

Indigenizing the Catholic Church. The Enculturation process in Chiapas, Mexico.

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This paper presents an ethnography of Catholic missionaries in the Misión de Guadalupe in Comitán, Chiapas, Mexico. It focuses on the efforts of those missionaries to put into practice the “Theology of Enculturation” in their work in Tojolabal communities. In the processes of transformation that the missionaries undergo the *enculturation of praxis* and the *theology of enculturation* are usually assumed to be one and the same thing. However, in fact they express a difference between a process of accommodation and a *should be* pattern, i.e., a difference between *how things are actually done* in practice, and a normative *how things should be done*. The theology of enculturation is linked to an institutionally based process (the pastoral work of the missionaries), whilst the praxis of enculturation is best understood as the process of transformation that the missionaries themselves undergo as they attempt to apply the theology of enculturation in their pastoral endeavours. The work of the missionaries or pastoral agents is inspired by notions inherited from the theology of liberation. Yet it is not just about the action of evangelization, but also aims to foster an intercultural and interreligious dialogue between Church and Tojolabals. Today missionaries attempt to recover ‘lost cultural aspects’ of the Tojolabals, in the hope of supporting them in (re)building their religious identities and “indigenizing” the Church. However, as my ethnography reveals, in the pursuit of these utopian goals, the missionaries display essentialism, and are also shaped by their individual beliefs or *habitus* and, in certain sense, individual interests.

Keywords: missionaries, pastoral work, theology of enculturation, enculturation of praxis, autochthonous church, essentialism, (re)building religious identity, ‘lost cultural aspects’ recovering.

Introduction

Today, when we think about Chiapas what usually come to our minds are Subcomandante Marcos, Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, and/or the rise of the EZLN’s movement in 1994.

This is already part of the contemporary history of Mexico. However, most of the information we have about these circumstances and historical events come from the mass media. Thus much of the perception expressed by them is much generalized and shows an incapability of catching the essence and image of social reality in Chiapas itself.

This social reality involves several people who are usually invisible, even to scholars who do not consider them important or interesting, because they do not belong to a specific movement or do not have an acknowledged leadership. The invisible people I talk about are generally indigenous peasants from San Cristóbal de las Casas Diocese area (Chiapas highlands mainly), and the individuals who work and get involved with them and

their economical and social problems, promoting activities in behalf of indigenous communities, *i.e.*, missionaries or pastoral agents, as are called as well.

One important characteristic of these missionaries is that they attest and, in certain sense, get involved in all problems, oppression, and injustice the indigenous individuals undergo. The involvement of missionaries in these situations has several ideological shifts. It even endangers their own Catholic adscription to live the faith (Catholic) in behalf of indigenous people, against orthodox and conservative principles of the Catholic Church.

One of the biggest missionaries' concentrations in Mexico took place in San Cristóbal de las Casas Diocese, in Chiapas. The bishop of this Diocese, Samuel Ruiz García, attesting indigenous social reality, conceived the necessity of planning a new pastoral pattern, inspired in Latin American Church theology of liberation, the 2nd Vatican Council (1963-1965), and different Episcopal Conferences (Medellin '68 and Santo Domingo '92 mainly).

From this basis, this pastoral pattern would change the paternalist and orthodox principles of traditional Catholicism. It would start the quest for understanding, accepting, and incorporating the different indigenous cultural aspects to its own Christendom. This would imply accepting indigenous religiosity and culture into Catholicism. Yet, at the same time, Catholicism would aim to be assimilated by indigenous culture as well. The latter is linked to the main goal of this pastoral planning, *i.e.*, indigenizing the Church through the enculturation process.

The main purpose of this paper is to present the efforts and activities Catholic missionaries do currently put into practice in the pastoral work in indigenous communities, based on the Theology of enculturation. The case in which I support the development of this subject comes from an ethnographical exploration about the work they do in the Misión de Guadalupe in Comitán, Chiapas, and some Tojolabal communities.

My research of these missionaries gave me very important information about their *modus Vivendi* and their *modus operandi*. Yet maybe the most important discovery is what they *suppose to be doing* based on the Theology of enculturation, and *what they really do and conceive* about enculturation itself. I noticed an explicit difference between both *theology of enculturation* and an *enculturation of praxis* process.

The theology of enculturation is linked to an institutionally based process (the pastoral work of the missionaries), and the enculturation of praxis has to do with the process of both an ideological and a religious transformation that the missionaries themselves undergo as they attempt to apply the theology of enculturation in their pastoral endeavours in order to reach the main goal: Indigenizing the Church.

Do missionaries accommodate or go native? Enculturation process.

The San Cristóbal de las Casas Diocese is currently acknowledged in Mexico as the one that struggles for indigenous and cultural difference rights, against orthodox and conservative positions of the Catholic Church. In this ideological environment the Marist Brothers mission, the Misión de Guadalupe (the one I analyzed during my fieldwork stay), has been working since the early seventies, collaborating with San Cristóbal Diocese and all its pastoral patterns.

Today the Misión de Guadalupe is still working with Tojolabal communities in southern Chiapas. These missionaries are not just evangelizing, but supporting and getting involved with Tojolabals' ecological and economical problems. They try to put into practice the *análisis de la realidad* (analysis of reality), which is meant to raise Tojolabals awareness about economical globalization and global overheating, political national injustices, amongst others devastating ecological and social destructing effects (*Cf.* Ávalos, 2008 y Valtierra 2009).

In the religious area instead, these missionaries are trying to change the common evangelical process Church used to develop, *i.e.*, they are not imposing the evangelical message, but accommodating Christendom to the 'otherness' cultural aspects and autochthonous religiosity beliefs. The Church, however, does not aim to accommodation itself. Rather they pursue the emergence of an intercultural and interreligious dialogue so both indigenous religion and culture and the Church's ideology will become incarnated or enculturated. This is the principle of enculturation itself.

The missionaries live a double enculturation process conception. On the one hand the ecclesiastical and theological patterns (*should be* statements). On the other hand the assumption or perspective about enculturation which is linked to all they are living each day with the Tojolabals. In this sense, the enculturation process has both a theoretical and a

practical content which must be presented separately as theology of enculturation and an enculturation of praxis.

An interesting definition about theology of enculturation by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, talks about the quest of separating Christian/evangelical narratives from western cultural references, and replace them with a *cosmovisión maya* or Mayan world perspective (Garrard-Burnett, 2005:49-50). Her definition stresses an accommodation of western culture and religiosity to the ‘others’.

This accommodation has to do with the missionaries’ assumption about enculturation as a pastoral and canonical pattern to follow which tries to be adequate to the otherness and to begin an interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Yet they conceive another assumption as well, i.e, enculturation, is not just a pattern to be followed by them. In the *praxis* the pastoral work that missionaries do in the Tojolabal communities, copes with certain circumstances in which the enculturation pattern (theology of enculturation) could not be possibly put into practice.

That is why missionaries must change certain ruling principles of pastoral planning so they can accommodate both their pastoral work and their own interests to particular situations they face. But enculturation is assumed as a living process as well. In this sense, enculturation would be the outcome of missionaries’ ideological transformation as I mentioned above. That is why a pastoral agent from the Misión de Guadalupe said: “Getting enculturated are us. Not them” (Interview. GTE FMS., 26 November 2008). He meant that enculturation is an ideological transformation and the comprehension of the other’s culture.

This enculturation expressed by the missionary above, is the enculturation of praxis I am investigating. It breaks all basis and explanations of an ecclesiastical pattern which tries to reach the indigenization of Catholic Church, because the enculturation of praxis has to do with the individual perception of those who live close to indigenous realities. It has to do also with the interpretation of indigenous religiosity and the “transference/introduction of all contents in the different cultures where this, the Christian message, incarnates” (Maldonado, 1989:30).

Until now I have outlined the enculturation process as a dichotomy. On the one hand, as an idealistic construction ruled and based on Church canons (theology of

enculturation). On the other hand, enculturation has to do with something apparently more 'mundane' expressed by missionaries convictions about their experiences and the shifts which that living process bring them about. But what about putting into practice enculturation? Does enculturation really exist? If so, how missionaries reach enculturation?

Enculturation of praxis or praxis of essentialism?

The theology of enculturation expresses idealism, because its aims have to do with getting cultural and autochthonous religiosity assimilation, and at the same time indigenous people are getting 'catholicized'. That is a reciprocal assimilation that alludes to a horizontal relationship just as conceived in an utopian landscape. The enculturation of praxis denotes a different point of view closer to "reality".¹

This ecclesiastical scope is the main principle missionaries should follow to 'indigenize Church', *i.e.*, to build a Church through which Christendom and the Christian message could be manifested in the 'otherness cultural outfit' (Valtierra, 2009:56). The enculturation of praxis use this pattern to reach this aim. But enculturation of praxis, understood as the assumption of missionaries, implies experimentation, not just to execute a pastoral plan.

Enculturation depends upon the missionaries' experiences and the individual perception. It also has to do with how long the pastoral agents have worked on that environment. My ethnographical research reveals different assumptions about enculturation and the close relationship between the statements of the theology of enculturation and the enculturation of praxis.

The pastoral agent who manages the Misión de Guadalupe, for example, has just two years and a half in the mission. He assumes himself as in a 'learning process'. He is studying all canonical statements to put them into practice for the pastoral work of the mission. But he is learning the indigenous social codes, culture and social reality as well.

In the learning process he is living, he notices that executing each ecclesiastical enculturation pattern sometimes is not possible depending upon each situation or

¹ However it does not mean essentialism is not present in these enculturation assumptions.

characteristics of the Tojolabal communities. Even so, this pastoral agent thinks about enculturation as the theology of enculturation.

“...what is enculturated is Gospel. Not the missionary. I mean the evangelical proposal. The proposal we ourselves... we are in an assimilation process of that proposal [...] Both with the indigenous and *mestizos* individuals, we are trying to read that evangelical proposal and that is what we are trying to inculturate” (Interview JCRG. FMS, 26 October 2008).

There are other missionaries with much more experience than this one. Last mission’s manager, for example, defines enculturation as follows: “...is that, eh. You get into the culture. You learn the culture. You start knowing the culture. You start understanding the way is watching the culture, and from that moment, you have a conversation with the culture” (Interview GTE FMS. 27 November 2008).

In both perceptions one can notice a difference, despite of the same theoretical and ecclesiastical basis of theology of enculturation. In the first interview, an approach to ecclesiastical statements is apparent. In the second case, when he, the missionary, says: “...from that moment, you have a conversation with culture” he is trying to follow ecclesiastical statements, but he is also alluding to an ideological transformation to comprehend indigenous culture. That implies a praxis that takes the orthodox ecclesiastical premises away.

Both the theological and practical assumption of enculturation, then, shows plenty of strategic means to accommodate to different sociocultural circumstances and reach an aim. However, the ways the Misión de Guadalupe’s missionaries, for example, try to reach that ideal goal are, on the one hand, through the recovering indigenous ‘lost cultural aspects’. On the other hand, through the incorporation of non Christian elements to Catholic ritual, pursuing this way to (re)builds and redirects the indigenous religious identity towards the indigenization of Church.

Essentialism is an important element that emerges while trying to recover Tojolabal’s lost cultural aspects and (re)building the spaces where those will be presented. But essentialism goes beyond that. For example, the conception missionaries from la Misión de Guadalupe and others (Cf. Lenkersdorf, 1996 and 2002) have about Tojolabals, as one of the ‘good savage’. The Tojolabal is good, innocent, and the pastoral agent must

lead him to build his own Church. He must be defended against injustices, teaching him ways to avoid them, such as auto-consumption, and isolation from city and global economy (Cf. Valtierra 2009 and pastoral meeting in Fieldwork notes 7 October 2008).

The way to reach these ideals is recovering *certain* prehispanic cultural aspects which have been forgotten by Tojolabals since Spaniard conquerors and missionaries arrived. The formula missionaries use to 'rescue the culture' is incorporating non Christian cultural elements to Christendom and current Tojolabal culture, which, ironically, before the arrival of this mission to this region, never existed before (Cf. Ávalos 2008, and Basauri, 1931).

The Mayan Altar could be a good example of a cultural element added to Tojolabal's rituals as well as the *Tzolkin* Calendar Mayan symbols. Historical characters such as the Mayan emperor *Pakal* or Mayan prophet *Chilam Balam* who are compared with biblical Christian prophets, are used too. (Fieldwork notes, 24 October 2008).

Manuel Marzal (2002:200) uses the *religious interpretation* term for the latter, due to the incorporation of non Christian elements to Christendom. But essentialism could be a *must be* term too, because there is an implication in those actions about recovering *the Maya* as a whole so Tojolabals understand and perceive Christian message and the presence of God from their 'original' culture, *i.e.*, the one before Spaniards arrival.

The latter have certain issues to consider. First linked with the 'cultural rescue' is that *the Maya* is not necessarily *the Tojolabal*. From this point of view, the missionaries and their actions are falling into a sort of epistemic violence (Spivak, 2003 and Bourdieu, 1999) or cultural imposition. The second issue is about the conception of Tojolabals as Mayas, I mean that the missionaries consider that Tojolabals must necessarily know, assimilate and comprehend the Maya, although the *tzolkin* calendric elements, for example, have to do with another Mayan group such as k'iche'.

And third, if the cultural aspects recovered (as a whole) would be the main goal of missionaries, the research about this ethnical group has been very poor. That makes me think that missionaries' interest has nothing to do with cultural recovering but their religious interests.² According to my ethnographical information the Misión de

² Tojolabals are culturally and historically linked with other Mayan group different from k'iche's. This ethnical group named Chuj, comes from Guatemala (Cordova, 2009; Piedrasanta, 2009; Ruz, 1980). Today Tojolabals still do pilgrimages to their prehispanic and original birthplace in Guatemala, named San Mateo

Guadalupe's missionaries do not have enough information about Tojolabals. However their conception of those as just Mayas as whole makes them consider each information about Mayan aspects as a part of Tojolabals' lost cultural elements. That is why what Guatemalan *tzolkin* and esoteric calendars said about each Mayan symbol (such as horoscopes) are important for pastoral agents to incorporate them in their pastoral plans.³

This means that missionaries look for different resources to live a mystical experience among indigenous people and transmit that kind of religiosity to them in order to better transmit the Christian message. This is a type of accommodation but those are missionaries' believes as well. That is why Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2005:50), I guess, called that enculturation process a 'folk Catholicism'. That was the enculturation side she surely noticed when defining it like that.

In sum, what I can see until now is a sort of *panmayanism* in missionaries' practices and ideology. That is, however, a contradiction because they assume a position on behalf of cultural differences respect and against cultural and religious imposition. The 'cultural rescue' considers all Tojolabals as Mayans, and their religiosity is the same than other Mayans' religiosity. Moreover, cultural imposition is presented when incorporating indistinctly selected Mayan cultural aspects.

Other essentialist traits in the (re)building process of Tojolabal religious identity is linked to strategic aspects. What missionaries from the Misión de Guadalupe do is (re)build ancestral religious and social structures in order to obtain important information and indirectly control indigenous communities. A good example is the (re)building or (re)invention of the Elder's Council.

This council was a typically Tojolabal structure. Communities used to choose five morally virtuous members with the important function of solving communal problems (Basauri, 1931:33). However, after agrarian reforms and the constitution of *ejidos*, gerontocracy lost importance and power, and were displaced by *comisarios ejidales*

Ixtatán. The missionaries do not consider this information important. They consider Tojolabals just as Mayas, so they could be chuj, k'iche' or whatever Maya means to them.

³ Missionaries also became excited, for example, when someone had a book about Mayan spiritualism, or when someone had access to certain Mayan new age music for accompanying a new ritual they could celebrate in the future with Tojolabals.

(Lisbona, 2005:198-199). That means Elder's Council itself does not exist anymore. The importance of elders nowadays is in exercising an ecclesiastical position, such as catechists, predeacons or deacons.

Missionaries on the other hand, built an Elder Council seven years ago, in which an indigenous elder was chosen by them and another one by the deacon or catechist of the communities. This is, a 'modern' and modified Elder Council of two indigenous elders representing the communities before the mission in order to have a conversation about communities' troubles. This process of cultural rescue, conceived as a sacred space, is thought of as a strategic practice with a religious character.

Conclusion

Talking about enculturation entails an ideological complexity due to its apparently contradictory nature, that is to say, the tension between the *theology of enculturation* and the *enculturation of praxis* concepts.

The pastoral activity that missionaries put into practice implies, on the one hand, following ecclesiastical rules. On the other hand, the pastoral work process of the missionaries makes them undergo several ideological transformations. Therefore, enculturation process itself entails the practice of pastoral activities linked to specific statements, and the shifts they have to do so they can accommodate different cultural and ideological/religious notions to the pastoral pattern they must accomplish.

The Misión de Guadalupe's case is very important to comprehend the behavioral patterns and the shift process missionaries undergo, as well as the ideological struggle in behalf of indigenous communities they do. Among the latter missionaries present certain notions inherited from the theology of liberation, their own individual history, and the behavioral values acquired from different contexts (family, scholarly education, religiosity education, social reality, and sociohistorical contexts).

This *habitus*, in Bourdieu terms (2005) appears in everyday missionaries' work. It implies the assumption of ideological and institutional positions which could even contribute to a confused state of mind (Caravias, 1990). What I observed is that accommodation's ways that the missionaries use in order to become accepted in the Tojolabal communities are not the only ways. In the course of the years the missionaries'

work use to go beyond accommodation, transforming their daily actions and mind, *i.e.*, apparently their actions and notions are not strategic anymore, but part of their daily lives are assumed as a *modus Vivendi* and not a *modus operandi* at all. This is a very similar process to socialization itself. And that is what defines missionaries' enculturation.

But the enculturation process, then, is linked to both a strategic/institutional pattern considered as a theology, and the shifts and 'cultural assimilations' of a missionary who aims to go native, both in his/herself, and his/her institution, indigenizing the Catholic Church, a fact that has proved being an interesting and challenging process, as I have tried to illustrate in this preliminary contribution. But if enculturation is institutional strategy and cultural assimilations of the missionaries, the question to solve would be: Is enculturation an aim, psychological state of mind, a disguised strategy or simply does not exist?

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