

HISPANIC/LATINO THEOLOGY

- Topic: Possible Contributions of Afro-Cuban Religion
to a Catholic Theology of Grace: An Interreligious Dialogue
- Convener: Roberto S. Goizueta, Boston College
- Presenter: Miguel Ramos, Florida International University
- Respondent: Orlando O. Espín, University of San Diego

In his presentation, Miguel Ramos analyzed certain aspects of Lukumí religion (sometimes referred to as Santería) that may lend themselves to interreligious dialogue with Roman Catholicism. Ramos focused on the Lukumí notion of *ashé*, which represents the life force energizing all things. *Ashé* is the manifestation of the Supreme God, Olorun, in creation. Although Olorun has imbued all creation with *ashé*, the degree of *ashé* present in any particular existent is dependent on the host's receptivity to the divine presence. In itself, therefore, *ashé* is neither good nor evil; it is morally neutral. Thus, Lukumí religion has no notion of a battle between good and evil. The moral character of *ashé* is determined by the ends to which it is used.

Ramos emphasized the important role that *ashé* has played in the history of Lukumí religion and its practitioners. As a constant reminder of God's nearness, *ashé* has fostered a deep sense of hope among people who have been subjected to slavery and oppression. At the same time that it gives hope for the future, *ashé* empowers persons to find God in the present; Lukumí faith is focused on the here-and-now. The universal character of *ashé*, which makes it possible for the Lukumí to recognize the divine presence in all religions, has also facilitated the adaptation of Lukumí religion to its cultural and religious environment.

Comparing the notion of *ashé* with the Catholic notion of grace, Orlando Espín offered a response that explored possible analogies between the two notions as well as fundamental differences between them. Inasmuch as *ashé* affirms God's presence in all creation, it can be compared to the Catholic notions of grace and sacramentality. At the same time, the morally neutral character of *ashé* does not find an analogue in the notion of grace, as this latter is identified with the loving presence of God in the world. This is the most fundamental difference between the Lukumí and Catholic concepts. On the other hand, if we examine what precisely is meant by "moral neutrality," the differences may be somewhat less dramatic than they appear at first glance. Espín suggested that, by locating morality in the human use of *ashé*, Lukumí religion resembles—functionally, not doctrinally—a kind of semi-Pelagianism. He concluded his response by arguing for the necessity of a continued dialogue between Lukumí and Catholic theologians. Espín noted that this session of the Hispanic/Latino Theology Group is the first time Catholic and Lukumí theologians have ever engaged in a public theological dialogue.

In the ensuing conversation, Ramos inquired about the role of free will in Catholic theology. The notion of original sin, he suggested, seems to predetermine and limit free will. He discussed the Lukumí belief in reincarnation as linked to an emphasis on free will, where one's fate is determined by the way in which one uses *ashé*.

A large number of the participants actively took part in the group discussion, which covered a wide range of issues. One question concerned a possible Lukumí analogue to the Christian Trinitarian God and belief in the Incarnation. While *ashé* bears some resemblance to the Holy Spirit in Christian thought, Ramos observed that there is no Trinity in Lukumí religion, whose monotheism is closer to Islam than to Christianity.

Much of the group conversation centered on the impact which contact and dialogue with African religions might have on Christianity. This is an especially pressing question, since the vast majority of Christians live in the Third World. In Cuba, 74 percent of the population participates in Lukumí religious practices. Noting that Christianity has, from the beginning, appropriated and adapted religious symbols and practices of surrounding cultures, several speakers mentioned that Christians can learn from the way in which Jewish Christians engaged Hellenistic thought during the Patristic period. What might Christianity look like today if, instead of spreading into Greece, it had first spread into sub-Saharan Africa?

In the case of Cuba, one speaker asked why there is institutional resistance to dialogue, since, at the popular level, dialogue has always existed. Ramos indicated that there is "uneven" dialogue at the institutional level. Moreover, such dialogue is made more difficult by the fact that there is no Lukumí "institution" as such. Most Lukumís consider themselves Catholic, seeing no conflict between their Lukumí and Catholic beliefs and practices; Cuba is very much a mulatto society. Currently, however, the relationship between the Lukumí and Catholic religions is more strained than ever, due in large part to recent critical statements made by Cuban bishops during the period of the Pope's visit to the island.

ROBERTO S. GOIZUETA
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts