Theology have a long history. The outcome of such blendings inevitably has been far more complex than their engineers anticipated. During the colonial period, for example, missionization and evangelization involved the imposition of a Eurocentric view upon the indigenous, but also the “hybridization” of this view as the spiritual colonizers adapted Catholic religiosity to encompass non-Western populations, and indigenous people interpreted Christianity according to their own cultural frameworks (Díaz Balsera, 2005; Gruzinski, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Thus, the “colonial semiosis” (Mignolo, 2000)—the interaction of signs and meanings of both European and indigenous origin—that ensued from evangelization, involved creative agency on the part of both clergy and indigenous peoples, despite clear power asymmetries.

Thus, with a nod to the salience of such a politics of syncretism, in this essay I highlight the need for a more careful evaluation of Indigenous Theology. The contemporary global context has generated a growing interest in the concrete conditions of decolonization and post-colonialism, and in the apparent reinvigorated role of religion in identity creation and social mobilization. Given this situation, it seems especially worthwhile to try to clarify the terms of processes of cultural confrontation and mixing, and in the present case, to understand better the nature of the dialogue between indigenous people and the Catholic Church (or at least a faction thereof) that the agenda of Indigenous Theology implies. For on the one hand, it seems that Indigenous Theology has opened a space in which Mexican indigenous peoples are vindicating their own mobilization and identities as social and political actors, such as by articulating the indig-

enous movement with the global human rights campaign (Brysk, 2000; Niezen, 2003; Norget, 2001). Yet on the other, *Teología indígena* and the indigenous pastoral might also be seen as examples, increasingly apparent in the post-modern globalized world, wherein elements from distinct cultures are purposefully recombined, often by representatives of state or other dominant social institutions, for particular ideological ends or material benefits (Amselle, 2003; Feld, 2004).

What then are the terms of liberation implied by this Catholic liberation theological discourse of Indigenous Theology? Is it really possible for the Latin American Church to transform its historical identity from colonial oppressor to "equal" endorser and agent of social change, truly conceding self-determination to indigenous peoples? When considered in the context of the concept of decolonization, these questions start to beg others. Postcolonial scholar Walter Mignolo (2000), for example, wrote that *decolonization* demands as its precondition the recognition of the legitimacy of previously subjugated indigenous knowledges, and their release from the oppressive imperialist epistemological yoke of Euro-western culture. In the sixteenth century, Christianity, as embodied by the Catholic Church, was the first "global design," in Mignolo's coinage, of the modern/colonial world system—a project aimed to enfold the Americas into the global vision of an *orbis mundialis christianus*, part of a civilizing mission and matrix of knowledge/power that both authorized and shaped subsequent knowledge production. As a decolonizing project, Indigenous Theology would therefore presumably work to establish a dialogue of mutual learning and understanding between clergy and indigenous communities, at the same time as facilitating the legitimation of forms of "indigenous spirituality," endowing the latter equal footing with Christianity so as to emancipate indigenous peoples' ways of thinking and senses of self. From the indigenous standpoint then, it seems important to consider whether Indigenous Theology allows the opening of a new space for a decolonization of Catholic theology. What is the nature of Indigenous Theology's articulation or overlap with popular religiosity? Are indigenous spiritual or other knowledges and learning reshaping the church's liberationist agenda regarding "religious" teachings, or its program for a material transformation of indigenous communities?

Of course, like liberation theology, feminist theology, Black theology, or any number of similar post-Vatican II theological innovations, Indigenous Theology is at base a general concept, an outgrowth of developments that were fiercely debated within the ecclesiastic ranks of the Catholic Church itself, rather than being primarily an idea inspired and instigated by desires

of indigenous peoples themselves. Thus, as a discourse of the church, how Indigenous Theology is manifest in any given setting is shaped by myriad factors—including the degree of moral and financial support from upper echelons of the diocese, the personal visions and capacities of local clergy and those of the members of the communities in which they work (Norget 1998, 2004). While many writings on Indigenous Theology describe its philosophical genealogy, and/or the history of its development in given locales (Garrard-Burnett, 2004; Judd 2004; Kovic, 2004), what is often not explored—and the inspiration for this paper—are the deeper suppositions or logic underlying Indigenous Theology as a prescriptive paradigm for the transformative union of Christian theology and indigenous religiosity—including Indigenous Theology's conceptions of personhood, of history, "religion," or even of "culture" itself.

My examination of Indigenous Theology and the indigenous pastoral is based on several periods of research over the past ten years in both rural and urban areas of Oaxaca state, including participant-observation in several different kinds of church-directed settings and activities, and extensive interviews with clergy and laypersons on their views of transformations within the church. With ample opportunity to observe the articulation of official and popular religiosities in various contexts, I have become particularly interested in the ways that religion has come to inform Oaxacans' identities and shape their political affiliations.

Thus, as I underscore the role of religion as concrete practice, not abstract theology, the basis of my discussion is a particular context wherein a Catholic liberation theological version of Indigenous Theology has been implemented, with the implicit goal of creating a "Popular Church" that would work to instill in indigenous people a more critical consciousness and fortified indigenous identity—and, indirectly, address the social ills that affected indigenous people especially. My discussion suggests that while liberation theological-Indigenous Theology as a concept promises a radical program for the socio-politically transformative role of (institutional) religion, as actual practice of the Catholic Church, its decolonizing potential is strongly weakened by its apparent refusal to engage with indigenous peoples except through an essentializing perspective of cultural difference. Rather than a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the logical underpinnings of indigenous theology, which is not possible here, the goal of this essay is instead to offer a few observations for future consideration of the possibilities—and the limitations—of Christian theological programs for progressive social change, especially in non-Western settings.

INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY, PROGRESSIVE CONSCIENTIZATION AND THE PASTORAL INDIGENA IN OAXACA

The current social field in Mexico in which the Church is struggling to (re)affirm its social and moral role and status is a complex one. It has been produced in part by the on-going crisis of the Mexican nation-state concurrent with a burgeoning and dynamic civil society. In Oaxaca and other areas with a significant indigenous population, since the 1970s several organizations have emerged that explicitly use their indigenous ethnicity to identify themselves according to historic, linguistic, and other cultural commonalities, as a means of legitimating their mobilization. Since especially the Zapatista/EZLN uprising in Chiapas in January of 1994, today, this is the platform these groups are using to forward their demands for incorporation into Mexican society on importantly revised terms. Concurrent to their attempts to carve out a new place within the national political culture, indigenous peoples throughout Mexico are transforming the nature of their identity from fragmented, ethnically distinct communities to pluri-cultural coexistence in regional and national political arenas.

The wide array of organizations that exist in Oaxaca illustrates the dynamic and plural character of the indigenous movement, a diversity that reflects the movement's diversity nationally. For example, the *Coalición Obrero-Campesino-Estudiantil del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (Worker-Peasant-Student Coalition of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec or COCEI), the *Movimiento Unido para la Lucha Trique* (Trique Unified Movement for Struggle or MULT), the *Asamblea de Autoridades Mixes* (Assembly of Authorities from the Mixe region or ASAM), the *Union de Comunidades Indígenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo* (Union of Indigenous Communities of the North Zone of the Isthmus or UCIZONI) are among the best known of several groups to have emerged over the last 30 years, heralding their ethnic identity to lobby for improved rights for Oaxaca's indigenous peoples and now, political autonomy. The specific agendas and modes of working of these groups are varied. Yet, despite their differences, the overall demands of the indigenous movement involve the recognition and respect for indigenous culture, including traditional modes of self-government and of subsistence, and an end to State repression.

It was in the 1970s, in the midst of this ferment of indigenous mobilization, that Catholic Church representatives in Oaxaca first began to develop a holistic and integrated pastoral program, aimed at, according to one official church document, "promoting, coordinating, and planning all the

pastoral resources of liberating incarnation that brings with it the Christian integral development of persons and indigenous communities in the context of intercultural situations" (*Objetivo provisorio de la pastoral indigenista*, as cited in Hernández Díaz, 2001, p. 127). Such official Church rhetoric, heavily flavored by the lexicon of Vatican II and the second conference of Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 (e.g., "liberation," "integral development," "intercultural situations") underlined the reformist character of the Oaxacan Church, signaling a milestone transformation in its attitude and vision. Notions of conscientization, empowerment, and liberation formed part of a powerful campaign for integral evangelization, a "contextual theology" encouraging the assimilation of the message of the gospel through the reality of everyday experience. The central concept of conscientization or consciousness raising (*conscientización*), borrowed from the hallmark pedagogical method of renowned Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire, refers to the development of a critical mind through the use of locally salient and politically charged images of conflict from everyday life. Throughout Latin America at this time, Catholic liberationists called the church to become the "church of the poor" in the sense that its overall mission is to empower them to become the agents of their own liberation, create new change "from below" and also the "new society."

Along with Chiapas, Oaxaca forms part of the Pacifico Sur—one of the most radical of the country's official pastoral regions. Here, until the beginning of the 1990s, eight bishops—including Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas—formed a coherent force in support of liberation theology and an explicit "option for the poor." Thus, through the 1980s and 1990s especially, these bishops made their liberationist position clear in several collective pastoral statements denouncing the material conditions of the region's rural indigenous communities (characterized by, among other problems, environmental degradation, chronic malnutrition, alcoholism, unemployment, and repression and exploitation by the government and local political strongmen or *caciques*) and declared themselves committed to working to transform this situation for a "more just, humane, divine, fraternal, and freer society" (Obispos de la Región Pacífico Sur, 1991).

With the aim of identifying the causes that kept indigenous people poor, following the liberation theological credo: "*ver, pensar, actuar*" (Observe, Think, Act), so crucial to the process of conscientization, in collaboration with lay Catholic groups, progressive Church representatives encouraged people to critically assess the "diocesan reality" and social situation in which they were immersed, in the light of the gospel. Such a process was to lead people to identify the causes of poverty and marginal-

ization; in actuality, the entailing discourse gradually solidified as a stance overtly critical of the government (Norget, 1997).

Directed by the philosophy of the pastoral *indígena*, pastoral agents in this part of the country directed their efforts not only at attending to indigenous peoples in spiritual terms, but also to involve themselves in their struggles, anguishes, hopes and, from the inside—“*desde dentro*”—to promote a liberating evangelization “in which the same indigenous peoples are, ideally, *active subjects* of their own evangelization, expressed, and lived according to the mentalities, traditions, and customs of their peoples.” This reflected a typical liberation theological emphasis on praxis: the new society should be a *participatory* one in which people are the “subjects of their own development” (a catchphrase from Medellín) (SERESURE, 1989, in Hernández Díaz, 2001, p. 130).

Thus, progressive Oaxacan clergy declared themselves to be working toward the same basic goals as are indigenous leaders: improved civil rights and living conditions for indigenous peoples, creating a better, “new society” from the grassroots, engendering recognition and respect for indigenous identity and culture and, ultimately, attaining formally recognized political autonomy. Throughout Oaxaca this multifaceted, “integral” popular conscientization has been fostered especially through bible reflection groups and regular regional workshops on themes related to human rights and civic education. Priests also helped to establish officially registered human rights groups, production cooperatives, education programs, community-run savings programs (or ‘*cajas populares*’), and forums for the promotion of “traditional” health care.

In keeping with an explicit emphasis on strengthening indigenous identity, it is in relation to “culture” especially that the agents of the *pastoral indígena* have focused much of their efforts at salvaging indigenous ways of life. Thus, the diverse pastoral projects (e.g., coffee cooperatives, artisan cooperatives, or sheep or chicken-raising farms) in both Oaxacan dioceses are directed by “cooperative principles,” structured around ancestral customs of labor founded on communalism, mutual aid, and reciprocity (embodied by the ancient custom of *tequio*, or community labor often associated with the local Catholic Church). This is part of a conscious effort to breathe new life into indigenous communal practices, a theme of particular interest in the campaign towards autonomy within the national political system.

The ‘culturalist’ thrust of this pastoral campaign, as it dovetails with the indigenous resurgence, has enshrined cultural identity as the leitmotif of a larger struggle for a new social order. Indigenous Theology is seen by its

proponents to offer a model for intercultural dialogue that nurtures indigenous cultural identity through a spiritual awakening that in turn becomes the motivating platform to fight for social justice and indigenous rights. In the next section of this essay, I examine more closely the particular model of exchange defined by the indigenous pastoral, as a means of reflecting on some of the more hidden and problematic narratives of the agenda of Indigenous Theology in relation to the pivotal notions of cultural autonomy and decolonization.

“GO TO WHERE THEY ARE”: INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY, INCULTURATION, AND THE POLITICS OF SYNCRETISM

The quote from the Zapotec priest with which I began this essay reflects the possibility for a special kind of mutually enriching exchange implied by the indigenous pastoral. The testimonies of him and other Oaxacan priests and nuns with whom I have spoken during my research, especially those of indigenous backgrounds, express clearly the profound change of consciousness wrought through their long-term work within indigenous communities. The *pastoral indígena* advocates the possibility for the same kind of existential transformation for indigenous persons, a critical process of conscientization that can lead to a new invigoration of indigenous identity, especially in confrontation with the larger national Mexican society and the State.

Ideally, this dialogic transformation between church agents and the indigenous would be what Johannes Fabian (1983) has termed *coevalness*: a context allowing for open intercultural communication and exchange, as free as possible of the taint of asymmetric social relations, especially the resonances of the relationship between Church and indigenous people in the colonial period. The ethos of the *pastoral indígena* rejects the concept of acculturation that underlay early Mexican State models for development. Instead, it follows a different hermeneutic principle, one premised on the equality of priest and indigenous persons, and the accommodation of the institutional church to the social and historical realities of the *pueblos indígenas*.

No other concept is more fundamental to this process than that of “inculturation.” Derived from Vatican II, inculturation has been a crucial tenet of the progressivist church philosophy in Oaxaca since its beginnings (Carrasco, 1994). Documents of Vatican II speak of the doctrine of *semina Verbi* (“seeds of the word”), which explains that non-Christian religions were seen as “historical-cultural facts, social and institutional expressions of people’s religious consciousness that have in them seeds which can

germinate when exposed to the christian message" (Sathler & Sathler, 1997, pp. 109-110). The concept involves a purposeful sloughing off of the negative resonances of the term syncretism and, along with the notion of "indigenization" (couching the Christian message in indigenous cultural forms), is part of a contextualization of the Christian message.

In theological terms, inculturation denotes a process wherein the priest or church agent evangelizes through the norms of the local community, using them as a sieve of interpretation, producing the hybrid "indigenous theology" (*teología indígena*). As conceived by the Church, the concept of inculturation hence refers to encounters where, theoretically, syncretism (regarded as the benign, equal interaction of two cultural systems) does not involve a usurping of either of the cultures from which it arose. As expressed by theologian Stephen Judd, "[i]nculturation is the process whereby the Gospel takes root in a determined cultural context without doing violence to that culture or its symbols, myths and rituals" (Judd, 2004, p. 216). Anthropologist Michael Angrosino, however, offers a critical view of the Church perception: "Both parties to the interculturative exchange undergo internal transformation, but neither loses its autonomous identity...inculturation occurs when a dominant culture attempts to make itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character" (1994, p. 825).

Underlining the perceived great coincidences in indigenous and Catholic belief systems, this Church-defined "inculturation theology" reflects the liberationist ideal of an "equal" intercultural dialogue or exchange between indigenous ("popular") and "official" religiosity. In Latin America in particular, the concept has also come to denote a radical revision of church structure in line with alternative political and economic realities, that is, horizontal relations, including shared space, reciprocal learning and exchange as opposed to customary vertical, authoritarian dynamic of imposition (Angrosino, 1994, p. 826). Although the term "decolonization" itself is not often invoked by indigenous theologians, the pluralistic vision imagined by liberationist indigenous theology implies a decolonization of knowledge in that it advocates a replacement of one-way transfers of knowledge and technology by dialogue and mutual learning (Duara, 2003).

Following the reasoning of inculturation and Indigenous Theology, for example, former Bishop of Oaxaca's Tehuantepec Diocese (1971-1998), Arturo Lona, told me in 1995 that the goal of his diocese was to be an "autochthonous Church" (*'iglesia autóctona'*). Like other clergy who sustain the idea of a distinctly popular church, the Bishop believes that indigenous communities will apprehend the Christian message better if they do so "from their own [socio-cultural] reality" (*'desde su propia realidad'*):

Indigenous theology is a theology very distinct from Western forms. Among the indigenous peoples there is that which is called the 'seed of the word' [*semilla de la palabra*] of God, and from there we try to inculturate the gospel and create a Zapotec theology, a Huave one, a Zoque one, from their own cultural richness....It's a theology that can bring about change. For that reason an indigenous theology is always living, and demanding that it always begins from the people's own practical reality. (Interview with Bishop Arturo Lona, Tehuantepec, 1995)

Bishop Lona's explanatory words implied that indigenous theology, guided by liberationist interpretations of the gospel (*'el evangelio'*), results in the progressive prototype of Catholic faith—an enlightened Christianity that is organic to people's way of life, and that empowers them to work for an end to exploitation for themselves and for others in their community. At the same time as it advocates a relativist approach to pastoral practice, the underlying idea is that the message of the gospel is a transcendent truth, not bound to a particular cultural context. From the liberationist perspective, the "seed of the Word"—an inchoate Christian spirituality—exists in any cultural setting.

Protagonists of contemporary Indigenous Theology claim to be deferent to the independence and autonomy of indigenous peoples. Following the example of Jesus, the priest's role in integral evangelization is to '*accompany*' (*acompañar*) the community in their own quest for liberation—to act as guide, but not to intervene nor to impose a foreign ideology. This thrust reflects liberation theology's ecumenical tolerance and acceptance of religious pluralism: the "Word of God," the message of the gospel, invoked by the liberationist movement refers not so much to a transcendent Catholic theology, but to a Christian faith of a more generic or ecumenical character, harking back to Catholicism in its original definition of a single, monadic, transcendent, "true" religion. As a document from SERESURE (1989) explained, "the idea of the pastoral indígena is that the priest no longer assists indigenous people, but instead involves himself with them in their path [*caminar*], their anxieties, their hopes and from the inside [*desde dentro*], to promote a liberating evangelization in which the same indigenous may be subjects of their own evangelization, expressed and lived according to their own mentalities, traditions and histories of the pueblos" (cited in Hernández Díaz, 2001, p. 130).

According to the "inculturation theology" of the Progressive or Popular Church, the gospel should be completely incarnated in "other" cultures, while perfecting the human values already present therein. The ethos of integral evangelization begins with addressing the material needs and

problems of the people. Religious faith is presented as an essential, implicit aspect of everyday existence, and spiritual understanding is thought to develop in tandem with, and to enrich, the awakening of social and political consciousness.

Over the past 30 years, the increasing numbers of indigenous priests, deacons, and catechists in Oaxaca symbolize the partial realization of the goals of inculturation. The Oaxacan Church has also undertaken programs of cultural “recuperation” as part of its pastoral mission. For example, although these activities have been considerably trimmed in recent years owing to a reduction in financial support from the Archdiocese, CEDIPIO still devotes much of its activity to fortifying indigenous cultural identity through active translations of Catholic rituals, sacraments, and celebrations into indigenous languages, organizing workshops on popular religiosity (led by clergy), on traditional medicine, and on indigenous “social memory,” and encouraging activities like the transcription of local myths, songs, and folktales. In addition, autonomous “intercultural schools” (*escuelas interculturales*) have been established in a few parishes. In “Centers of Peasant Education” I have seen in the Tehuantepec Diocese for example, Mixtec and Zapotec children are instructed in agricultural skills and traditional knowledge, stories, and songs. In similar schools I have visited in other Oaxacan parishes, such as in the Southern Sierra region, indigenous children and adults are taught to read and write in their own language (which survives almost exclusively in oral form), as well as in ‘*castellano*’ or Spanish. Such schools form part of the shared objectives of the progressive Church’s and the indigenous movement’s campaign—the “rescue” of customs of collaboration and mutual aid, regarded as essential elements of rural indigenous (and *campesino*) life.

The logic of the discourse of progressive clergy implies that part of authentic indigenous or popular identity is, being Catholic. Cultural practices that purportedly define or sustain indigenous identities are associated with the festival calendar and other communitarian rites and customs related to the civil-religious hierarchy or *cargo* system (traditionally the backbone of rural community social organization, a system of rotating political or religious duties among adult men, including financial sponsorship of local festivals or saint’s celebrations) and other Catholic rituals. At the same time, reflecting a so-called respect for indigenous values and cosmo-visions, I have observed elements of long-condemned and disparaged autochthonous rituals—indigenous languages, particular practices, and so on—being reintroduced into official liturgy and ceremonies.

Exemplary of the accent in liberationist Catholic thought on ecumenicism and pluralism, Indigenous Theology echoes the Vatican II-in-

duced opening and adaptation of the universal church to national and local cultures. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Norget, 1997, 2004), the inclusivist, pluralist theology implied by the liberationist concept of inculturation presents a significant challenge for the Popular Church in terms of the coherence of its grassroots, democratizing political posture, and self-image.

DECOLONIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF INCULTURATION PRAXIS, "CULTURE," AND THEOLOGY

In opening up spaces for reflection and conscientization, the inculturation theology of the progressive church in Mexico's southeast has arguably contributed to the larger project of indigenous revitalization and even effective anti-government opposition. In the state of Chiapas, for example, indigenous catechists trained by Samuel Ruiz and other liberationist clergy played a key role in raising indigenous peoples' awareness of acute social inequalities and marginalization suffered by their communities; this conscientization contributed to the mobilization required for the historic Zapatista uprising (Kovic, 2004; Leyva Solano, 1995).

It is worth taking a closer look at how this mobilization is enabled. In their current role as defenders of indigenous culture, priests help to develop alternative worldviews that challenge the prevailing order and work to educate movement participants. The clergy see sharing the way of the life of the poor as their mission while forwarding a process of evangelization that enables the development of a critical sociopolitical consciousness. The Oaxacan liberationist pastoral activities mentioned earlier exemplify the movement's establishment of social "free spaces" in which people are able to congregate and express their material concerns, which Antonio Gramsci—the original theorist of popular conscientization—saw as critical to the development of critical awareness, and therefore to effective popular mobilization. In the case of the Popular Church, the construction of an earthly Kingdom of God (that is, the "new society") is the concrete evangelist goal, seen to replicate Jesus' own evangelist project. In the Oaxacan project of integral evangelization, the material conditions of social life are contrived to form the basis of the symbolic construction of a distinct cultural (and religious) identity. Essentialized rural-derived values and customs of collective welfare and a moral rootedness are elaborated and embellished, then held up in contrast to the dominant (mestizo) society and the state.

And yet in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other settings where liberationist inculturation theology has been put into practice, it is difficult to determine

specifically how the transformed *religious* identity encouraged by the inculturation praxis has figured as a motor of mobilization. During my research in Oaxaca, while participants in the various initiatives organized by progressive Church initiatives spoke positively of learning more about human rights, and discussing problems in their communities through the lens of rights and “social justice,” their statements were never couched in explicitly *spiritual* terms. Considering this, we might well ask what indigenous people themselves have to gain from inculturation theology, beyond the practical benefits of conscientization (education, spaces for exchanging experiences and for the fostering of community)—benefits that undoubtedly contribute to and strengthen identity platforms for participation in the indigenous movement. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, for example, argued for Guatemala, “[b]oth revitalized Mayan religion and inculturated theology work, serve, and share the strategic goals of the Movimiento Maya, including that of self-determination, although in practical terms the utility of religion in this context seems to be more symbolic than concrete” (2004, p. 145). So how are we to understand what “religion” is in this context? Is it the fount of a completely revised worldview, or of a renewed allegiance to the Church? These questions are both complex and virtually impossible to answer. Nevertheless a tension is implied when one considers the issue of cultural autonomy, for indigenous peoples already have in their own “popular” religious forms—produced from many years of complex intermingling, conflation and layering of signs, practices and beliefs deeply embedded in everyday life—an important resource for resilience and resistance. While this is not a consciously politicized religiosity—or, perhaps better said, an obviously spiritual political consciousness—in the terms proposed by Indigenous Theology, the countless millenarian and other religious resistance movements occurring throughout Oaxaca’s history suggest it is precisely popular religion’s relatively autonomous social status that allows it to act potentially as an effective oppositional force (Barabas, 1997). This fact throws into relief a fundamental contradiction of the indigenous pastoral as a discourse aspiring to be authentically “of” and (from without) “for” indigenous people at the same time.

For when the surface of the discourse of the indigenous pastoral is scratched, other contradictions emerge. In general terms, inculturation theology regards “popular” or indigenous religious forms as necessary to a productive dialogue or reciprocal evangelization, between clergy and the poor, indigenous social classes. However the liberation theological imaginary, like that of Catholic theology, is a projection of a Eurocentric mode of knowledge, a refraction of “coloniality” that is rationalist and “purist” in

its logic and which supposes a transcendent, universal subject. As such its ability to tolerate or deal with pluralism necessarily has its limits. While it purports to address and ameliorate the social suffering of indigenous peoples, Mexican Indigenous Theology and its key concept of inculturation are also based on a view of "indigenous culture" that is arguably patronizing and utopic, reflecting a wish to preserve it according to conceptions of indigenous culture as a homogenous, egalitarian whole, to which (Catholic) religiosity is both central and "authentic." Indigenous spirituality is understood to inhere in a distinct cosmo-vision, and yet, as mentioned, one that contains at its heart the germ of the Word of God: once again, difference here is subsumed by universal "truth."

The stance of many clergy I knew reflected an ideology of "radical indigenism" manifest by many Oaxacan intellectuals today, who espouse what could be seen as a reverse racism and an adamant anti-Westernism (Hernández Díaz, 1994). While trumpeting the imperative of the autonomy and independence of indigenous society, this view tends towards a homogenizing modernist romantic idealism; the indigenous world is seen as an endangered society of primeval harmony and tradition, whose independent development since the conquest has been repeatedly violated by capitalist foreigners ignorant of its distinct cosmology and ways of being.

At issue then is the conscious, orchestrated character of the process of borrowing and mixing intrinsic to Indigenous Theology. For David Lehmann (1998), adherents of the "People's Church" movement within the Catholic Church, or the practitioners of the Indigenous Theology of inculturation, are examples of what he calls "*basista*" tendencies, due to their faith in the faith of the poor or the grassroots: "They develop their theory about the proper place of indigenous practices at second remove, in order to set them up as an authentic performance of something 'other'..." (1998, p. 613).

Along similar lines of critique, Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 66) wrote "colonial discourse is an apparatus of power that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial, cultural and historical differences." Within its discourse of the indigenous pastoral discourse, the Oaxacan Popular Church constructs cultural differences in a certain fashion to justify its continued mediatory role in indigenous communities as beneficent "accompanier." While indigenous society is unmistakably different and "other" vis-à-vis the sacred, timeless, and transcendent body of the Church, Catholicism is construed as being genuinely traditional to the history and identity of indigenous peoples.

"Indigenizing" projects are often efforts "from above" to control the orientation of religious synthesis: in this sense, Oaxacan Indigenous Theol-

ogy may be seen as an attempt to define the interface of indigenous, “folk” religion with official Catholic religiosity, which was previously the territory of a more self-determined, autonomous popular faith. The controlling penchant of liberationist discourse, however, is dissonant alongside local sacred practice and belief. The continued tenacity of certain popular-indigenous religious practices attests to a self-defined field of meanings that is characteristic of popular religiosity, and which represents a challenge to Church attempts to control expressions of faith through the imposition of “official” doctrinal interpretations of any kind (Norget, 1998, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Theology has been referred to as a “movement” that is sweeping indigenous communities throughout Latin America (Judd, 2004). Following the spirit of far-reaching Church reforms that ensued from the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-1965), the philosophy of Indigenous Theology advocates an incorporation, validation, and reinvigoration of marginalized autochthonous traditions and culture within a revised Catholic doctrine, liturgy, and its associated pastoral program the “indigenous pastoral.” They form part of a campaign that has seen some clergy transformed into staunch defenders of indigenous rights, as they aid indigenous groups to combat perceived sources of culture loss, exploitation, and, increasingly, militarization of indigenous communities.

This essay has attempted to nuance what I have suggested is a simplistic view of Indigenous Theology that understands the meeting of liberationist Catholic discourse and indigenous religiosity in neutral and idealistic terms, assuming that their dialogue occurs on an equal social and political field. Based on my research in Oaxaca, I have tried to demonstrate, however, that in spite of the progressive Church’s efforts to valorize indigenous cultural forms and to defer to indigenous peoples in determining their own path toward liberation, the fundamental implications of the indigenous pastoral campaign cannot be understood outside of a consideration of power relations that have colored the engagement of the Church and indigenous peoples since colonization. The church progressive discourse is not an “organic” theology in Gramscian terms, reflective of the common-sense nature of popular consciousness; while being a praxis that emulates and speaks to popular experience, it is still directed “from above.” Owing precisely to its insistence on the immanence of the Christian message in any cultural context, and its continued allegiance to the Catholic Church, liberation theology’s discourse is underlain by a logic of universalism that

is premised on an idea of Catholicism as a supposedly generic, non-culturally specific religiosity.

I have also emphasized that we cannot fully comprehend the social and political relevance and impact of progressive religious philosophies like liberation theology without seeing how theological praxis is implemented in specific circumstances. Catholic liberation theology is a discursive construction, not a concrete social phenomenon; as such, it lends itself to manipulation, reinterpretation, and distortion. To offer an example from Oaxaca, recently a much diluted version of Indigenous Theology has been adopted by the conservative (i.e., Vatican-aligned) leadership of the Mexican Bishops Council (CEM) as the central theme of pastoral (“evangelization”) plans that are seen as leading toward a new rapprochement with indigenous peoples. But this version of Indigenous Theology is completely stripped of the political intent of the liberationist discourse, and is an appropriation of its terminology for the sake of re-signifying, and presumably undermining, its underlying “emancipatory” message.

Thus, the Popular Church’s indigenist pastoral agenda is a program for action that, despite its calls for a more politically engaged and relevant Catholic popular faith, remains mired in problems given by the historical position of the Mexican Church as agent of “official knowledge” vis-à-vis indigenous peoples—a situation that has existed since colonization. This is especially so today, given the emergence of an even tighter relationship between the Mexican Church and the state at the national level, in which the ecclesial hierarchy’s cooperation in an intransigent stance toward indigenous peoples represents a neo-colonial turn.

In these increasingly socially and politically turbulent times in Oaxaca and Mexico, how the progressive Church steers its professed agenda for social reform is an interesting question: the future of the Popular Church may lie in the hands of those clergy and nuns with enough courage, commitment, and imagination to divorce themselves from the institutional church even further, and to take the terms of equal dialogue seriously. Until then, “liberation” will likely remain simply another goal of utopic Church rhetoric, one as elusive as that of autonomy.

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