

Can We Do Theology from Below? A Theological Framework for Indigenous Theologies

by William Dyrness

"[John] Mackay helped us to construct a new Latin American spiritual history without rejecting our cultural roots, and start a 'dialogue of love' with our culture, without departing from the biblical roots of our faith." José Míguez Bonino¹

In his influential book *A Secular Age*, Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor has described the modern social imaginary in the West. Taylor claims that whether we realize it or not, modern people in the West all live within an immanent frame. This is how he describes it:

And so we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order; or better, constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral. . . . This understanding of our predicament has as background a sense of our history: we have advanced to this grasp of our predicament through earlier more primitive stages of society and self-understanding. In this process, we have come of age.²

Evangelicals have often responded to this with excessive hand wringing—just another attempt to deny the transcendent world, to close it off from God's direct activity. But, to my mind, Taylor's work does something of special interest to those of us committed to seeing the gospel take root in all the nations of the world. His primary purpose is to name the assumptions of many Western people, what he calls their *social imaginary*. This to my mind is essential to Christian witness in the West, and he is worth reading for that reason alone. But he has done more than this. What I suggest is that Taylor signals a possible sea change in the Western imagination. Taylor's focus on the immanent frame suggests that we might reimagine God not as a distant judge somewhere off in the heavens, but as the radically immanent Emmanuel—God with us, that the New Testament pictures for us. Considering the long term development of theology, we might put matters this way: we may finally be moving beyond the influence of Plato and the dualisms he proposed—of mind and body, spirit and matter and so on—a move that allows us to pay attention to the immanent presence and activity of God, by the Spirit, in our own history and that of others.

Let me linger on this point a bit. I would argue that for two thousand years Western theology has labored under the influence of Plato's metaphysics—that all the world is a shadow of some other world that is more real and certainly more important than this one. God and God's truth reside in this other world. This heritage over time has come to be connected with all kinds

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of political, cultural, and even racial assumptions that we unconsciously carry with us in our missions' activity. Whatever the positive virtues of this heritage—which are the subject for another day—this lingering shadow has kept us from paying attention to the way God works not from the top down, but from below. As John put this in the first chapter of his Gospel (John 1:14): “the word was made flesh and dwelt among us”—God, as Eugene Peterson translated this, “has moved into the neighborhood.” If this is true, it means the gospel, like yeast, is meant to permeate our situation; God became one of us, to begin the process of transforming the creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is something that Plato could never have imagined, indeed that he would have found incomprehensible. This “God with us” continues working from below by the Holy Spirit—that other comforter Christ promised, bringing creation to the end that God has prepared for it. If something like this is true, it seems to me the fundamental theological impulse should be to start not in the abstract realm of ideas, but with what God is doing in the everyday life of people. To tease out these ideas, I offer some historical observations about our Western history in order to show the way this history has actually *impeded* the development of indigenous theology, and continues to do so.

Conflating Transcendent and Universal

As we reflect together on the possibility of doing mission and theology from below, let me describe a major result of this lingering shadow that I hope we can overcome. In some fundamental sense, the top down model that follows from our Platonic heritage, has led us to *confuse the transcendent with the universal*. Because we say God is transcendent, it follows that everything we have come to believe to be true about God and salvation is universal—that is, true for all people and all times. Following Socrates (Plato's teacher), we have come through

our process of dialectic, what we call our hermeneutics, to the truth about things—to our equivalent of Plato's knowledge of the eternal unchanging ideas. This truth, since it reflects the unchanging forms—or in our case the transcendence of God, and the final truth contained in Scripture as we understand this—is necessarily universal. It is only a very short step from this to assuming that our accepted understanding of what we mean by atonement, or how we define precisely the two (or single) natures of Christ, or *our* biblical understanding of what the church should look like, are also universal—because there is a transcendent truth about these things. Of course, there *is* a truth of these things, but none of us (and certainly no culture



on its own) has finished discovering what this is, and we won't do so until we stand before the Lord and are finally given eyes to properly see what has been before our faces all along. We are all on the way, as Paul makes clear in Eph. 4: 11–16: the many gifts of the church are given for building up of the body of Christ, until we all come to the truth (the plural verb forms are emphatic in this passage), which Paul pointedly describes as a mature, corporate personhood.

The Communal Person and the Church

This conflation of transcendent and universal—reflecting our top down metaphysic—has particular application

to two realms which I want to mention briefly: our understanding of persons and of truth. First, this confusion has often led those of us from the West (and that includes all of us educated in Western schools) to assume that *certain social and political arrangements, because they appear to us to rest on foundations that we take to be biblical, must be universal*. Even if democracy isn't working so well in our own country, it surely should be the goal of all other countries; even if the neoliberal economic model is clearly showing strains and has resulted in massive injustices, it still should be the goal of economics everywhere. Many Christians are convinced that these Western arrangements have developed under the influence of Christian teaching that is dominant there. And there is in fact some evidence for this.³ But even if this were so, it does not follow that the same biblical teaching may not lead to other equally valid forms of social and political expression.

Because this is so important to our missions strategy, let me briefly unpack this unconscious baggage. Often we commend our institutions because we believe they tend to give people their dignity. But giving people their dignity does not necessarily mean that we give each individual the freedom to “decide things for themselves.” Here is where our assumptions about persons become influential. In the West, persons have come to be regarded as autonomous individuals who make decisions for themselves, and as a result, our evangelism and church planting have often assumed this view of the person.

But this leads me to ask: how might people in communal societies think about dignity and choice? I am convinced that we need to understand more deeply how democratic ideas are reinterpreted as they spread throughout the world into these other societies. How is forging a common future understood, for example, in India today? I would like our anthropologists to help

us understand what it is like for a communal democracy to develop—that is, how do people whose identity has been forged over centuries through various cultural and religious group practices, come to understand what it means to shape their own future? When I read in section 3 of the draft bill (Freedom of Religion 2017), tabled in August, 2017, by the Jharkhand government, that,

No person shall attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion / religious faith to another by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means, nor shall any person abet any such conversion, . . .⁴

I am sure that, though this certainly includes an unfounded prejudice against Christianity, it also shows evidence of political and cultural understandings and confusions developing during the last two hundred years, and is expressive of a long tradition of communal cultural values we need to learn about. Moreover, these ideas reflect deeply held values that will not change any time soon. Here is my question: how can we find ways to understand and accommodate ideas that are so deeply expressive of communal cultural values and that, in themselves, offer no direct challenge to the gospel? How can we honor deeply held cultural values that have developed over long periods of time and that express peoples' identities? How might the gospel be understood differently in these places? Answering questions like this is essential to the project of indigenous theologizing.

Let me give another example that has resulted from the research that Darren Duerksen and I have done for our forthcoming book *Discovering Church*.⁵ As we reviewed the emergence of the modern Western church in the light of its particular history, paying attention to how it came to be from below, it became clear to us that the model of church that Western missionaries took with them overseas was almost universally a product of the

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Reformation notion of the gathered church, as this was filtered through enlightenment categories (the “individual choice thing” again). If one accepts this narrative as somehow normative (i.e., that it is a universal expression of God and Scripture’s transcendence), then the obvious form of church that God wants is a voluntary society. When we uncovered this mostly overlooked assumption, many things started making sense. Why is it that many of the historically unchurched populations represent those places where the communal notions of culture are assumed and, thus, where the whole idea of a voluntary society is either non-existent, or incomprehensible? Maybe the resistance is not to “church,” but to our Western ideas of church; maybe because of our “sweet tooth” for transcendence, we have confused “the Body of Christ” with a “voluntary society”—that is, we have conflated our “transcendent understanding” with what is universal. Maybe followers of Christ from these places will help us see new ways of embodying Christ.

Muslim Philippines: A Communal Model

This became even more striking to us when we found examples in the Southern Philippines of “inclusively diverse communities,” that is, communal societies in which identities are formed in multiple ways. Followers of Christ there—now in the third generation—have found ways to define themselves within their communal Muslim society as those “inviting others to the way of righteousness,” in ways that recall the emerging church in the book of Acts. E. Acoba points out that the ethnic identity of the Bangsamoro, in its Muslim form, makes room for an understanding of community as inclusively diverse, that is, made up of

various tribal groupings.⁶ Note this is not pluralism in the Western sense, but embraces differences within a larger solidarity, that in turn finds its final form in the *Ummah*—the larger inclusively diverse Muslim community.

This unique context poses the question: how might this embrace of difference allow for formation of particular groupings of followers of Jesus (*Isa al Masih*)? Clearly these believers have found a place in their community where they can live out their new identity as followers of Christ. Acoba has called attention to the presence of multiple sets of hermeneutical approaches and even exegetical methods in these communities, suggesting a different application of their understanding of community as inclusively diverse.

Here we see a striking parallel to the emergence of ideas of freedom in Early Modern Europe. Living in this communal, premodern culture one could not expect to find complete freedom of choice or assembly, since these ideas did not develop until much later. Still, in the various principalities that made up Early Modern European society, as Peter Wilson has shown, there were spaces for various *liberties* to emerge. Perhaps, in a similar way, such spaces today can allow believers in communal societies like in Muslim Philippines to express their newfound freedom in Christ.⁷ While not envisioning church in a manner familiar to Westerners, these believers are able to exploit the possibilities inherent in their solidarities to join together and live out communally their witness to Christ.

Clearly, it is difficult to either specify the character or the direction of this project, because it is an emergent process with an open future. But there is a clear sense to these believers that God is present in a living way as they

gather and invite others to the way of righteousness (which is how they have come to define their community). Clearly, the notion of church as a voluntary society, in which members freely choose to join or not, is an inadequate model for their emerging notion of church. But at the same time, their assumptions about community as inclusively diverse provide spaces for them to come together around a study of Scripture, as they seek guidance in their commitment to follow Jesus in the midst of their newly non-subjugated Muslimhood. Notice that God is allowed to work in and through the cultural assumptions of the people, suggesting a possible model for an indigenous theology of the church.

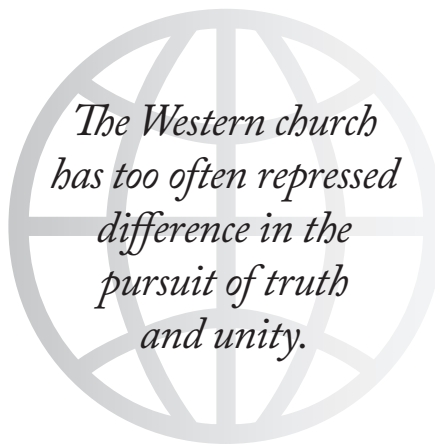
The Church and Immanent Histories

Secondly, consider our (mostly unconscious) assumption of the tenets of the Enlightenment—where the search for “true truth” takes the form of readily understood (and therefore universally valid) cognitive categories. Not only has this often obscured the biblical notion of truth as faithfulness, but it has made us insensitive to the way patterns of truth, of truth telling and of faithful living, are culturally determined—since again, our notions of truth, growing as they do out of our situated reading of Scripture, are assumed to be universal.

If God works from below, that is from within the cultural histories of a people, we might begin to explore what non-Western historians are calling “immanent histories”—like that which believers in Bangsamoro are living out. That is, freed from our false sense of security, we might be willing to listen and learn from peoples’ stories, that are existentially felt and lived, and that trace ways in which God (or the gods) have been active long before they have been exposed to any Western missionaries or Western forms of thinking. This may enable us to learn, as Paul put it when he quoted a Greek poet,

that “in him (God) we live and move and have our being”; or, as our African brothers and sisters put it, “I am because we are.” Similarly, we might profit from the way Hispanic theologians have described their identity as grounded in their concrete, embodied life together, not in abstract ideas. As Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta put this for Hispanic people:

...it will not be sufficient to read books about Jesus Christ, or even study relevant dogmatic declarations or biblical texts—important as these might be. We must instead look first—even if not only—to the concrete, historical relationship to Jesus (often for example by actually touching his image and kissing his feet); [it



is here] that we come to know him, as it is in our concrete historical relationship with our families and friends that we come to know these.⁸

Now if we as Protestants object to this Catholic expression of faith, we may need to ask ourselves whether our Protestant way of worship has not been over-accommodated to its Reformation and Enlightenment setting. Because, what strikes me about Goizueta’s description is just how deeply it resonates with many other communal cultures that think in concrete rather than abstract terms.

Though happily there are exceptions that I will describe below, the history of the Western church has too often

repressed difference in the pursuit of truth and unity.⁹ I will begin with another example that Darren and I have uncovered in our research on the church. From the third century to the fifth (that is between Cyprian and Augustine—interestingly two North African bishops), the definition of the church gradually evolved. From Cyprian, who emphasized the character of the community and its behavior—especially the patience enjoined on that community in order to survive persecution—things changed with Augustine who defined the church by its spiritual and theological character—that it was “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” as the Nicene Creed phrased it. But in the century between these two theologians it was Cyril of Alexandria who taught that the church was constituted by a mystical unity in Christ—and this mystical unity could guarantee its righteousness.¹⁰ This seemed at the time a reasonable conclusion because it allowed church leadership to be more tolerant to the obvious imperfection of its members, who were joining in such large numbers from Roman society after the conversion of Constantine. The church’s purity was understood to reside in the risen and glorified Christ. Notice that while the earlier Bishop Cyprian defined believers by particular standards of behavior—from below as it were—the latter Cyril began to describe “church” in philosophical and spiritual categories—from above. Moreover, this soon became a consensus that was enforced by the imperial power.

In the fifth century, Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo, became the dominant influence on ideas about the church. All sections of the church owe a great deal to this great North African bishop, whose theological perspective continues to guide many. Under the influence of Cyril’s theology, which was shaped by the Middle Platonism of the time, Augustine came to define the church in the theological terms of Nicea and Cyril, from above—its purity was guaranteed by

its mystical unity with Christ. But the Donatists, representing the indigenous Berber community of Augustine's own North African setting, chose to follow Cyprian and defined the church as a truly righteous community. Both of these ecclesiological perspectives are surely valid ways of defining the church, but Augustine could not tolerate this difference, even among his own neighbors. Early in his life a more tolerant Augustine had written: "I am displeased that schismatics are violently coerced to communion by the force of any secular power." But late in life, in his *Retractions*, he admitted he had changed his mind, and wrote,

I had not yet learned either how much evil their impunity would dare or to what extent the application of discipline could bring about their improvement.¹¹

Bound as he was by the dichotomies of his Middle Platonism, Augustine could argue that patience and love were interior virtues that one needed to cultivate, but that meanwhile the state was justified in imposing its truth by violence. What was lost was the indigenous impulse carried by the local Berber culture, a motivation that sought actual purity and defined sin as pollution. In other words, the process of indigenous theologizing was overridden.

Medieval Reaction to Grassroots Theology

The medieval period was, if anything, even more opposed to indigenous expressions of Christianity. This of course expressed its communal boundedness and the political structures developed to support this. But it also reflected a particular theological orientation; all this was happening while the magisterial theologians of that period began to formulate their transcendent categories of theology. There is a general consensus that this rich and important theological reflection was deeply influenced by the recovered treatises of classical (Greek) philosophy—Aristotle especially but

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also Augustine's Platonism. These same influences also funded the mis-siological response to militant forms of Islam coming to their doorstep in Spain—consider that the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas' second most important treatise, was written to prepare missionaries to confront Islam in Spain.

Meanwhile, as a means of keeping the medieval church pure (or to reform it) the church began formulating more violent means of protecting this doctrinal purity. R. I. Moore has argued that all the medieval heresies that developed were related in one way or another to the growing desire for spiritual purity and for escape from the evils of the world, and to the equally strong and increasing sense that the church was not being true to its spiritual mission—that it had failed in fundamental ways.¹² These emerging movements in many ways were replaying the struggle between the Donatists and Augustine. Moore notes that the increasing wealth of society had often corrupted the church and its leadership and the people quite naturally began to look elsewhere for religious guidance. It was, in part, the failure of the religious authorities that promoted heretical groups, or at least encouraged them in the direction of heresy.¹³

But the second claim by Moore, developed in his more recent book *The War on Heresy*,¹⁴ is more troubling. He asserts that the very process of the church's efforts to reform itself led to mechanisms of control that inevitably entailed violence. In this endeavor, the church was actually following the lead of its most famous teacher, St. Augustine. The process began in 1160 when five heretics were burned in Cologne, only the second execution in the seven centuries since the fall of the Roman

Empire. Moore claims this process culminated in the famous Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and produced a full blown "persecuting society." The canons of this council encouraged prelates to liquidate heresy in their regions—even as it required the faithful to make an annual confession. Thus, this movement toward reform was also, at the same time, a precursor of the Inquisition.

However one judges Moore's work,¹⁵ the ironies that he pinpoints are compelling. The heresies that developed, or, if Moore is right, were actually sparked, were all in the service of a piety that sought real holiness and deliverance from the trials of life on earth. But the response of the church to these movements, which can be understood at best as attempts to reform itself, only increased the systematic persecution of those seen as deviant. Does this, Moore wonders, suggest an intention to destroy the ability of local populations to display the difference of understanding and acting that their indigenous traditions had given them? In other words, is this part of the continuing preference for doing theology from above rather than from the grassroots?

These efforts at reform by violence not only failed to account for regional differences—like the Hussites in Bohemia, or the Cathars in France—they also fueled the entire sad history of the Crusades. This pursuit of a pure and unified church led to attempts not only to recover the Holy Land from its Muslim rulers, but also came to include campaigns directed against residents of Europe, who for a mixture of religious, economic or political reasons were considered pagans or heretics. Whatever deviance was perceived in these groups, these initiatives ensured that the indigenous

wisdom these groups represented was given no account. Subsequent to the disastrous fourth crusade, which virtually destroyed Constantinople as the capital of Eastern Christianity (1204), it would take almost 300 years to recover the riches of the Greek tradition of Christianity. The attacks on Islam themselves represented a certain hypocrisy, considering all the Western church had gained from the Muslim philosophers in Spain. Indeed, the Greek philosophical and scientific heritage had passed into Europe by means of the Muslim (and Jewish) philosophers in Spain. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of this medieval Christendom, it is uncontested that it was this form of Christianity that conquistadores took with them to Latin America. As Enrique Dussel notes, such was the confidence in this Christian civilization that the crusades against the Moors and the conquest of Latin America appeared natural. “It was,” Dussel notes, “the same Latin, Hispanic Christendom which came to America.”¹⁶

Small wonder that theological reflection from the grassroots, or dialogue with other religious traditions, was not on the agenda. And, unfortunately, missionaries originally carried the Christendom model of missions with them as they sailed for Asia or Africa. As Jehu Hanciles has written:

The Western missionary enterprise was marked by the dye of Christendom in its fundamental assumptions, operational strategy and long-term objectives.¹⁷

While Hanciles surely oversimplifies a complex history, it is incontestable that, in Latin America, the missionary program was often allied with territorial expansion, pursued with the collaboration of political authorities, and was framed in terms of spreading Christian civilization around the world—taking with them this confusion of the transcendent with the universal. But this meant, as Willie James Jennings has pointed out, that they also carried with them the top down model of doing theology that

ignores the religious and cultural realities on the ground. As Jennings argues, rather than learning from other worlds where missionaries went they “translated these worlds into the old world of Europe.”¹⁸ As a result, too often the objects of mission were not encouraged to carry out what John Mackay calls a “dialogue of love” with their own traditions and history.

Of course, during all these periods there were exceptions, those who sought to listen and learn—I will describe examples below. One thinks of Bartolme de las Cases in Latin America or Matteo Ricci in China. But these were often marginalized by the mainstream Christian powers. Consider the experience of Ricci in 17th and



18th century China. The achievements of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) are well known, but what is often overlooked is the ecclesial machinations that led to the frustration of his contextual efforts. The learning of the Jesuit followers of Ricci impressed the ruling elite to such an extent that they were put in charge of the royal observatory, and even more significantly, led the Qing Emperor Kang Xi (1661–1722) to issue an edict permitting the practice of Christianity in China. Since the Europeans were quiet and did no harm, the Emperor declared,

we decide therefore that all temples dedicated to the Lord of Heaven... ought to be preserved, and it may be permitted to all who wish to worship

this God to enter these temples, offer him incense, and perform the ceremonies practiced according to ancient custom by the Christians.¹⁹

But denominational jealousy being what it is, the Dominicans and the Franciscans accused the Jesuits of heresy. Despite Kang’s support for the Jesuits, the Pope sided with the accusers in 1742 and declared the Chinese rites incompatible with Christianity. Kang’s successor returned the favor and proscribed Christianity as heterodox. Sinologist Roderick MacFarquhar comments on this episode: “Christianity thereby lost its best chance of emulating Buddhism and becoming accepted as a Chinese religion”—and, I add, Christianity has suffered over its foreignness ever since.

A Theology Grounded in People

Fortunately, from the time of Paul himself, there have been others who have insisted that theology had to begin with the people. For it is the people themselves that have the deepest sense of their own identity and its meaning. This existential feel for history José Rabasa has described as “immanent history,”²⁰ and I would argue that this immanent history is always the starting point for vibrant expressions of biblical truth—as an expression of something new in that place, and not an import from without.

In the late sixth century, St. Colomba of Iona (d. 597) became famous for his encounters with the local magicians—the cultural experts of his day. One of the ways he engaged them was to always carry with him a small “white stone” which had featured in one of his miracles. Colomba would have called this a “cretair,” which was the Old Irish word for “amulet or talisman”; but this same word, in a fascinating semantic shift, came later to mean a “Christian relic.” Ironically it was this assimilation of the facts on the ground (of these pagan faiths) that allowed Christianity to appear in its

subsequent history as an “indigenous” faith in that part of the world.

About the same time, Pope Gregory the Great discovered that a Bishop in France by the name of Serenus was destroying all the pagan sites and the symbols engraved on these. Around 600 he wrote the French Bishop:

We commend you, indeed, for your zeal against anything made with hands being an object of adoration; but we signify to you that you ought not to have broken these images. For pictorial representation is made use of in Churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books. Your Fraternity therefore should have both preserved the images and prohibited the people from adoration of them, to the end that both those who are ignorant of letters might have wherewith to gather a knowledge of the history, and that the people might by no means sin by adoration of a pictorial representation.²¹

In this case, Gregory’s pastoral sensitivities set the tone for the relationship with the local populations and their religious practices, encouraging a “dialogue of love” with culture that allowed Christianity to be perceived as truly indigenous. This allowed a truly indigenous theological tradition to develop that took account of local beliefs and values—who now doubts that Christianity is native to Europe? (How often we forget that Christianity was an import into Europe—it was not the native religion!)

Rereading Scripture and Indigenous Faith: An Example

Let me offer a contemporary example, the Zapatista among the Mayan people of Chiapas, as a place where a truly indigenous expression of Christianity is emerging. The rural poverty of Chiapas in southern Mexico (until 1824 a part of Guatemala), resulting from both the 16th century *encomienda* system and the subsequent *finca* system of debt peonage, helped fuel the Mexican revolution in 1910. This led to forms of communal

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ownership of the land (*ejido*), and more recently to revival movements of indigenous Mayan communities. The latter was, in part, sparked by the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal—led by Bishop Samuel Ruiz—calling in 1974 for an Indigenous Congress of Mayan groups who began claiming their rights, which included the formation of the movement known as EZLN (Ejercito Zapatistas de Liberacion Nacional). The contemporary Zapatista movement owes its origin to the New Year’s Day uprising in 1994 when the EZLN took on the Mexican army in 12 days of inconclusive fighting. Since then the Zapatista movement, with a substantial number of women in leadership, has developed into a non-violent effort to collaboratively create self-sustaining and productive communities that resist both the global neoliberal consensus and the oppressive control tactics of the Mexican government. A significant part of this movement called *Las Abejas* (The Bees) is intentionally Christian in its orientation.

What is interesting to me are the multiple—religious, cultural and political—repertoires that the movement selectively marshals. Underlying the movement is the widespread commitment especially among women leadership to Catholic Christianity.²² As noted, the Catholic diocese of San Cristobal, and its revered Bishop Ruiz, already in the 1970s introduced the impulses of Vatican II and of liberation theology to the people. Significantly it was in the small Bible study groups, where many women learned to read, that the Scriptures shaped their vision of change. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bishop Ruiz organized Bible study groups in each community. The women credit their biblical study for their ambition to claim their rights. As one woman told researcher Hilary Klein: “We learned organizing by studying the *palabra de Dios*”—as they told her:

“we drew, sculpted, and sang our way to empowerment.” As the women organized against alcoholism, and for access to health care and education, Hilary Klein reports, “the women authorities were singing; the men were scratching their heads.”²³ Though these Christian women did not see any barrier to joining the EZLN cause, they did resist any form of violence as a condition of their participation. The specifically Christian component of the movement has developed into a separate organization, mentioned previously as *Las Abejas*, founded in 1992 (two years before the Uprising, and well known after the December 22, 1997, Acteal Massacre when 45 of them were killed by state police while they prayed—the majority elderly, women and children).

What can be learned from these brief reflections on our Christian mission? A careful review of the evidence suggests several benefits follow from pursuing this indigenous theological and biblical method. First, I am struck with how often such a fresh reading of Scripture has been associated with some of the most successful efforts for the expansion of Christianity. I am thinking of the proliferating insider movements, but also the growth of Pentecostalism throughout the world, which often reflect indigenous readings (and translation) of Scripture. But, equally important, these efforts lead to fresh insights into biblical truth. For it is always the immanent sensitivity and wisdom that is illumined by the reading of Scripture within that history. And in what may be the most telling virtue, I am impressed that it is where the immanent history has been honored and celebrated that Christianity is perceived as being indigenous! As Andrew Walls indicates:

New translations, by taking the word about Christ into a new area,

applying it to new situations, have the potential actually to reshape and expand the Christian faith. Instead of defining a universal “safe area” where certain lines of thought are prescribed and others proscribed or ignored (the natural outcome of a once-for-all, untranslatable authority), translatability of the Scriptures potentially starts *interactions* of the word about Christ with new areas of thought and custom.²⁴

Where such practices have not developed Christianity labors under the stigma of a foreign religion.

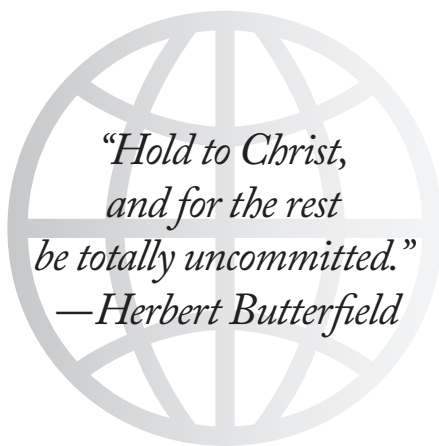
The Inescapable Syncretic Process

The response to such examples, of course, is the worry about syncretism. Though this term has a largely negative resonance for most Evangelicals, perhaps we need to distinguish good syncretism from bad. As my examples illustrate, how important, indeed inescapable, syncretic, or perhaps better, synthetic processes have been to the spread and vitality of the Christian movement. This worry often overlooks how thoroughly syncretic our own version of Christianity has become. In the conclusion of my book, *Insider Jesus*, I make the observation that the theological anthropology in Western theology cannot be understood apart from its roots in Aristotle and Plato as well as biblical exegesis. Biblical anthropology has long insisted that the Christian hope involves an integrated soul and body, not simply an immortal soul existing separately from the body. Now this is clearly a biblical idea, but as we have framed this in our theology, it is also an Aristotelian idea. In fact, A. N. Williams has argued that in its detailed elaboration in Western theology during the Middle Ages, this conception owes *more* to Aristotle than the Bible. But, she argues, this is not a case of pagan philosophy subverting Christianity (i.e., syncretism), but it is rather an example of philosophy having been “co-opted to underscore a deeply Christian view.”²⁵ So our own understanding of the body and soul is deeply syncretistic, and that is

not an entirely bad thing, even if it carries the liabilities I have pointed out.

But what might it look like if we began to read these same biblical passages about the body and the soul in Mayan categories rather than Aristotelian ones? Consider how the anthropologist John Watanabe describes the Mayan understanding of the person:

Having a soul means behaving in sensible ways, not just mechanically cleaving to established ways. Soul indeed demands mastery of cultural convention, but this need precludes neither personal opportunism nor cultural innovation as long as one has the eloquence to persuade others of one’s propriety. Although souls unequivocally situate individuals within a community, they



constitute that community more as an inclusive, continually negotiated ground of social interaction than as an exclusive nexus of essential traits or institutions.

Watanabe goes on to say,

I would suggest that greater appreciation of these ‘emergent’ qualities of Maya souls might well clarify the tenacity of Maya ethnic identity in the face of rapid, increasingly violent, social change.²⁶

Not only might this provide windows into biblical truth for the Zapatistas, but it might make a contribution to fresh global conversations on a truly communal (and therefore more biblical) understanding of the human person in community.

A “Dialogue of Love” with Culture

In conclusion, I want to return to the quote of Míguez Bonino at the top of this paper. Notice that this Latin American theologian believes that to construct a new spiritual history, his people need to carry on a “dialogue of love” (quoting John MacKay, the great Presbyterian missionary, and later President of Princeton Seminary). But this must be done, Míguez notes “without departing from the biblical roots of our faith.” Because our work is conditioned, nourished, and directed by these “biblical roots,” we need not fear a loving dialogue with all that people know and grow to love. The reason for this confidence lies not only in the power of the biblical word, but equally on the power of the Spirit that works both in the teaching and preaching of that word and in the lives and communities of people who will hear and receive it.

Often in thinking about the gospel and culture, I am reminded of the conclusion of Herbert Butterfield in his 1950 book *Christianity and History*: “Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.”²⁷ This, of course, is ultimately impossible, but it does suggest something of the shape of our relative commitments. Moreover, this Christ is the physical and historical expression of the Creator God, who by the Spirit is—all around us—moving creation to the place where “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). And it is this Christ who reminded the disciples in some of his final words, how far God’s vision exceeds our own:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:14–15) **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ José Míguez Bonino, quoted in John Sinclair, prologue to *Un esocés con alma latina* (Mexico: CUP, 1990), 15. I owe this reference to Cory Willson.

² *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 543.

³ See the important argument of Robert Woodberry that democracy, education, and liberal economics have flourished in places where Protestant missionaries (whom he calls “conversionist”) worked. “The Missionary Roots and Liberal Democracy” *American Political Science Review*, 106 (May, 2012): 244–274.

⁴ Evangelical Fellowship of India, report of August 3, 2017.

⁵ *Discovering Church* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, Forthcoming, 2018).

⁶ “Towards an Understanding of Inclusivity in Contextualizing into Philippine context,” in M. P. Maggay, ed., *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualizing Issues through Asian Eyes* (Manila: OMF Literature/ISACC, 2013), 416–450. At p. 417. For what follows see pp. 424–426.

⁷ See Peter Wilson, *Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire* (Harvard, 2016), 265.

⁸ *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 54n12, 168.

⁹ I have described this history in greater detail in W. Dyrness, “Listening for Fresh Voices in the History of the Church,” in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, ed. Pui Lan Kwok, et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015), from which this section is adapted.

¹⁰ On these differences see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper, 1978 rev), 400–406.

¹¹ *Retractions*, 31, quoted and discussed in Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker, 2016), 289.

¹² R. I. Moore, *Origins of European Dissent* (New York: St. Martins, 1977), 44.

¹³ Malcomb Lambert argues for example that the Waldensians were drawn into heresy by the inadequacies of the church authorities. *Medieval Heresy* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1992), 67.

¹⁴ R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012).

¹⁵ The review by David Collins gives some idea of the debate it has inspired.

“Collateral Damage,” *America*, November 12, 2012: 25.

¹⁶ Dussel, *The History of the Church in Latin America: An Interpretation*. (San Antonio: Latin American Cultural Center, 1974), 15.

¹⁷ Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African migration and the transformation of the West* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 96.

¹⁸ *The Christian Imagination* (Yale, 2010), 156–160.

¹⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar, “China’s Astounding Religious Revival,” *New York Review of Books*, June 8, 2017, 36. Quote which follows is from this page as well.

²⁰ José Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista insurgency, and the spectre of history* (University of Pittsburgh, 2010), 6–7.

²¹ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2 (New York: Scribners, 1900), Vol. XII, 53, ii/xiii. (Schaff and Wace 1867).

²² For what follows see Hilary Klein, *Compañeras: Zapatista women’s stories* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2015), 5–40.

²³ *Compañeras*, 53–54, 69. Klein notes that only gradually did women become catechists.

²⁴ Andrew Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 29. I owe this citation to Elizabeth Gill.

²⁵ A. N. Williams, “The Theology of the Comedy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge University Press, 2007, 2nd ed), 210.

²⁶ John Watanabe in “Elusive Essences,” in *Ethnographic Encounters in Southern Mesoamerica*, eds. V. Bricker and G. Gossen (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 273.

²⁷ Butterfield, Herbert, *Christianity and History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1950), 146.