

## HISPANIC/LATIN@ THEOLOGY CONSULTATION

Topic: Syncretism in Light of Inculturation: A Theological Perspective  
Convener: Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union  
Moderator: Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union  
Presenters: Raúl Gómez Ruiz, Sacred Heart School of Theology  
Ramón Luzárraga, University of Dayton

Since Vatican II and the turn to culture, the theological notion of “inculturation” has come to the fore. This session explored “inculturation” vis-à-vis “syncretism” by drawing attention to some of the theological issues and ritual practices that seemingly are causing concerns among Roman officials, theologians, pastoral ministers, and others. In varying yet complementary ways each presentation raised questions about explicit and implicit criteria operative in assessing the suitability of non-Christian or non-Catholic practices, feasts, art, architecture, and popular expressions for adaptation into Catholic liturgical and devotional life. In effect each presenter uniquely pondered what makes adaptation inculturation and not syncretism.

Raúl Gómez Ruiz, in his paper, “SC 37: Magna Carta for Inculturation of the Liturgy or Slippery Slope to Syncretism and Abuses?” proposed that the adaptation in the liturgy called for by *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC), while embraced enthusiastically by those who saw in SC 37 permission to adapt the liturgy to cultural needs, was seen instead (by Roman authorities) as resulting in a slippery slope—from inculturation to syncretism and abuses. Subsequent documents such as *Varietates Legitimae* (1994), *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001), and *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004) articulate concerns about what the magisterium identifies as abuses that contribute to the obscuring of Catholic faith and doctrine in terms of the sacraments. In his exploration Gómez Ruiz examined the notion of inculturation and related concepts, the notion of syncretism with examples of the incorporation of non-Christian elements into the liturgy, and particular articles in the aforementioned documents which call into question the need to adapt the liturgy to the “culture and genius of the various peoples who comprise the Catholic Church.”

He concludes that incarnation and ecclesiology are major theological considerations that need to be employed in assessing the adequacy of the current approach to inculturation as communicated in these ecclesial documents. Gómez Ruiz cautions that the imposition of one text or ritual as normative ignores the reality that it will also require the dynamic of inculturation to insure appropriate authenticity in respective cultures’ celebrations of the liturgy. “For in terms of texts, it is not just a question of translation into the vernacular, but also a question of the text’s ability to help people encounter and make sense of the mystery of the Incarnation mediated by their culture and celebrated in the liturgy.” In terms of ecclesiology, Gómez Ruiz challenges positions that imply that “one translation of a text, one way of celebrating the liturgy, or the use of historical symbols which express the authorities’ understanding of their significance” contributes to the unity of the faithful.

Ramón Luzárraga, in his paper, “Syncretism: Why Latin American and Caribbean Theologians want to Reexamine a Bad Word in Theology,” considered the scholarship of Latin American and Caribbean theologians whose work challenges simplistic distinctions between so-called “good” and “bad” syncretism as identified by reigning European and North American theological perspectives. Luzárraga attended to how the term “inculturation” is preferred because

it does not carry the baggage “syncretism” does in dealing with the embodiment of the faith within cultural particularities. He observed that often Latin American and Caribbean attempts to inculturate faith have met with accusations of syncretism because the unfamiliarity of their expressions was interpreted as compromising Christianity in order to adjust to the culture being engaged. The faithful of those regions and their clergy and theologians, who readily acknowledge that bad inculturation is a problem to guard against, nonetheless insist that their own attempts at inculturation are theologically sound and original ways to live as a Christian.

Luzárraga sees these regional theologians motivated by genuine needs to secure integral liberation of their peoples as well as finding and/or acknowledging ways of incorporating indigenous and African spiritualities and worship without dismissing Iberian and other European elements that shaped the Church there for centuries. He admits such moves involve granting “popular religion the space to serve Christianity as an original means by which the people communicate the faith in the Church both inside and outside official worship and sacramental celebrations.” He concludes with three questions, drawn from the scholarship of Peter Schineller, to help guide concrete practices of inculturation: is it faithful to the Christian message? Does grace build on the nature of the culture of the people? Is the guidance and leadership in official Church structures working in tandem with the lay and clerical leaders among the people?

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