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Periods of Transition

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The Global South's Estrangement in Phillip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*

The imperial agendas of colonization of the 16th and 17th centuries of the then discovered world by a cohort of more or less Christian European powers, provided a continuous avenue of tangible supplies. This phenomenon, on the other hand, provided the platform for a developing of a sense of entitlement that permeated European societies as they continue colonizing, each at its own pace, but all competing against each other driven by the collective desire of leading as an economic power above the others. Such entitlement granted an assumption of greatness that isolated others from the position of power. Each one, engaged in economic, political, and also religious maneuvering, again, with the implied intention of overpowering each other. Granted, consolidations were achieved, and agreements were reached. However, such operations had their own ulterior motives as economic powers were laid out. Religious manipulations were also planned and promoted, in general, for the benefit of the European subject at the expense of the colonized object. Even after the establishment of modern nation states in the 19th century, European elites and their heirs remained in power, and the colonized object was generally overlooked when national development was at stake. Also, the religious frame of colonized societies was planned based on the agendas, objectives and strategies of the European Church as an institution.

Such initiatives overlooked the simple fact of what we may call overcompensation or simply stated, a social survival mechanism of the colonized object to be able to practice beliefs outside

of the Christian perspective. The fact is, assimilation is a notion proposed and understood by the colonizing subject, and perceived as a necessary step toward the full embracing of a western Christian worldview. As Paul Jenkins mentions in *The Next Christendom...*,

In Central America, Ancient Mayan priestly dynasties maintained their spiritual power in the guise of Catholic confraternities... [and] the Latin American church soon occupied a place as the authentic religious voice of the people.” (Jenkins 139).

It seems simple to understand that colonized societies and indigenous communities in the Americas would establish, if not pose, a necessary, continued, and fluid level of resistance most likely equivalent to the level of social, and religious intrusion experimented by the West. In fact, initiatives of economic and social penetration were perceived, and accepted by Europeans, as a positive and noble option. An action necessary for the saving of whole indigenous societies, otherwise “lost” in the Western hemisphere.

Under these circumstances, developing and establishing societies in the Americas were driven by objectives foreign to indigenous communities and ultimately beneficial only to place the colonizer in a position of power regardless of the initiative. Even during decades of national control by prior imperial powers during the 19th century, and even as late as the 20th century, initiatives would drive the national agendas, again, for the benefit of powerful European elites. These, on the other hand, benefitted from a privileged position among disgruntled societies of local indigenous communities that had paid lip service and literal servitude to elites that according to their own western standards, had the rights to govern, develop, and place themselves, again, as the driving force and legitimate heirs of a system that undermined anything and anyone but the European.

It is under these conditions that indigenous societies struggle even in the 21st century, still dragging a social structure, clearly declared by local elites about indigenous societies to be ineffective, and detrimental to their own self development. However, these elites are powerful enough to enforce on the indigenous the idea of a sacrificial approach not only inherited from centuries of enforced Christianity but also from millennia of indigenous practices. It is under these circumstances that Jenkins pictures an inevitable new reality in the 21st century, where the previously colonized object now advances operating as the colonizer; without permission and in its own right to re-evangelize sort of speak, those who for millennia had previously been secured in the West by the Catholic Church as its religious institution of choice.

Let's look at some necessary statistics in order to clarify some of the issues in this presentation, and also to have a point of reference from which we can provide ideas and possible initiatives to tackle a current problem with what it seems to be more effective outcomes. According to Jenkins in *The Next Christendom...*, " and in reference to the U.S.,

The main driver for population growth [is] immigration... the foreign-born portion of the U.S. [is] 15 percent... by 2050, one American in five will be foreign-born. As the nation grows, its ethnic character will become less European and less white, with all that implies for religious and cultural patterns." (Jenkins 126).

Indeed, and already for a few decades now, many individuals and communities from the Christianized colonial territories leave their locations either by force or by their own will as they try "to pitch their tent" sort of speak in locations in Europe and the Western hemisphere. This current phenomenon has created a very large global movement of displaced communities

through migration, exile status, refugee patterns, etc. Such global movement finds multiple destinations, mostly, on the Western hemisphere.

As these diverse communities arrive to the U.S., some, multiple times to various locations; their spiritual and religious experience in the U.S. get fragmented, strange from their roots, they also deal with a very diverse audience in their new locations. Certainly, as Jenkins also expresses,

American society is steadily moving from a black-and-white affair to a multicolored reality... Today, 50 million Americans are counted as Hispanic, 64 percent of them of Mexican ancestry... The current best bet is that the United States in 2050 will be 25 to 30 percent Latino, and 8 to 9 percent Asian.” (Jenkins 126).

The perception of the general population in the U.S. today seems to be challenged by the reality of the difference not by the different reality experienced. It also seems as if the assumed strangeness of new arrivals is incompatible with maintaining an ideal national identity, and subsequently detrimental to an economic development, and not beneficial to an assumed American society. Even the notion of what an immigrant means, today is dismantled of the inherent value it had in past centuries when the U.S. developed as a formidable political and economic power in the world. The language used as we refer to immigrants and new arrivals in this country has gradually changed driven by economic agendas of staunch economic powers and depreciated by the dialectic of scholars (S. Huntington), established politicians (P. Buchanan), and more recent presidential candidates (D. Trump). It seems as if the most recent war on terror and the U.S. pursue of a global democratization has not only actively contributed to closing our physical borders but to close the American mind as a response to the influx of immigrants and the fear placed in such process.

The reality is, immigrants in the U.S. from the Global South, specifically from Central America and Mexico, are younger and higher in number. Younger and in more numbers, are factors we must take into account when speaking of the development of the current church in the U.S. Both, factors affect its make up as it should affect the various initiatives for what the Church should look like, where and how it should go about as it grows in the U.S. Jenkins assures us that,

Latinos are generally much younger than longer-established populations. By mid-century, over 100 million Americans will claim Hispanic origin. At this rate, The U.S. will become one of the largest Spanish-speaking nations in the world, “more populous than any actual Hispanic nation with the exception of Mexico...” (Jenkins 126).

In addition, an important item in our current reality check we must not overlook is the fact that in some states of the American union the increase of Hispanics/Latinos is so high that this communities are no longer a minority in terms of the population but stretch the thin and delicate national fabric challenging notions of national identity. Again, Jenkins reminds us that,

Presently, four states (California, Texas, New Mexico, and Hawaii) have achieved majority-minority status, in that non-Latino white have ceased to form an absolute majority of the population and other states will soon join the list. Soon Latinos will constitute a majority of California’s people, while Latinos make up a 40 percent of the population in Texas, the second largest state. By the 2050’s, the United States as a whole will be a majority-minority nation.” (Jenkins 126-7).

Such current growth and inevitable projection into the future creates a level of nervousness among those who romanticize a regression to a past when there was a higher and more consistent

European representation in the U.S. regardless of country of origin. For these individuals or communities,

We face a similar dilemma today. Fears about America's future have given rise to a new nativism...Their idea is that 'real' Americans descend from white Europeans and that our culture is based on the individualism, work ethic, and rule of law that we inherited from our Anglo Protestant forebears. (Gomez 67)

It is under these conditions that new arrivals from the global south to the U.S., and to the church bring their own vision of not only what this country means but what the general religious practices should and will look like as new enclaves of worship propagate. However, not without transferring a new ethnic and racial flavor, a mingling of languages through which their own cultures are passed on to new generations of believers. (Oboler 137)

It is on these points of contact and social space where and when the exchange of ideas and notions, perceptions and assumptions about a common practice and understanding of religious tenets gets to be challenged. This phenomenon appears to be a constant since the perception of those who are already within the religious institutions about those who just arrive seems to be set, again, according to their own guidelines. The new arrival brings a notion of salvation and consecration, practice and method that often more or less differs from those held by religious institutions in the U.S. It is also in this context where I argue that the notion of acculturation and the oversight over indigeneity gains importance. However, it's usually overlooked, subsumed, swallowed by what, in Western eyes is totally perceived as an issue of language. In other words, there seems to be a consistent perception on the part of religious institutions, and we should include our Seventh-Day Adventist Church in this phenomenon, that language as it is the

medium of communication it also serves as a buffer mechanism with which to erase ethnic and racial differences. Language becomes the shield and buffer zone, a sort of glue that "... strips people of their historical identity and reduces them to imputed common traits" (Jimenez, 1989). This operation allows us to not deal directly with the ignored differences among those arriving or already arrived from the Global South, more specifically from Mexico, and Central America.

The idea of no racial and ethnic differences within the church still remains in the future. The assumption that the "mestizo loyalty is neither to race nor nation, but to Christendom, the Pilgrim church" (Jenkins 145), is an obvious oversimplification, wishful thinking, and an application of a collective desire with no foundation. To expect a diversity of communities mingled in a place of worship in the U.S. assuming on being united only by language, while overlooking ethnic and racial differences is an unfortunate display of national arrogance. Not accounting for such differences impedes effective evangelistic efforts and misapplied organizational initiatives. Not knowing the historical background of such differences, and not understanding, we too, in the Americas have a very structured set of racial and ethnic differences that are surely transferred with those communities to the various locations of worship in the U.S. contribute to perpetuate mistaken perspectives and failed initiatives within organizations in newly arrived locations in the northern hemisphere. Such structure will act as a discordant factor within evangelistic agendas. Certainly, it is a fact the Hispanic/ Latino church membership is rapidly growing and great numbers are being added to the church. Also, a high number of Hispanic/ Latino young adults are joining the ranks thus strengthening an already elderly church structure in North America. Again, their ways of worship, their possible practices as a community brought from their place of origin, are all transferred and put in motion right here, in the U.S. At times, indigenous community practices will not be consistent with expected practices

by church members already established in their own churches. This off-sync pattern usually creates a level of conflict that is surely misunderstood and navigates as an issue of language difference. The truth is, some of these differences are not new nor easily dismantled since they have been embedded within our Global South societies for centuries. In fact, these same differences will define how communities will be arranged, in their place of origin and also in their new places of worship in the U.S.

The complexity of an acculturation process is already embedded in the experience of the new arrivals from the Global South in the U.S. In general, there is a high expectation over the new communities to arrange themselves around given tenets already established by a society that perceives them as inexperienced due to an inability to clearly communicate and be understood. In other words, in the north, language becomes the primary issue and the common culprit for the newcomer to adapt and adopt to new locations and societies in the U.S. It seems, as if for those who are already established in the north there is nothing to learn from the newcomers and initiatives are placed in motion driven by that same assumption. This phenomenon is not strange to the church as a community of believers. Time and time again, the *modus operandi* is unidirectional as it is commonly assumed those who need to learn anything at all are solely those who recently arrived. Therefore, they are the ones who need to embrace the cultures of the north, to somehow forget, intentionally deactivate, and effectively neutralize the cultural baggage they bring with them. All this time, the assumption is, the newcomer will somehow become not only a member of the church, but also a good member of a society that assumes there is no need to recognize the difference nor legitimize the other. Such assumption is essential in the process of acculturation, at least as it is defined in the West. There is also the assumption that the newcomers are gladly embracing “the new” and abandoning “the old,” which in reality is their

own identity. However, this process has been happening for centuries and the new arrivals will surely protect their cultural patrimony above and beyond new guidelines provided for them in the U.S. By the way, such guidelines are given to them in a strange language. What really takes place is a process of cultural syncretism not really new to indigenous newcomers. After all, they have gone through this process many times over since colonial times in the Americas, and this one in the U.S., is just one more hurdle in the process of social and cultural survival.

The misperception about indigenous societies from the Americas in the U.S., is also a major contributor to possible mistaken plans of evangelism. Those indigenous who arrive from locations in the Global South are more likely loyal first to their ancestors, and second, to a modern nation. Those already in the northern hemisphere, at the receiving end, need to understand that many they label as Hispanics/ Latinos often do not speak Spanish. Most new indigenous arrivals from the Americas more or less will continue with practices brought from their homeland. (Chavez 29) In fact, once settled in multiple locations in the U.S. they will establish programs for community access, and empowerment on simultaneous locations, in the U.S. and also back home in their local villages. In various occasions, local government back home is voted and made into law by those who are currently in the U.S. since often entire communities move north and exercise a great level of power from abroad.

While it is true that empowerment of indigenous communities abroad is a vital element within modern notions of diversity and inclusion, providing not only the platform of free expression but also facilitating the acquisition of benefits, it is also true that such empowerment serves and increases a collective isolation that render these communities invisible within the political process in a modern nation state such as the U.S. Now, the children born in the U.S. of

indigenous communities will embrace it as their nation of birth, and rightly so. Unfortunately, many of those who are already in the U.S. will not embrace who these children are. The reality is that all newcomers are affected by a powerful but broken system of immigration in the U.S. However, those who are indigenous and arrive from Central American locations are mainly victims in such system. The social misperceptions and failed assumptions of the public in general, will stigmatize their presence. The lack of equity when treating these communities will enhance their lack of trust and decrease their level of honesty within a system that portrays to be democratic and humanitarian. The bias projected by the media will convey a need to persecute and most likely instigate to place new arrivals in long term imprisonment in locations masked as detention centers such as those already managed by for-profit corporations like the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). Overall, we need to be more intentional at raising awareness of the current condition we are in with respect to the identity, value, and acceptance of new arrivals to the U.S., specially, when speaking about indigenous communities moving, migrating, simply being in exile or seeking refuge in the northern hemisphere from the global south.

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