

IS *TEOLOGÍA INDIA* A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION?

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How can we define *Teología India*, Indigenous Theology? What makes it different from *Teología de la Liberación*, Liberation Theology? Even though both “theologies” are centered on a preferential option for the poor and Indigenous peoples as subjects of faith, *Teología India*, or *Sabiduría India* (Indigenous Wisdom), as many of the local pastoral actors prefer to call it, goes beyond liberation theology, complementing Catholic liturgy with practices and reflections on faith emerging from Mesoamerican philosophical heritages.

This innovative theological project is grounded in a philosophical approach, a serious and respectful relationship with indigenous Mayan communities. These peoples’ beliefs and practices within their *pueblos*² belong to the Catholic diocese and are included in its pastoral work in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Much of what I will review here springs from a long interview I did with Don Samuel Ruiz, the late bishop emeritus of the regional diocese, who worked in San Cristobal for more than 40 years.³ I will also bring forth some of my own systematizations on “embodied thought”⁴ and some lessons learned from my extended ritual participation and presence in the region. Since 1974, when I was first invited by Don Samuel to come to the diocese, I have been loosely but regularly connected to the grassroots projects of *Teología India* and autochthonous churches in Chiapas.

This Catholic proposal is evolving quietly, offering new insights on faith and how we can live together and sustain the earth as well as respect the plurality of the diverse religious and cultural practices and beliefs present in the area. A fresh Catholic Church, innovative and

2 → *Pueblo*, as a concept, is the contemporary collective subject of most justice struggles in indigenous movements of the Americas. A recent ontological perspective has proposed an epistemology of collective action (Pablo González Casanova, “Epistemología del animal político,” *La Jornada*, August 5, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ACMAQj>), so the term *pueblo*, has become the concept where collective struggles are built.

3 → The late, emeritus Catholic Bishop Don Samuel Ruiz was a key political defender of the Mayan indigenous populations in his Dioceses in the south-east state of Chiapas, Mexico. He and his collaborators developed a “pastoral indígena” that allowed him to propose and coin the term “Teología India” during his more than 40 years of tenure at the dioceses of San Cristobal de las Casas Chiapas.

4 → Sylvia Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought: Gender Categories in Mesoamerica”, *Religion* 28, no. 4 (1998), 371-382.

committed to social justice is emerging. Chiapas is a tiny point on earth but it is pregnant with hope.⁵

THEOLOGY AS A CONSTELLATION OF PRACTICES: A CEREMONY IN THE FOREST OF CHIAPAS

“O You by whom we live and move, nothing we say here
is real. What we say on this earth is like a dream. We
only mutter like one waking from sleep...”⁶

“Ipalnemohuani is the God through whom we live”
–Nezahualcoyotl, (Chief of Texcoco and poet 15th
century)⁷

“Tloquenahuaque” is the Lord of close vicinity, del
“cerca y del junto”⁸

I arrive invited to the mass in celebration of an anniversary of *Universidad de la Tierra* (CIDECI) in San Cristobal de las Casas. The *ermita* (chapel) is full. I can see a crowd gathering at the altar. To the side of the bishop stand the priests that will co-celebrate the mass and beside them, a man and his wife, elderly Tzotzil Mayan people. They are *tunnhel*: deacons. Man and woman as a unit, represent the deacon’s participation in unity. They incarnate the Mesoamerican concept of “duality,” and will contribute as co-ministers in the ceremonial mass. Dressed in their local attire, they stand proudly by the side of the bishop.

5 → Hope is inscribed in the collective ritualization of *Teología India*. It springs from hope to be respected and accepted as belonging to indigenous collectivities that have been brutally subjugated, physically exploited, and discriminated against as inferior and primitive due to their particular way of conceiving God, the universe, nature, and themselves.

6 → *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, ed. and trans. John Bierhost (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 170.

7 → Miguel León Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

8 → Miguel León Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

The music we hear in this Catholic mass is the ritualistic sacred music of the surrounding indigenous hamlets. We can recognize the structure of the Eucharist, although we could easily be distracted by the splashes of color, the languid, repetitious rhythm of indigenous sacred tunes, and the collectivity that ministers the mass. Several priests and ordained indigenous deacons populate the higher space of the chapel. The readers of the Scriptures are women and they read in three languages: Spanish, Tzotzil, and Tzeltal. Who leads the ritual? I would answer: the collectivity.

In this very concrete experience, many of the tenets of *Teología India*, and of the project of “autochthonous churches” are perceptible even to an uninitiated onlooker as “excerpts of practice.” The pastoral work of the Diocese of Chiapas grows and develops ever more towards a respect and recognition of the values, spirituality, devotions and ritual practices of the region’s indigenous peoples. In what follows, I hope to present an epistemic context: dreams as prophecy, myths as history, and indigenous languages as conceptual systems. This is not a finished analysis of a stable reality but a study that reflects the haziness of reality and the process of permanent change.

COLONIAL INFLUENCES

We should be aware of the ways in which native peoples adapted to their colonial circumstances, accommodated the Christian hierarchy, selected, absorbed and synthesized new ideas and beliefs. On the basis of being a culturally distinct people,⁹ they assert a common past, which has been in part suppressed, in part fragmented, by colonialism. They participate in the emergence of a cultural revitalization that reunites the past with the present as a political and religious force. We are witnessing the transformation of Indigenous religion itself, not forcedly through conversion and hybridization, and even less through “commodification,” but through its own internal processes of metamorphoses and migrations.

The term religion was, according to Jonathan Smith, first “extended

9 → Kay Warren and Jean E. Jackson, *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation and the State in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 13.

to non-Christian examples in the literature of exploration particularly in descriptions of the complex civilizations of Mesoamerica.”¹⁰ However, in contrast to the Christianity imported by the Spaniards, indigenous Mayan religious conceptual systems are formed by a complex web of epistemic particularities. Among others we find: concepts of time/place, gender, nature, self/community embedded in particular cultural perceptions.

THE EPISTEMIC CONTEXT OF *TEOLOGÍA INDIA*

Knowledge systems pervade our thinking, influence our conceptions of causality, and guide our sensory perceptions. At all times, we are immersed in an epistemic system that organizes the way we conceptualize the material world around us to “fit” this cognitive system.¹¹ When we approach *Teología India* or *Sabiduría India*, we can discern the underlying cognitive structure, which is intimately bound to indigenous cosmology. Some particularities of these indigenous traditions are: concepts of nature and of the divine in which a merging of transcendence and immanence occurs, a belief in a bi-directional flow of spiritual forces between the realm of the deities and human existence, metaphors as the selected vehicles for conveying hermetic meanings, and beliefs that are *embodied* and thus articulated implicitly rather than explicitly. “The word comes and goes, goes and returns, the word walks . . . to achieve unity, say the indigenous.”¹²

Both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have written about the quiet way in which an epistemic configuration can operate and express itself. It quietly takes on existence through practices, through actions. The *episteme* is embodied and thus exists: “actions can supply moments of reinterpretation and reformulation.”¹³ Belief and thought

10 → Jonathan Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

11 → Sylvia Marcos, “Cognitive Structures and Medicine,” in *Curare* 11 (1988), 87-96.

12 → La palabra va y viene, se va y vuelve, la palabra camina... para alcanzar la unidad dicen los indígenas.” Alicia Gomez in: Samuel Ruiz and Carlos Torner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas* (Santander Sal Terrae: Cantabria, 2002), 79.

13 → Pierre Bourdieu quoted in: Henrietta Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 155.

enact themselves through corporeality. Without physicality there is no sustenance and foundational reality for ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and especially for *reflections on faith*. Here we can grasp the main tenets of Indigenous spirituality and thus of the intercultural project of *Teología India*. We could call it an *Embodied Theology*.

Its embodied character is also the reason why it is often perceived from the outside as a variable *set of practices*. Don Samuel Ruiz affirms that “the Indigenous people prefer the term *sabiduría* (wisdom) to theology: *sabiduría india*.” He adds, “Theology is systematic, abstract,” and I would add *disembodied*, “this abstraction is foreign to the Indians . . . who live a communal life. They nourish themselves from contemplation and reflections on nature, myths, and dreams.”¹⁴

DREAMING AS PROPHECY

Thinking about the meaning and place of dreams in Indigenous Tzotzil communities, Don Samuel adds:

the Acteal local inhabitants who had been displaced from their hamlet,¹⁵ they had decided to return home. But some of them had dreams, premonitions. Actually, it was an old woman, an old man, and three others. The five of them agreed in interpreting those dreams as an omen. “This is not the opportune time to return. . . . We cannot go back now.”¹⁶

For the local people, dreams are encoded messages. Dreams are communications from wise ancestral protecting spirits. Don Samuel heard the indigenous interpretations; he understood and valued them in their indigenous context. He even called the dreams “prophetic” and

14 → Sylvia Marcos, “Las semillas del verbo en la Sabiduría India,” interview of Don Samuel Ruiz, *Revista Académica para el Estudio de las Religiones*, Tomo II: Chiapas el Factor Religioso, (Mexico: 1998), 33-59.

15 → Don Samuel is referring to the massacre of forty-five people, members of the community of *Las Abejas*, perpetrated by paramilitaries backed by the State government.

16 → Marcos, “Las semillas del verbo en la Sabiduría India.”

gave advice to follow them.¹⁷ The people did not return to their hamlet at that time.¹⁸

MYTHS WEAVING HISTORY

Myths are History, a history that gets constructed and re-constructed permanently. Myths are considered facts. Don Samuel tells me about the story of a grain of coffee being given to the peoples there by “el Señor” in the origins of time, to help them in their survival. But it is well known that coffee was brought to the region in the early years of last century. How to interpret this?

[T]hrough a telling or a re-telling of their myths, indigenous people enact a reflection or and “Indigenous wisdom” that has been transmitted through their elders . . . the sources from which this presence of God is perceptible spring from within the confines of indigenous culture . . . the reflection which derives from that is not as among us based in philosophy, but rather in mythology. Myth is a form of abstract reflection about things”¹⁹

Paraphrasing Diane Bell, “the body of wisdom often called ‘myths’ by outsiders, for the Mayans is a matter of fact.”²⁰

A DEBT THE CHURCH SHOULD HONOR

Don Samuel smiles and looks at me challengingly: “[T]he Gospel did not arrive in America with Christopher Columbus’s three caravels. God was here before.”

17 → Marcos, “Las semillas del verbo en la Sabiduría India.”

18 → Although it would be beside the point I am making here, it was the best decision possible at that time and in that situation.

19 → Sylvia Marcos, “The Seeds of the Word in Indigenous Wisdom, Interview with D. Samuel Ruiz,” trans. Jean Robert (2001), unpublished.

20 → Diane Bell, “Desperately Seeking Redemption,” *Natural History* 106, no. 2 (1997), 52.

One can never overemphasize the importance of indigenous reflection. It initiates a dialogue that never took place in the five hundred years since the first evangelization. A foreign culture was imposed on the Indigenous culture in order to express the gospel. There was no reciprocal listening...it was not possible to recognize anything positive in a religion that was not Christian. ...simply, that which was indigenous had no value and had to be eradicated. Only now, after Vatican II we are starting to correct this serious error.²¹

Don Samuel often speaks about “how the Indigenous converted [him].”²² The evident irony of the power inversion implied in this expression gives some clue of the depths of his commitment to amending the Catholic Church’s presence and evangelization in Mexico.

EMBODIED THEOLOGY

I have analyzed one of the main characteristics of Mesoamerican Mayan thought: a thought that is not built on mutually exclusive categories. A thought that does not separate matter from spirit, earth from sky, death from life, a thought that is embodied or incarnate.²³ One of its main characteristics is the perception of things in flux, both flowing and “fusing.” This notion of a continuous flux between the material and the spiritual, of a permanent oscillation between the two poles of a duality is basic to a deep understanding of the proposals of *Teología India* which can best be perceived as a “constellation of practices.”

These practices include not only the rhythms of local indigenous music, the chanting, dancing and rituals like *el caraco*²⁴ but also the veneration of deities inside caves, and the rituals on the sacred space

21 → Marcos, “The Seeds of the Word in Indigenous Wisdom.”

22 → Ruiz and Toner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas*.

23 → Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought.”

24 → In ancient Mesoamerica, deep seashells were the symbol of new beginning.

on mountain tops. These practices of *Teología India* cannot be fully comprehended by a pastoral work inspired by the conventional Christian strategies of “inculturation,” defined as the missionary project of incorporating indigenous music, and art into Catholic liturgy.²⁵ A deeper effort is now taking place. It includes joint reflection on faith and consultation of elders (women and men) considered the bearers of the indigenous religious traditions. “*Teología India* is a way of reuniting the strength of God, the strength of the elders, and thanks to this strength, confronting conflicts and keeping hope. It is the indigenous themselves who do this work. It is they who speak with the elders.”²⁶ Each community has a group of young indigenous theologians, who speak with the elders, who tell and explain to them the ancient words.

This commitment goes far beyond the “preferential option for the poor,” one of the basic tenets of Liberation Theology. *Teología India* commits itself to respecting the epistemic and philosophical backgrounds of the Mayan cosmos and to building a “theological” perspective in harmony with it. The Christian philosophical religious tradition that came with the missionaries was plagued by a disdain for matter and a rejection of earthly dimensions contradictory to the pristine Christian faith in the Incarnation. Catholics committed to indigenous wisdom move away from these disincarnate conceptions to accommodate a universe where earth and matter are sacred, where natural beings express divinity, and where the spiritual and the material are fused.

According to the Mayan vision of the cosmos, human life is intimately connected with its surroundings. All surroundings have life, so they become sacred. We encounter earth, mountains, valleys, caves, plants, animals, stones, water, air, the moon, the sun, the stars that share in sacredness.²⁷ In the words of Carlos Camarena, a Jesuit at

25 → Paul Gifford, “The Nature and Effects of Mission Today: A Case Study from Kenya,” *Social Sciences and Missions* 20 (2007), 122.

26 → “La Teología India es una manera de reunir la fuerza de Dios, la fuerza de los abuelos, y gracias a esta fuerza, hacer frente a los conflictos y conservar la esperanza. Son los propios indígenas los que hacen el trabajo. Son ellos los que hablan con los abuelos.” Alicia Gomez, cited in: Ruiz and Torner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas*, 79.

27 → Eva Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantan*

the Bachajón Mission in Chiapas since 1963: "For the indigenous peoples material and spiritual realities are the same."²⁸ Eugenio Maurer a Jesuit parish priest committed to the indigenous populations says:

For the people of Guaquitepec all mountains are "alive" in that they are the font of life: they are the site of cornfields; firewood comes from their slopes; springs emerge from them...they are the dwelling place of important sacred beings . . . they have power in their own right.²⁹

For Indigenous peoples, the world is not "out there," established outside of and apart from them. It is within them and even "through" them. *Teología India* says this explicitly. It is not an abstract reflection springing from pure spirit or pure mind. It is grounded, it is practices, actions, rituals, and devotions, processions, embroidering, dancing and chanting. All these actions have to be incarnated into bodies which are themselves a vortex of emanations and inclusions from the material as well as the non-material world. As such, carnal bodies are intertwined in the divine and belong to the sacred domain.³⁰

"Here you cannot distinguish between God and the world, between God and his creation."³¹ Thus, *Teología India* has to be found in the myriad incarnated and corporeal ways by which the Indigenous peoples express their beliefs. "The indigenous cultures are characterized by their unity," says Andrés Aubry, and he adds: "unity also between death and life."³² Here again, we find the duality and fluid oscillation between

Mythical Poem. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977)

28 → "Para los indígenas las realidades espirituales y materiales son lo mismo." Ruiz and Torner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas*, 88.

29 → Gary Gossen and Miguel León Portilla, *South and Meso-American Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 232.

30 → Marcos, "Embodied Religious Thought."

31 → "Aquí no se puede distinguir entre Dios y el mundo, entre Dios y su obra." Andrés Aubry quoted in: Ruiz and Torner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas*, 63. Andrés Aubry was a French historian who, since 1974, coordinated and organized the *Archivo Diocesano*, the Archives of dioceses of San Cristobal de las Casas.

32 → "Las culturas indígenas se caracterizan por su unidad...unidad también entre la muerte

opposed and complementary poles.³³

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The conceptual source of *Teología India* springs from local indigenous languages. Aubry affirms that “a language is a conceptual system.” As an example he mentions that in Tzotzil, there is no word for the Spanish verb *ser* (to be). To take a Spanish “equivalent,” let’s consider the verb *estar* in its differences with *ser*. *Estar* means “being in relation” to someone else or to a situation or to the natural surroundings (*entorno*). There is no concept of an ontology where a being is conceived by itself, alone, individual, separate.

Teología India is greatly enhanced by the use of terms, meanings, and syntactic turns proper to indigenous Mayan languages. *Teología India* in Chiapas could not be grasped without those languages that provide it with its foundation. The pastoral work of the Diocese makes permanent use of one or several of those languages allowing for their particular conceptual meanings to inform its commitments and work.

TEOLOGÍA INDIA AS AN OUTCOME

“Teología India is the final result of a pastoral action.”³⁴ *Teología India* and its practices do not stem from a project started by the will of the bishop, the priests, nuns, or the pastoral agents at the diocese of San Cristobal. They did not sit together to discuss and decide how it had to be done. It is the result of their pastoral approach with indigenous communities, and of their respect and awe for the Indigenous religious universes. These Indigenous universes are so elusive, so rich, and have been discarded in the past. It is the end result of many years of

y la vida.” Andrés Aubry quoted in: Ruiz and Torner, *Como me convirtieron los indígenas*, 67.

33 → Sylvia Marcos, *Taken from the lips: gender and eros in Mesoamerican religions* (Boston: Brill Academic Press, 2006).

34 → Christine Kovic, “Maya Catholics in Chiapas México: Practicing Faith on Their Own Terms,” in *Resurgent Voices in Latin America Indigenous Peoples Political Mobilization and Religious Change*, eds. E. L. Cleary and T.J. Steigenga (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2004), 187-207.

getting close to the Indigenous peoples and communities with an attuned ear, a respectful attention, and a congenial attitude. Especially vital is the attitude of pastoral actors, listening and learning to absorb indigenous epistemic worlds and how to work with and through them. Perhaps hidden is the idea, that I venture here as my own, that the pastoral agents, nuns and priests, and the bishop himself could discover a way of feeling and conceiving God that would also enrich their own.

THE COLLECTIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING GOD

Teología India is and must be a collective experience. It is practiced within the collective corporeality and embeddedness of liturgies.³⁵ Historically, Christianity has a strong communitarian sense, and early Christian assemblies have been a model and are always at the background of our hopes for a better Catholic community. Yet, the indigenous lived experiences of community are grounded in a concept of collectivity hard to understand from a Westernized mentality. It is easy to be entranced by the ways we see them acting, living, and believing through community. It stands out as an ideal. Some of the first Catholic missionaries that arrived in the Americas agreed, describing these communitarian ties as “the Christianity of the Indians.”³⁶

To Indigenous peoples, even today, a community is not conceived as a collectivity of individuals, according to the Western scheme exposed by Louis Dumont in his *Essays on Individualism* (1992). For the Westernized mentality, a whole (Greek: *holon*) is a collection of individuals (Greek: *atomi*); accordingly, Europeans, North Americans and Westernized Mexicans are trapped in an *atomistic holism* that renders notions of the person as a node in a network of relations and notions of one’s place in the world as a *topos in a cosmos*. For the

35 → This is why Don Samuel was adamant about not allowing me to interview him about *Teología India* on his own. This is why in his book *Como me convirtieron los indígenas* he insisted that several pastoral agents be interviewed along with him.

36 → Some of these early colonial sources are Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Diego Durán, and Motolinia, who admired the collective cohesion and sharing of the local Indigenous peoples they were catechizing.

Indigenous Mesoamericans, the full person has always been in her/himself parts of the collectivity: the *calpulli*, the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, the *pueblo*. It means that a part of him/herself belongs to the collectivity of which he is a part. The person is not complete without that part. If it were missing, he or she would experience it as the loss of a limb or another vital entity without which he or she lacks integrity and coherence as a person.

The embeddedness of the person in the collective cannot be equated to the consideration of the ego as a totally separate individual being, body and soul. With our concepts of the unitary soul or unitary identity or unitary subjectivity, we are unable to know in depth what collectivity means for the indigenous people. We can only try.

In Catholic faith-based organizations like *Las Abejas* (The Bees), we can detect the kind of communitarianism that pervades the indigenous worlds; their cellular structure, as in the case of Acteal in the municipality of Chenhalo,³⁷ allows for maximum flexibility. They are one of the most visible outcomes of the outreach of the pastoral work of the diocese. This cellular collective structure enables the constituent organizations to shift arenas, modifying their strategies in response to attacks by the federal and state police and paramilitary forces. It permitted the collective mode of organization to extend across regions. Indigenous peoples in the self-constituted autonomous regions of Northern Chiapas and the Lacandon rainforest as well as bordering hamlets of highland municipalities (*municipios autónomos*) are in fact engaged in the practice of collective autonomy while waiting for the government to implement the San Andrés Accords.

The diocesan pastoral work sustains and builds on these indigenous practices. Spirituality is linked to a communitarian sense in which all beings are interrelated and complement each other.

June Nash affirms that the indigenous people are seeking autonomy in daily practice through *Juntas de buen gobierno*, operating within an Indigenous collectivity. Through the practices of *mandar obedeciendo* (obeying we lead), one could easily think of the early Christian communities being embodied in contemporary practices by these

37 → As noted above, forty-five members of the community of *Las Abejas* were massacred.

Indigenous rebels and their supporters.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Beyond inculturation, the diocesan pastoral work in Chiapas threads a new path to build a true intercultural dialogue that we may call *Teología India* or *Sabiduría India*. It is based on a constellation of practices, which have to be understood in the context of the interconnection between matter and spirit, of the embodied sacredness of beings, earth, nature, and humans and on the epistemic philosophical backbone of the indigenous communities. This is the Catholic Church in Chiapas: balancing faith and politics, theology and justice, devotion and rights, mind and bodies, orthodoxy and inculturation. ■