

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS REALITY IN IBERO-AMERICA (I)

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We celebrate with joy this First Ibero-American Nazarene Theological Conference because if we want to be faithful to God's call we must admit that in every historical moment it is opportune to reflect over the challenges that confront the church in its walk through the world.

We are fully conscious that the fulfillment of the mission is always done in contexts with specific socioeconomic, political and religious characteristics. Although the church is not of the world, it is in it. Scripturally we comprehend that the mission of the church is done in the power of the Spirit, but this does not exclude it from the influence of the context where said mission is done. Therefore, in full sense, it is healthy to see our context with the purpose of seeking more creative and pertinent missionological answers in the light of the Word.

Initially, I would like to mention two clarifications on the presentation of this essay. In first place, in relation to the theme that we are dealing with, it is obvious that it is impossible to do an exhaustive approach because the multiform spiritual and religious reality of Ibero-America surpasses whatever intent at synthesis. In second place, it is necessary to mention that it is difficult to conceive the idea of a reality as something static that we can face descriptively. Instead of a fixed reality what we have in our continent are dynamic scenes in which different actors in motion intervene, in the midst of a lot of action.

Without doubt, in Ibero-America we live in an age of transition in many senses, and spirituality does not escape this pivotal change. We begin to feel the effects of postmodernism which is an emerging paradigm that has appeared as a new interpretive solution of reality. Formally, modernism was inspired by the premise that it could change the world through reason, but finally this ideal of progress turned into tragedy when it was discovered that ironically the progress that was so desired, went against human beings. Salinas has written that:

... the hope that through reason as human beings we could understand the cosmos, establish social peace and better our condition has become a nightmare that has shown that progress has escaped from our hands and in its advance is leaving a consequence of problems even bigger than it tried to solve... trust that science and technology would produce an infallible cure for our social and existential pains has dissipated into an every growing pessimism. All of the pillars of the modern project have shown themselves to be only hollow columns, with golden covering.¹

From its purpose, postmodern philosophy affirms that the world does not have one sole significance, and that all reality is subject to multiple readings, each with equal validity. It ridicules the search for one truth and questions absolutes. There are no single truths, only

¹ Daniel Salinas, *Postmodernismo y la iglesia evangélica* (San José, IINDEF, 2000), 54.

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temporary appreciations, that is to say, “everything depends on my point of view”. Terranova has written that “in postmodern society everything is relative and there is no place or time for that which requires will and commitment. It is the age of *feelings*: ‘nothing is truth or a lie, everything is watered-down’”.²

This framework of postmodernism, without doubt has relevance in the religious and spiritual situation in our context. In the midst of these times of transition it is legitimate to ask ourselves: what elements configure in the religious and spiritual reality on Ibero-America in the time of dizzying change?

Before trying to describe our religious and spiritual reality, the following are some tendencies that are present on the religious and spiritual scene of our continent that allow reflection over some challenges that we face as the church of the Lord in the fulfillment of our mission.

1. Explosion of the religious. One of the affirmations that modernism had was the disappearance of religion, because it was considered nothing more than an illusion that responded to the lack of maturity of human beings. However, the phenomenon of postmodernism has shown openness towards the sacred that has been made evident in an ever growing religious pluralism³. Religious pluralism should be understood not as an isolated phenomenon but as a growing reality⁴. In fact, during the past decades many Latin American countries have modified their constitutions to recognize the multicultural, multi-language and multireligious characteristic of their societies.

Hong has mentioned that “the rupture of the scientific myth and its promise of building a world full of peace and happiness are causing an enormous vacuum in us. This ‘emptiness’ is inducing ironically in us the search for the transcendent and irrational. It has generated a ‘spiritual emptiness’ that demands transcendence. Among the tendencies that characterize postmodernism, one that is most pronounced, is a certain ‘return to the sacred’”.⁵

Latin America as a continent has historically been considered culturally Catholic, but as result of this tendency of the resurgence of the transcendental, currently multiple religious expressions live together peacefully that range from the resurgence of indigenous religions, the

² Juan Terranova. “La iglesia frente a la cultura posmoderna”, in *Apuntes Pastorales*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (Costa Rica: Desarrollo Cristiano Internacional, October 1999), 46.

³ José María Mardones has called this phenomena the “new religious revitalization”. In *¿Adónde va la religión?*. (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2001), 7.

⁴ Last year in Argentina a guide was published about the mosaic of religions that are practiced in Buenos Aires, which shows this postmodern religious phenomenon. *Guía de la diversidad religiosa de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2003).

⁵ In Sik Hong, *¿Una iglesia posmoderna?* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2001), 9.

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arrival of oriental religions, Afro-Brazilian spiritists, even New Age.⁶ Piedra has said that “there is a revival of the religious in which everything fits”.⁷

2. Spirituality is understood principally in the framework of feelings before convictions. In postmodern spirituality, everything passes through “how I feel” or in evangelical language, “I feel the presence....” Padilla has written that in the past, Christian experience was defined in doctrinal terms, in converting to Jesus Christ and accepting certain Biblical truths; now the emphasis is in the spiritual experience and this as a means to feel good.⁸

The faith that is articulated from the base of reason has given way to the overvaluing of the senses and emotionalism which have been made into legitimate categories of “experiences” supposedly religious.

For sociologist González, what predominates “is religion ‘lite’: a kind of religiosity characterized by its absence of the dramatic, its doctrinal incoherency, its nonsystematic aspect (beliefs that do not necessarily translate into personal behavioral norms and rituals that do not demand institutional support) and its declaration of independence in the area of personal commitments and ethics”.⁹

3. An individualistic and subjective spirituality. In the framework of postmodern religious pluralism, every categorical affirmation of absolute truth is questioned and this opens the way to religious individualism. Spirituality becomes of the individualistic character without a center of reference and the validity of beliefs that become legitimate by means of the individual’s own experience. The theme song or phrase is “everything is valid because I believe it”. Hong has written that “if a man doesn’t have any reference, he is indifferent and lives a lifestyle of ‘levity of being’, nothing stands in his way. His only reference is to have a good time.”¹⁰

In the evangelical world this type of postmodern spirituality translates into apathy and the lack of commitment to the mission of the church. This is a personal and utilitarian perception of the Christian life and piety, as if God’s grace were exclusively for our service, forgetting the act that was the greatest expression of Christian spirituality has to evidenced in the commitment to building the Kingdom.

4. Transversality in the evangelical experience. Another interesting phenomenon that is occurring on the contemporary evangelical scene is that that has to do with the migration of theologies, worship styles and mission models. In other words, a doctrine or style can be present in various denominations, crisscrossing them. For example, currently it is difficult to perceive

⁶ Jean-Pierre Bastian has written, “Today, Latin America accepts exogenous religious movements, and as a result produces religious movements that export practices and beliefs... The pluralization of beliefs is a global phenomenon that is being manifested in the majority of the countries on the planet.” *La mutación religiosa de América Latina* (Mexico: FCE, 1997), 83-84.

⁷ Arturo Piedra, *¿Hacia dónde va el protestantismo? Herencia y prospectivas en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2003), 45.

⁸ René Padilla, “De cara al Cuarto Congreso de Evangelización (CLADE IV)”, en *Iglesia y misión R.I.O.C.* Vol. 18, No.67/68 (Buenos Aires: FTL, enero-julio, 1999), 45.

⁹ Luis González Carvajal, “Educar en un mundo posmoderno”, en *Educadores* (Madrid, 1992), 246.

¹⁰ In Sik Hong, op. cit., 17.

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any denominational doctrinal distinction in the light of observation the type of worship in any certain congregation.

This crisscrossing has shown the fragility of confessional borders and has resulted in the dilution of the distinctive doctrines of every denomination. It appears that the need to give a precise account of what and why we believe no longer has much importance. Related to this point, this phenomenon that some have called the “Pentecostalization of the Latin American evangelical church”¹¹ deserves special study. Bastian, in analyzing this period of mutation in the Latin American Protestantisms, has mentioned an important characteristic,

... the absolute predominance of the Pentecostal-style societies. Even when some historical denominations... could qualify themselves as imposing, they find themselves numerically marginalized in comparison to the Pentecostal churches, which make up, in general and at least, four fifths of the total of the Protestant forces in the majority of the countries”.¹²

However, in relation to this influence perhaps it would be more appropriate to talk about neo-Pentecostalism than Pentecostalism since from its traditional Pentecostal roots, mass media has helped to diffuse their doctrinal emphasis.

5. New “religious fads” on the evangelical scene. In the evangelical plane, the postmodern search for spirituality and transversality has given rise to “fads” that have been installed in churches all across the continent. Some representative indicators of this are: faith in faith itself as the panacea to accomplish everything, the lion’s roar in worship, theology of prosperity that has as its premise the search for material success as the highest goal of the Christian life, the rise of the Apostolic movement, the causal relationship between divine blessings and material prosperity, blaming the failures of mediocre Christian lives on every type of demon, subtle forms of “evangelical animism”, etc.

The eager desire for the extraordinary has favored a spirituality that is “mystic without ethics; an emotion without mission; a speculation without projection”.¹³ Unfortunately, in the face of this wave of “religious fads”, what has been first in the womb of evangelical churches has been the absence of Biblical-theological criteria that are used as filters to evaluate the different focuses and allow discernment of their legitimacy.

One direct consequence of the tendency has been the increase in “migratory members” that move from one church to another, under the supposed search for “something renewed” on God’s part and complicating membership records.

¹¹ Some interesting works have touched on this phenomenon in the contemporary evangelical church including David Stoll, *¿América Latina se vuelve protestante?* (Quito: Abya Yala, 1990) and Bernardo Campos, *De la Reforma Protestante a la pentecostalidad de la iglesia: Debate sobre el pentecostalismo en América Latina* (Quito: CLAI, 1997).

¹² Jean-Pierre Bastian, op. cit., 231.

¹³ Harold Segura, *Hacia una espiritualidad evangélica comprometida* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2002), 15.

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Having traced this brief profile of the contemporary religious scene, it is time to ask ourselves: How do these tendencies influence the ministry of the contemporary church? What are the challenges that the church confronts at this time?

I believe the biggest challenge has to do with the message of the Gospel and the mission of the church. We must ask ourselves: What is implied in announcing Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation in a pluralistic world? As Christians we affirm that the absolute truth has as its name Jesus Christ, and that because this truth became man we have the criteria to evaluate other truths (1 John 5:20). He is our reference of salvation, because of this we tell it to every culture, religion and nation. No other contemporary current can attempt anything against this central value of the Christian faith. To negotiate the singularity of Jesus Christ is to lose the essence of the reason for being the church. However, we need to continue thinking in who we can present the Gospel if we want to be relevant to a postmodern society.

A second challenge has to do with the need to understand our spirituality, not only in individualistic terms of moral perfection, but more holistically as an opportunity to grow in the image of Christ in service to others. Christian spirituality is not based on ecstatic experiences disconnected from commitment to the Kingdom and that only respond to our individual hunger for transcendence but that it is a spirituality that is founded in a way of life coherent to the style of Jesus Christ, as our model of the new humanity. This genuine spirituality capacitates us to stop looking inside of ourselves and obligates us to see the world through the eyes of the Gospel.

A third challenge is one that has to do with our doctrinal identity as the Church of the Nazarene. We have a theological inheritance and a history that we need to honor not only for denominational loyalty but because of personal conviction. We need to joyfully embrace what we believe because it gives us identity. This doesn't imply, under any reason, that we don't know the universality of the Church of Jesus Christ that goes beyond all confessional borders, but that fortunately being part of this community of faith in Christ requires us to have doctrinal definitions that we need to believe and that give us standards to live by.

A fourth challenge has to do with the necessity to return to the Scriptures and to find in them the criteria to evaluate all the contemporary manifestations of the Spirit. As heirs of the Protestant Reformation, we have to recover our legacy that the Word of God has to be our only reference of life and faith. We have to be alert to the fact that basing our beliefs on what we feel, can be very dangerous and insecure. Biblical ignorance tends to become the door through which "fads" enter the church to cause us to deviate from sound doctrine.

The religious scenario in Ibero-America opens a series of challenges for the contemporary church. Our context is marked by diverse ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic and religious contrasts, but at the same time it is a region full of potential, resources and opportunities. The churches in our countries are experiencing great growth, but at the same time are seriously threatened by pressures of an individualistic spirituality, subjective and superficial, far from the message of the Gospel. In the midst of these times, postmodernism has shown that more than ever there is hunger for God and for the Only truth. May God help us to be His faithful witnesses to our generation.