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Interculturality, Conflicts and Religion: Theoretical Perspectives

Interculturality reveals, in its tensions and relationship with religion, many aspects that need to be theorized. On one hand, the studies on international relations analyse interreligious conflicts in the context of power conflicts and regional or international geopolitical imbalances. On the other hand, studies of interculturalism are centred on phenomena such as migrations, education, health and interethnic contexts. The author develops the hypothesis that current interreligious conflicts are, almost without exception, intercultural conflicts, and they must be approached as such. The analysis of the relationships between religion and culture reveals that religions can only exist and express themselves by the vehicle of the local cultures. All definitions of religions have cultural connotations. Two cases of religion, conflicts and interculturality in South America provide a starting-point for a more theoretical reflection. In a global world in which cultural factors are increasingly important, the symbolic-religious component is an enormous factor in the struggle for power and in its intercultural syncretisms and conflicts.

Key words: *interculturality · multiculturality · religion and culture · hegemony*

L'interculturalité révèle, par ses tensions et ses relations avec la religion, plusieurs aspects qui méritent d'être théorisés. D'une part, les études portant sur les relations internationales analysent les conflits interreligieux dans les contextes de conflit pour le pouvoir et de déséquilibres géopolitiques régionaux ou internationaux. D'autre part, les études ayant pour objet l'interculturalisme se centrent sur des phénomènes tels que les migrations, l'éducation, la santé et les contextes interethniques. L'auteur développe l'hypothèse que les conflits interreligieux sont, presque tous sans exception, des conflits interculturels, et qu'ils doivent être abordés comme tels. L'analyse des relations entre la religion et la culture laisse apparaître que les religions peuvent seulement exister et s'exprimer au travers des cultures locales. Toutes les définitions de la religion ont des connotations culturelles. Deux études de cas à propos de la religion des conflits et de l'interculturalisme en Amérique latine constituent le point de départ d'une réflexion plus théorique. Dans un environnement mondialisé, au sein duquel les facteurs culturels sont de plus en plus importants, la composante symbolico religieuse est un facteur énorme dans la lutte pour le pouvoir et dans ses conflits et syncrétismes interculturels.

Mots-clés: *interculturalisme · multiculturalisme · religion et culture · hégémonie*

In our times, interculturality is certainly linked to what has been called globalization. This phenomenon includes in its dynamics the internationalization of goods, services and labour markets, the new communication and information technologies revolution, and the new international scenario following the end of the cold war, with the weakening of nation states. These processes are gene-rating more favourable conditions for revitalizing and developing old and new intercultural conflicts all over the planet.

Interethnic conflicts have increased within international contexts, and the concept of multiculturalism has prevailed from a democratic perspective. Migrations and the explosion of indigenous peoples and ethnic and national minorities laying claim to their rights generate tensions in the world's most varied corners. Within this panorama, conflicts generated, caused or sustained by religions emerge.

Studies on international relations analyse interreligious conflicts in the context of power conflicts and regional or international geopolitical imbal-ances. There is an increasing preoccupation with promoting dialogue between religions, and the rapprochement of the positions of "civilizations" marked by such universal religions as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism.

Yet, present-day political-religious conflicts have been little analysed in their strictly intercultural connotations. Studies on interculturalism are centred on phenomena such as migrations and the challenges of education and health in interethnic contexts, and religion is taken as one of their components (see Salas, 2003; Ameigeiras and Jure, 2006). But what we want to develop here, as a central working hypothesis, is that current *interreligious* conflicts are, almost without exception around the planet, *intercultural* conflicts, and that they must be approached as such.

To develop this thesis we must first approach religion conceptually as a cultural factor. We must then analyse briefly the challenge posed by intercul-turality, based on Latin America's recent experience, and then move on to a more universal reflection. Our postulate is that it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of the close relationship between religion and interculturality without going beyond the concept of multiculturalism and at the same time over-coming a functional, interpersonal and a-problematic vision of interculturality.

Latin America is a continent that is becoming increasingly pluralistic in the religious field (Parker, 2005). But this plurality must be analysed from the standpoint of the social sciences as a new form of interculturality. Yet the most common analysis of interculturality is centred on interethnic encounters in inter- and intra-state processes and dynamics, while interculturality is not commonly analysed as a phenomenon within the religious field.

1. Religion as "Part" of Culture?

Geertz (1973) conceives religion as a cultural system in which the symbols and rituals are primary elements for discovering meanings. Through cultural interpretation—provided by "thick description"—one has to decipher the ultimate meanings. The meaning of religion is expressed in a person's world vision (which reflects their conceptual ideas of the world) and in their ethos

(as shown in their religious behaviour). And both of these, world vision and ethos, are merged symbolically within religious rites. Geertz's research—in contrast with Durkheim (1968) who privileges society as the ultimate meaning of religions—is centred on patterns of specific and characteristic meanings in the context of social life. Religion establishes a language of a second order in which realities, as stated by Geertz, are established with a different aura of reality.

In this perspective we are used, when focusing on religious realities, to dealing with them as closed or quasi-closed systems of meaning, whether the closure is given by strictly religious notions, by ritual or doctrinal definitions, or by geographic-cultural areas. Even the conceptualization of religion that we have inherited from classical sociological theories of religion is criss-crossed by Eurocentric biases and especially with particular explicit or tacit references to Christianity (Parker, 2006a).

But in our present globalized society—indeed nowhere in the history of humanity—what we certainly do not find is a religion in its "pure" state. We talk about religions as if we were dealing with homogeneous realities, as if we were capable of comprehensively capturing the huge variety of beliefs and rituals that actually exist in the multiplicity of sites into a single universal concept that we call Christianity. Even within Catholicism the actual variety is very large in spite of the unifying universalizing factors established by a centralized and Roman ecclesial apparatus.

But the reality is different. If we compare religions, we see that they have practically nothing in common, and yet they have many intersecting similarities with one another. In the words of Harrison (2006),

> The study of religions discloses an enormous diversity of beliefs and practices interwoven with striking resemblances. The diversities can be so extreme that even two forms of the "same" tradition might seem to have little important in common (never mind one common defining feature). Nevertheless, both can be recognized as bearing a family resemblance to one another.

For the same reason, from the theoretical standpoint we must go beyond the essentialist approach to religions. As Harrison says, in an intercultural and multicultural world we need to develop "a theoretical approach to the study of religions that is not from the outset prejudicial to any religion. And a family resemblance approach seems most suited to this requirement" (2006: 145).

In fact, religions are linguistic and communicational structures (Bourdieu, 1971) that develop on the basis of a language of a second order. But they are also vehicles of world visions. Of course theology discusses the purity of the message transmitted by God to men, but it is a fact widely accepted, even by contemporary Christian theology, that there is no "pure faith". Every religious expression is precisely a given form assumed by a given message—self legitimized because it is inspired by God or by his prophets—when it is transmitted by means of signs, symbols and symbolic structures, messages, languages (doctrinal, ritual, etc.) that cannot be abstracted from the conditionings of each historic time and its cultural dimensions. However, when the original messages crystallize in some cultural forms, when they adapt themselves to the established powers, and when they interact with the dynamics and the conflicts of the time in which they are developing, a religion can become a carrier of cultural values

in itself. This is clearly valid for the so-called universal religions which even try to transform their messages into specialized fields seeking a relative autonomy from secular powers and culture; in the case of ethnic religions, however, the distance between the religious message and profane culture tends to **disappear** because of their direct and transparent relationship.

Historically, Christianity can indeed be associated with Western culture, Islam can be associated with Arabic culture, Brahmanism and Hinduism can be associated with Indo-aryan cultures, and Confucianism can be associated with Chinese culture, even though we know that we are talking—sociologically—about ideal types of those universal religions. It is a historic fact that each of them has adapted to and adopted the most complex syncretisms and accommodation to different regional and local cultures in which they have developed (through missionary and colonial means, crusades, or diffusion). Beside Christianity, the case of Buddhism shows us how a tradition diffuses. Born in India, it has now spread through such diverse cultural areas as Tibet, Indochina, Thailand and Japan, combining with the local traditions and generating a variety of characteristic Buddhisms **which encompass long local traditions.**

In the case of Christianity, for example, it is a commonplace that it has been the carrier of a given vision of family relations that have marked all of Western history. In fact, Christianity has promoted regulations that foster the nuclear, monogamous family, discourages marriage between close relatives, and condemns polygamy, divorce and remarriage (Korotayev, 2003).

Religion is then a way of crystallizing cultural patterns and not a fully autonomous phenomenon, having different supports when faced with an outside reality called "culture". In this sense religion has been one of the most important and significant cultural factors in the history of mankind, and only in the modern Western world, given its characteristic secularization processes, is it possible to talk about a secular culture almost completely independent of religious connotations.

2. The Dimensions of the Present Intercultural Phenomenon and the Insufficiencies of Multicultural Analysis

The socio-cultural dynamics of post-industrial, globalized and computerized capitalism sets at least three large trends in motion, generating tension in contemporary major religious traditions claiming a universal vocation:

- the trend toward the diversification of narratives (pluralism and subjectivization);
- the trend toward the validity of an immediatist space-time (vs. long-term trends, tradition and permanence);
- the trend toward the dilution of margins and the increase of mixtures (versus clarity of content and of mental and socio-cultural limits).

In this context we are suggesting that what emerges is not the "multicultural" panorama but the challenge of *intercultural diversity*. Two realities that we need to elucidate.

In fact, in present-day national societies, as well as in international society, there are no socially symmetrical situations supporting a liberal multiculturalism, with diversity existing between equal cultures seeking respect for their common rights. The normative vision maintains that "multiculturalism" means to share and learn through cultural differences, promoting understanding, harmony, and justice in a society in which diversity prevails. History shows repeatedly that interculturality is a factor where cultures are in asymmetric positions of power within a struggle: in some cases, the dominant culture seeks the preservation of cultural hegemony (homogenizing and globalizing); in other cases, a marginal culture will try to subsist and resist, seeking to replicate its own local identity. A number of states apply multicultural socialization policies to citizens of different origin. Such policies are often used as an instrument in fighting racism and overcoming prejudice. In this sense "official multiculturalism" takes on the function of widening the scope toward the "other", and therefore having a disposition to dialogue with other cultures in the search for common elements among cultures.

Let us keep in mind that multicultural analysis derives from a conceptualization developed in Western countries (Anglo-Saxon and European) as a result of migration, which is increasingly promoted by globalization. In countries with high immigration rates such as Canada, Australia, Spain, France, England and Germany, a "recognition policy" (Taylor, 1994) is being actively promoted, associating the concept of multiculturalism with a form of democracy for citizens that is inclusive. In this way "multicultural citizenship" (Kymlica, 1995) appears as a transformation of the parameters under which the classical concepts of political citizenship and social participation in these situations is developed.

Beyond the successes or failures of these multicultural policies, it has recently been recognized that the word "multiculturalism" has some limitations, because it denotes the situation in a descriptive manner and simply indicates the coexistence of cultures in a single geographic framework. In contrast with this purely descriptive meaning we find the term "intercultural" which "has a connotation that refers to the dynamic interaction and cooperative exchange between cultures due to migratory movements, whether they are recent migrations or took place centuries ago" (Ibarra et al., 1999: 104), a meaning that therefore tends to prevail in educational policies.

However, this way of understanding interculturality as "dynamic and cooperative interaction" is also limited, since it hides or shifts attention from an unavoidable reality. In dealing with claims of cultures to be different and diverse, there is a strong temptation to leave aside the matter of the rights of minorities and the conflicts of power underlying all intercultural relations with an asymmetric base, and to centre on a perspective that interprets citizens as individuals with rights and duties regardless of ethnic or cultural attachments. In this way the liberal interpretation of multiculturalism or of the uncritical vision of interculturality have taken as a point of departure the treatment of persons as individuals regardless of their ethnic, national or religious identity. The "right to the difference" is therefore subsumed by the "citizens' rights", based on a formal and legal equality that actually covers up and legitimizes socio-cultural inequalities and forms of exploitation and/or neo-colonialisms of the 21st century.

Interculturality as we understand it here is, on the other hand, a critical concept. The authors who analyse the situation of indigenous peoples refer to critical interculturality and distinguish it from a functional interculturality. The critical perspective resides in a discursive practice included in the agenda of the Latin American indigenous movements, which "foster the revaluation of native identities, the eradication of the causes of poverty, and the promotion of plurinational or multicultural states", while the non-critical perspective develops "a discourse and a praxis that make poverty invisible in the name of an assumed intercultural dialog that legitimates existing power relations" (Castro, 2004: 131).

In the history of contemporary culture the problem arises with the processes "covering up" the conflicts underlying the encounters (often "disencounters") between different cultures and, in most cases, with the ideological rejection or negation of the effective processes of *mestizaje*, or mixing of races, that have given origin to the so-called "official cultures", which in modern terms are the "national" cultures. This generally occurs on the basis of the predominance of a cultural matrix—monocultural and supposedly superior—over the others, which generally are dominated (Parker, 2006b).

The notion of interculturality starts, then, from the recognition that the classical concepts of "culture"—denoting areas of symbolic constructions having a monocentric connotation under hegemonic assumptions—become absolutely insufficient and even dysfunctional in apprehending the phenomena of present-day cultural dynamics. First of all, "interculturality" reveals, as its prefix 'inter' denotes, that we are dealing with a relational term that always leads to contacts between two different realities, in this case between two dissimilar cultures. But as we will see, the more dense meaning of interculturality does not lead to a simple contact or opening between two cultures, but to conditions enabling an interaction which, based on realistic principles, and taking into account complexity, conflictuality and underlying power relationships, can result in a changed dynamic between the cultures involved. The challenge of interculturality therefore requires a dynamic, dialectical vision that highlights the points of conflict, negotiation and construction of cultural synthesis in new stages.

3. The Complexity of Religion and Interculturality

Zygmunt Bauman (2003), in his excellent characterization of cultural changes in contemporary history, develops the concept of "liquid modernity". We are moving from heavy modernity to light modernity, he tells us, from the era of "hardware" to the era of "software", from industrial society, the era of large machines and buildings, to the era of computers, the era of chips and of nano- and biotechnologies. "Heavy modernity" was the time of territorial conquest. Wealth and power were rooted in land. They were heavy, with clumsy movements, and depended on the size and quality of hardware. Steel and concrete were their materials.

The great religions of salvation, and above all Western Christianity, have been good companions of heavy modernity, but not without serious initial difficulties when fighting occurred in defence of their traditions—seen as threatened

by that modernity. (Perhaps that is one of the evolutionary stages Islam is still going through in its struggle to accommodate to a modernism that has tended to question its certainties.) With light modernity, however, various strong religious traditions have become dislocated, misplaced, deeply challenged. A good example of the above is presented by the Latin American Catholic Church. The Conference of Catholic Bishops in Aparecida (2007) provides a clue. In a paragraph corresponding to diagnosis we read:

> Society, which coordinates its activities only through multiple actions, believes that it can in fact operate as if God did not exist. But the efficiency of the procedures achieved by means of information, even with the most developed technologies, does not satisfy the desire for dignity engraved deeply in the human vocation. For that reason it is not enough to suppose that mere diversity of viewpoints, of options and finally of information, which often is given the name of pluri- or multiculturality, will solve the absence of a unitary meaning of everything that exists. The human being is, in its essence, that place of nature where the variety of meanings converges in a single vocation of sense. (Documento de Aparecida, 2007: N 42)

Note how the text is centred on an idea of substance: there is a single vocation of sense in human nature, a unitary meaning of everything that exists, and that is found in God. Diversity, multi- or pluriculturality, plurality of information, and options are a risk factor because they challenge that unitary human nature, they believe in operating "as if God does not exist".

Paradoxically, there are two truths in relation to interculturality and religion:

a) The diversity of experiences, of information and messages of contemporary cultural dynamics effectively put at risk the canonic messages of the universal religions, because they give preference to a variety of world visions, and this relativizes the world vision proposed by religious orthodoxy. All religions need a sort of orthodoxy, an original prophetic experience legitimated as an extra-historical foundation of salvation.
b) The diversity of experiences, that fragmentation of narratives appreciated by postmodernists, generates the risk of setting up a time-space that dissolves sense, insubstantial and "instantaneous", and that instant life characterizes a sort of "eternal present", devaluing (according to Bauman) immortality, and thereby depriving the sense of eternity of its true religious significance. However, in this "instantaneous life", subjected to the uncertainty of tomorrow, the discourse on sense regains its meaning and therefore religions regain value.

Within South America, two cases of interculturality in which religion has a main role illustrate the complexity of the relationship between religion and culture. In these two cases this relationship affects intercultural relations decisively, revealing the interethnic, multinational, interreligious, identity and power conflicts often involved in what we call interculturality.

One case is the conversion of native groups to Pentecostalism as a result of the intensive missionary activity of those churches in those environments. We will illustrate this case with an Andean Aymara community in the north of Chile, but it is known that similar cases occur and are occurring daily in

indigenous communities throughout South America and Central America, including Mexico.

The other case deals with the hermeneutical difficulties revealed by the analysis of the re-evaluation of the Mapuche religion in rural and urban environments in contemporary Chile. This is based on a study by Ramón Curivil (2007), a Mapuche social scientist of religions.

In general, in recent years a re-evaluation of indigenous religions in Latin America has been taking place, sustained by the struggles of native peoples to claim their rights and their autonomy in states that do not always acknowledge them (Parker, 2002). In this context it is necessary to concede that current Indo-American religions have been under the influence of Western religions, especially that of Catholic Christianity, in some cases since the conquest itself, five hundred years ago. The areas with the highest proportion of indigenous inhabitants among the population, especially where there has been much missionary influence, reveal more "christianized" indigenous syncretisms. The more isolated areas inhabited by indigenous peoples or those that, for various reasons, have received through colonization a more recent influence, retain central elements of the old religious traditions, dating back even to pre-Columbian times.

The Mapuche case is interesting because until 1880 they were a people who enjoyed relative freedom and autonomy. It was only after the so-called "Pacification of Araucanía" in Chile, or the "Desert Campaign" in Argentina, that they were finally subdued.

Even so, the intensive Catholic missionary activity since colonial times and the intensive offensive of the Christian Protestant Churches since the end of the nineteenth century have left their mark on the religious expressions of the Mapuches. Here "interculturality" clearly meant religious-cultural colonization with a serious loss of the old traditions of shamanic origin. The result is that nowadays in all the Mapuche regions various expressions of Christian/native syncretism are predominant.

Under these conditions, revaluation of the Mapuche religion is a weighty task because, as stated by Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2002), it is a real "invention of the tradition". Curivil brings up this semantic difficulty when analysing the main religious truths of present-day Mapuche people because, as an old oral tradition, they have not been adequately systemized. Any existing systemizations are derived from the writings of authors foreign to the Mapuche culture itself (*Gringos* or Chileans) or by Mapuche intellectuals considered *awincados*, which means whitened.

> [W]e are going through a first stage of information-gathering and of discussion, where two different views prevail clearly with respect to ways of understanding religiosity. For example, for some Mapuche leaders, their religion is based only and exclusively on the relation that is generated by the powers of nature, the *geh* and the *newen*. Others, the majority, without denying the above, support a kind of religion in which the central figure is that Someone or Superior Being, conceived as a Divine Couple, that exists in the manner of a marriage, and which in prayer is invoked preferentially as *Fvca* (old man), *kuse* (old woman), or Divine Family, where to the old couple is added the presence of a *Wece* (young man) and a *Vlca* (young woman). (Curivil, 2007)

Intercultural issues are highly topical in the context of the struggle of the Mapuche people for recognition by the Chilean nation-state, and the debate

among Mapuche leaders on the fundamental contents of their religion is neither insubstantial nor innocent. In one case the negation of a Superior Divinity, claiming a pantheistic religiosity centred on the energies of nature, is a form of cultural rebellion against dominant Christianity and its monotheistic theology. In fact, until recently the classic interpretation of the Mapuche religion offered by the researchers (non-Mapuches, or *awinkados*) arose out of two approaches, Christian and ethnocentric, mutually reinforcing, and neither in sympathy with the original tradition: Chau Negnechen is held to be the Mapuche God and would correspond to the God of Christians, but in a vernacular version. In contrast with this colonizing interpretation, however, the majority stream of present day Mapuche leaders reinterpret their traditions based on the belief in a primordial Divine Couple which certainly has nothing to do with the tradition of the Christian Trinity but would be semantically related to the traditions of the high Andean cultures of Tiahuantinsuyo, beginning with Tiahuanaco and culminating with the Incas.

This example of religious interculturality makes it possible to understand that intercultural relationships are rarely completely external, and that the extent of cultural and religious intersection depends, among other things, on the history of encounters between cultural groups, on their power relationships and networks, and on their mechanisms of elaboration and transmission of memory.

In the case of the Aymaras there is a paradigmatic experience, which illustrates that the "struggle between religions" takes a different form nowadays via intercultural conflict. It was a conflict of religions that provoked the conversion of a group of Aymaras to Pentecostalism in the Andean valleys of northern Chile. It occurred in the early 1990s in Cariquima and in Chile's Altiplano, but it is something that those who study the indigenous religions of Latin America know is a frequent modern phenomenon.

Guerrero (1990) studied the cycle of conflict and religious violence that affected the Aymara society 15 years ago. This conflict is linked with the fact that two religious groups—the Catholic Aymaras and the Pentecostal Aymaras—fought a kind of "holy war", with a succession of accusations and counteraccusations. The conflict appeared to be confusing and indecisive, but in the end served to clarify and crystallize the religious differences between the two religious nuclei involved, Catholic Aymaras and Pentecostal Aymaras, who are now the defining elements of local religious life. Expert Juan van Kessel is quoted in Guerrero (1990):

> The former [the Catholic Aymaras] self-legitimizes itself with arguments based on "tradition" and "ancient culture", while the latter [the Pentecostal Aymaras] argues about "modernization" and "agreement with accepted practice". The traditional Catholic Aymara nucleus is centred on the earth and conserves its Andean character, eminently immanentist, while the Pentecostal nucleus took a decisive turn—"kuti"—centred on the outside, toward the urban world, and toward an escathological future, giving it a certain religiousness of a transcendentist character. In this way it achieved a new "extirpation of idolatries" as painful and destructive of Aymara culture as the former. Between the two clearly identified nuclei there are a considerable number of undecided or "little decided" Aymaras. This insecurity is no longer, as before, due to the rather unappreciative attitude of the Catholic pastors, but to the contradiction existing between Catholic and Pentecostal pastors. Due to the religious contradictions, Protestant Aymaras did not take part in community ceremonies (such as the patronage festivals, carnival, the start and end of the farming year) and this clearly undermined the corporate character of the celebrations. On the other hand,

at the social level (communal work, defence of ownership of land and water and other legal rights), the Andean community is returning little by little to an attempt at compatibility between the antagonistic groups, as the first indications of understanding, tolerance and collaboration [appear].

This intercultural conflict within the common Aymara culture reflects the complexity of the religious and intercultural mesh. Religion is the vehicle of cultural patterns, but it is nothing more than a system of symbols and communication whose signified develops on the basis of a signifier which is the base culture. Religions can only express themselves over the vehicle of the natural languages of the local cultures. The asymmetry of the religion-culture basic relationship, however, is clearly seen in the differential degree of articulation of religious signified and signifier in one case and the other.

In the case of the Catholic Aymaras, a syncretized tradition has existed for hundreds of years. Indigenous Catholicism guarantees the subsistence of ancestral non-Christian rituals and traditions in an open or concealed manner. The days of the extirpation of idolatries at the time of the Viceroyalty are long gone, to such an extent that Catholic signifiers such as the church and the bell tower, resemantized under an Andean interpretation, in the middle of the "Holy Plaza", represent identity factors for the Aymara people.

The new culture brought by Pentecostalism—with its missionary and crusading spirit against idolatry—tends to contradict ancestral Andean customs and rituals. "Conversion" to the Gospel means for the Aymara people the rejection of the cultural traditions that belong to them. This has resulted in serious violence and conflict, including the violation of holy places, the theft of sacred images (by evangelicals), physical and psychological aggressions (between religious agents), and so on.

All this intercultural conflict emphasizes the vital contradictions that are engulfing this society, which is undergoing rapid modernization processes. They are intense disputes, in a society where "the children of Pachamama" (Guerrero, 1990) struggle to know who they are and where they are going.

4. The Need to Expand Theoretical-Methodological Frameworks

Intercultural conflict can therefore exist not only between "cultures" that are clearly foreign to each other, but as contradictions within cultural and religious subgroups within the same original indigenous community. Here the epistemological and methodological challenge for the social sciences is double: it is not enough to observe from the vantage point of the actors within the conflict; an external analysis must also be carried out, to objectify structures of meaning and contextualize them in the framework of their corresponding semio-spheres (Lozano, 1998).

In religious terms, interculturality appeals to a form of understanding of phenomena that requires going beyond the interpretative frameworks provided by the religious traditions themselves. As we analyse the latent cultural patterns we find that apparent similarities provided by a superficial religious tradition only serve to conceal differences.

Religion is a factor of cultural unity and cohesion, but we must not forget the real complexity of the religious field, itself crisscrossed by diverse socio-ethno-cultural differences, tensions and orientations. It is therefore a matter of asking which religion or which particular religious manifestation produces what kind of cohesion and sense of unity. Indeed, contextual analysis is a first-order methodological requisite when one is analysing religions that under some circumstances can exert a function of unity and in other socio-historical contexts can rather reinforce conflicts, legitimizing and sacralizing inter-ethnic and/or national conflicts, thereby exerting a very powerful disunion function.

The cases of Ireland and Yugoslavia are paradigmatic of ethnic/national conflicts that have been generated by very clear interests and in which the religious factor has been a cultural component of unquestionable importance, but they are however not conflicts motivated in a first instance by confrontations having strictly religious contents.

5. The Challenge of Contemporary Intersections and Syncretism

In this context the study of the religious phenomenon can no longer remain fixed on the central religious systems as if they were closed systems or susceptible of being understood in their own categories. The analysis of the margins, of the relations and interrelations, of the spaces of intersection, conflict, negotiation, is now the new study subject that should be given preference by the social sciences so as to understand the new—old but renewed—historical-cultural dynamics of the present. The new interpretative paradigm must be centred much more on the spaces of transaction than on the configuration of the centres of substantive definitions of each religious system.

So far the studies of religions in Latin America have centred first on Catholicism, then on the Protestantisms and on the growth of Pentecostalisms, and then on the new religious movements, or the alternative religions—Afro-American or others—or on the renewal of indigenous religions. There are abundant descriptive, ethnographic, sociological, and comparative analysis studies. There is, however, another tradition in the study of religions that has centred on syncretism and on the *mestizo* character of many expressions, on the hybridisms of Latin American culture reflected in its religious field. Peter Beyer (2005), analysing the religious phenomenon in the context of globalization, shows how we have to understand the syncretic and hybrid cultural and religious forms, as referred to the "pure" traditions that they supposedly combine: "In this way 'pure' forms are constructed and conserved on the one hand, but in a dynamic, continuous and historical contingent process of which syncretization is the opposite side".

Purely religious forms in this sense do not exist per se. Every *pure* form is the result of a previous form of syncretization, whose legitimization as *pure* is the argument that it looks for in protecting its self-evidence and in that way disguising the social and cultural contingency that gave rise to it. It is possible to analyse these forms of syncretic and hybrid combinations in terms of identity, history and power.

Comparative studies of popular Catholicisms in different continents (Bamat and Weist, 1999) show us that it is not possible to understand its expansion, development and vitality without understanding the way in which local Catholicisms have been able to become flesh in local cultures: Catholicisms of the Altiplano with the Aymara traditions, Catholicisms of the Caribbean with old Afro-American traditions, Catholicisms of Ghana with the local African and Islamic traditions, Tanzanian Catholicisms with the healing mores of the African religions, Catholicisms of Kerala and Tamil Nadu (south of India) with mixed traditions of their Portuguese colonizers and local Indian background, as well as the Catholics of Hong Kong with old ancestor venerating traditions of Chinese culture, urban Catholicisms in Chile with old popular traditions of the country. Thus it is not possible to understand Catholicism without this dialectic between universalism and particularism, characteristic of the *local* phenomenon and dynamics; between, on the one hand, common and more permanent aspects characteristic of what can be considered a universal "Catholic identity" and, on the other hand, intercultural insertions, syncretized and immersed in local traditions, without which those Catholicisms would not offer a sense of identity deeply rooted in those places and nations.

In this sense, we add, it is not possible to understand a given religious tradition other than in terms of the particular processes of construction of its memory and traditions. In those terms it is feasible to understand that, mainly in the great religious traditions of "the book", the definition of what is *pure* or orthodox is just the result of a long conflict of interpretations, a struggle of hermeneutics that are more related to conflicts of power than to central elements of faith. In any case, these definitions succeed in crystallizing religious models that are actually cultural models: forms of definition of fundamental truths of world vision, *habitus*, symbolic and ritual forms that are developed in the context of a society, and that contribute to delineating other religious-cultural or simply local secular cultural forms.

The construction of multiethnic and democratic societies goes beyond the challenge of building dialoguing and tolerant civil societies: it involves facing the challenges of structural inequalities that generate racist exclusion and prejudices, and because of that it involves analysing the religious-cultural dimensions present in intercultural contexts as conflicts that go beyond their proper religious meaning, and which, if not well understood and approached, can in the end legitimate other interests that have nothing of a religious or transcendent character.

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