

MISSIONOLOGY AND MISSION THEOLOGY

Topic: Syncretism and Indigenous Leadership and Traditions
Conveners: Stephen Bevans, Catholic Theological Union
Lou McNeil, Georgian Court College
Moderator: Jeanne Evans, Marymount Manhattan College
Presenters: Carl F. Starkloff, Institute of Jesuit Resources
Stephen Bevans, Catholic Theological Union

One of our presenters, Michel Andraos of the Catholic Theological Union, was unable to be with us because of the impending delivery by his wife of their second child. Stephen Bevans presented in his place. Andraos' paper: "Indigenous Leadership in the Church: the Chiapas Experience" was referred to by both Carl Starkloff and Stephen Bevans, since it had been originally intended as a case illustration of Starkloff's more theoretical approach to syncretism.

Starkloff suggested that syncretism has been an abiding, natural process in the experience of the human family. The interpenetration of religious systems has been seen from the times of the Canaanite and Hebrew encounters through the period of the Cappadocians' use of Greek thought to articulate the Christian experience. Only in the seventeenth century, as many Protestant theologians became resistant to "theological compromise," did syncretism begin to take on negative connotations. Earlier Christianity had often entered a culture dialogically, but during the empire-building period of modern Europe, the encounter began with the closing of dialogue. It became more an invasion than an encounter. As a result, the response of the invaded culture often was either "syncretism" understood as (1) addition, along with the maintenance of "compartmentalized dual systems"; (2) mixture, perhaps, but the maintenance at a deeper level of an unchanged consciousness or unconsciousness; or (3) accommodation, the two cultures, to some degree, intentionally adjusted to one another in adopting each other's practices.

In time, however, there was a "reaction phase" in most situations during which indigenous leaders rallied the people with the cry that "enough is enough." Starkloff illustrated this amply, adding that it often leads the "invading" church into a period of "repentance." He noted that this period of repentance leads missionaries often in the post-Vatican II period to adjust their notions. Syncretism as a result comes to be seen as: (1) translation—a form of accommodation; (2) adaptation—each learns from the other the vagaries of religious acts and expressions; and (3) synthesis—a "utopian" ideal, often pursued in the 1970s, to inculcate the gospel into new "soil" without destroying or damaging "anything good in the local culture."

Bevans, in his turn, reminded us that Andraos' paper had been a reflection on the indigenous leadership in Chiapas as illustrative of the very processes

Starkloff outlined in the last portion of his paper—Chiapas had moved into a fertile moment of dialogue between religious cultures—synthesis.

For his own part, Bevans maintained that theology can only be local theology. He underscored the significance of this by recalling that both Scripture and Tradition themselves are local theologies. Each is the testimony of the believing community to their experience and meaning of the Jesus revelation. It is just this new understanding of experience as the third *loci theologici* that has made the Vatican nervous.

In the forthcoming revised edition of his book, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans holds that contextual theology is the interaction of the experiences of the past and the present. In the case of the past, it is those experiences recorded in the Scriptures that are pondered and defended in the Tradition. In the instance of the present, it is the experiences that we all undergo at four levels: individual lives, social location, cultural context, and the constantly evolving change in cultural expression/s. The difficulty, Bevans suggested, in our present situation is that the Vatican suspects local leadership and its experiences. This suspicion has hindered the development of local identity within the Christian community. The consequence has been that not only the richness of the gospel is inhibited, but also the Church is deprived of one more font “in understanding of the unfathomable riches of Christ.”

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THOUGHT OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

- Topic: Signs of the Times in Newman's Thought and Strategies
Conveners: Edward Jeremy Miller, Gwynedd-Mercy College
Kevin Godfrey, Alvernia College
Presenters: Thomas R. Potvin, Dominican College of Theology, Ottawa
Gerald H. McCarren, Seton Hall University
Edward Jeremy Miller, Gwynedd-Mercy College

Thomas Raymond Potvin opened the seminar with a summary of his paper, “Times and Events: An Integral Part of Development of Doctrine,” arguing that Newman was fully aware of the roles of times and events in the development of doctrines, starting with the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Likewise, the advancement of the church’s understanding of the Deposit of Faith seems to find its natural setting in a context of needs, controversy, and even heresies. Newman states almost as an axiom “that the profession and developments of a doctrine are according to the emergency of the time (Dev 10.1. p. 401), and that