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Heavenly Lord) and Ha Na Nim (하나님 , One Great Spirit) of Shamanism, and the Christian usage of Ha Na Nim (하나님) for the God of the Bible has certainly helped Korean Christians to witness to non-Christians about the gospel.

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Christian Responses to the Challenge of Native Spiritualities in Central America

Guillermo Cook

Evangelical theology calls for dialogue between the Scriptures as the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ as unique and universal and the responses of communities of people, each with their own experience of God and of spiritual reality. In this article Dr Cook clearly empathizes with the Maya people of Central America in their past and present search to know God as expressed through rich images and symbols some of which reflect the glory of biblical imagery. The author explores the ways Catholic and Protestant indigenous Christians search for bridges to communicate the fullness of Jesus Christ while acknowledging that his uniqueness is a stumbling block to Maya spirituality. The insights of a team of Maya Presbyterian village pastors from Yucaton, Mexico in formulating their own confession of faith is particularly illuminating. For the Maya people to be unashamedly Christian and unashamedly Maya is a challenge to Christians in every culture.

Even before 1992 and the quincentenary of Columbus' 'discovery' of the 'Americas',[1] the ancient religiosity of the indigenous inhabitants had begun to reappear. It had been hidden for centuries in mountain caves, isolated jungles and under a thin veneer of popular Catholicism. This reawakening coincides with the resurgence of the indigenous populations. A century and a half after the European invasion, the indigenous population in the 'New World' was reduced to barely 10% of its original population of an estimated 100 million people. Today the indigenous population stands at about 50 million and is growing.[2]

All over the Americas there has been a revival of interest in indigenous culture and spirituality. Informal meetings of indigenous priests and leaders have been held in

[1] The whole incident of the conquest of the 'New World' by European powers is full of ironies and misnomers. Columbus thought he had arrived in the East Indies, the Spice Islands and called the inhabitants 'indians'. Their ancestors were the real discoverers of this new land, when they crossed the Baring land-bridge from Siberia thousand of years before. When Columbus' exploits were forgotten, the new lands came to be named after another Italian explorer, Americo Vespucci, with a greater ability to spin a yarn.

[2] *500 YEARS Quito*, Latin American Council of Churches, No 3, Nov. 1991, p. 9.

Mesoamerica,[3] the Andean region and elsewhere to discuss the content of the various ethnic spiritualities, their commonalities and differences. Indigenous Catholic liberationists and Protestant pastors have dialogued with priests of the resurgent indigenous religions over points of contact between their respective spiritualities. They began with creation myths and exodus events. Understanding was achieved on a number of general theological issues, until the question of Christ's claim to divinity and universality—central to the Christian faith—fractured the unity of indigenous religious leaders. At first glance, there are more points of contact between the Old Testament and indigenous spirituality than with the New Testament. The unique claims of Jesus Christ and of the faith which he founded are not easily assimilated into traditional indigenous spirituality. This has caused numerous defections from among Catholic priests in Guatemala and the Andean region, and more recently, from the ranks of Methodism in Bolivia.

I have chosen to focus upon the Maya people who have been around Mesoamerica for several millenia, because it is the people that I know and love best. Much of what I shall have to say could also be written about the resurgence of indigenous spiritualities in other parts—particularly the Andes region—of what indigenous peoples have begun to call Abia Yala[4].

Both Catholic and Protestant (including evangelical) indigenous thinkers are struggling to establish bridges between the Christian faith and the spirituality of their ancestors. While the outward trappings of this spirituality, it must be recognized, are not the same as those of the ancient Maya and Aztec priests, many aspects of the underlying worldview remain the same. The fact that even today Maya Christians—both Catholic and Protestant—may be found attending their regular church services as well as secretly practising ancient rites that missionaries taught them are idolatrous is a testimony to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the nature of indigenous spirituality.

I THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE MESOAMERICAN PEOPLES

Mesoamerican indigenous spirituality needs to be taken as seriously as are the so-called great world religions—for reasons of age and sophistication and because of its emerging challenge to Christianity and also because of its alternative proposals to the unsavoury fruits of modernity.

Between ten and fifteen thousand years ago, when the Indo European peoples were just beginning to fan out from the steppes of Central Asia into India, Anatolia, the Aegean and Europe, a unique culture began to develop on the Pacific watershed of Central America. At about the time when Abram and Sarai were migrating south and westward from the Fertile Crescent, the culture which came to be called *Maya* began to move into the Guatemalan highlands and jungle lowlands of Central America, over a period of many centuries. Around the time of the birth of the Buddha in Nepal, and of the return of the Jewish exiles from Persia, a sophisticated civilization of towering temple pyramids was at the height of its development in the northern jungles of Guatemala. The sheer scope of the time and space that this civilization has encompassed is staggering. To put it into a more familiar perspective, the Classic Era of Mesoamerican civilization began at about the time of the close of the New Testament period. It ended, in the ninth century, not long after

[3] Mesoamerica (middle America) is the term that Latin Americanist scholars use to refer to the land mass that encompasses Mexico and Central America.

[4] Abia Yala—'beautiful' or 'fruitful land' — is what the Kuna peoples of Panama call their world. Indigenous leaders throughout Latin America use it to refer to the 'American' continent.

Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor. By the time the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century, their amazing civilization was buried in jungle growth. Only a few relatively weak and backward warring tribes remained to make life miserable for the invaders for another century or so. Yet, despite their subjugation, the Mayas and their culture are still with us. Their refusal to disappear was dramatized by the ongoing Tzeltal Maya uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. A major factor in their survival has been their secret maintenance of their holistic spirituality.

II TEUTLATOLLI:[5] SPEAKING ABOUT GOD—INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

What I have been calling indigenous 'religiosity' or 'spirituality', indigenous thinkers prefer to term 'theology'. An indigenous theologian and Catholic priest, defines his peoples' theology as 'the complex of religious knowledge that indigenous peoples possess and by means of which we explain, beginning thousands of years ago until now, our faith experience'. Indigenous theology 'is not the fruit of intellectual minds of people who write books', points out Fr. Eleazar López Hernández, an indigenous priest in Mexico. Rather, 'it is the reflexive expression, in indigenous style (that is, in symbolic and mythical language) of the vital experience that we indigenous have of God'. This means that we should not expect indigenous theologies, and even less their incipient Christologies, to meet western standards of logic and precision.

Indigenous theology has always been expressed not so much through words as through cultic symbols—dances and reenactments, prayers and rituals, dreams and oral tradition, in which the core myths are expressed, discussed, interpreted and elaborated upon. The word for it in indigenous languages signifies 'God speaking', and 'speaking about God'.[6] The emergent theologies of the indigenous peoples of Abia Yala represent the most recent stage in an age-old, and yet new, grassroots spirituality that can both enrich and challenge traditional Christianity. Such is the case with the various responses of Maya religious leaders to the Christ which was forced upon them by white Europeans and who yet continues to attract them.

European theology,[7] in all of its manifestations, is increasingly being rejected today by Maya activists and thinkers. It stands accused of cultural insensitivity, at best, and of racial and physical genocide, at worst. Radical Maya thinkers resent being called 'pagan'; this condescending pejorative makes them fair game for thoughtless proselytizers of every Christian persuasion. 'Five hundred years have passed and the Christianizers are escalating their efforts to convert us', Pop Cal explodes. Christian techniques have become more sophisticated: what Catholicism calls the 'new evangelization' is disguised in jargon about an 'indian Christ', and 'an autochthonous church'. The Catholic hierarchy, he argues, is trying to convince the indigenous peoples that the violent gospel of the past has today

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[5] *Teutlatolli* is a Nahuatl (Aztec) term that can be translated both as 'the God that speaks' and 'speaking about God'. It is the most abstract term in indigenous theology, and the most explicit vis a vis Christian theology. The term, and its equivalents in other Mesoamerican languages, came into common usage during the classic period (300 to 800 AD)

[6] See chapter 10 by Fr. Eleazar López Hernández, in Guillermo Cook, *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic and Protestant Worldviews* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

[7] I use the term 'European' in place of imprecise geographical terms such as 'Western' and 'North'. Central America is, along with the United States and Canada, geographically in the Western and Northern hemispheres. The source of the theology and worldview that indigenous peoples refuse to submit to is ultimately European.

converted to the 'Good News of love' which has become incarnate in Maya culture. But indigenous people cannot forget the brutal excesses of the first evangelization. Even liberation theologians have come in for their share of criticism. In the pursuit of their ideological agendas, indigenous leaders say, liberationists failed to come to terms with the unique spirituality and rich culture of the indigenous peoples. 'The poor and crucified Christ' that progressive Catholics profess to have discovered in indigenous communities is as alienating and demeaning as traditional evangelism. 'It keeps us weak against our oppressors, and turns us all into abjectly servile persons', Pop Cal cries. He accuses ideological warriors of every persuasion of continuing to use indigenous peoples as cannon fodder.

The most scathing criticism, however, of this Mayan intellectual is directed at Protestants who base their missionary activities on the Great Commission. Pop Cal accuses them of depriving 'human beings of the right to search for God on their own'. The Christian claim that the only revelation of God is through his Son Jesus Christ slams the door on Maya-Christian dialogue, radical indigenous thinkers insist.[8] According to Fr. López Hernández, this radical rejection of Christianity is influential, even though it characterizes only a handful of indigenous intellectuals.

It is precisely the richness of their spiritual and cultural heritage that, indigenous leaders argue, gives them the right to question the imposition of Christianity upon them. But they are not merely questioning, they are building upon their heritage with the materials that have come down to them—and new elements that they have adapted from the invaders—and developing their own responses to Christianity. Maya Christologies are developing in the middle ranges between the extremes of Christian fundamentalism and of indigenous radicalism.

III INCIPIENT INDIGENOUS CHRISTOLOGIES

Christology, even in Scripture, did not develop in a vacuum. The various interpretations of the person of Jesus Christ which have followed grew out of particular understandings about God's intervention in human history—inculturated responses to specific challenges to the Christian faith. This is the case with the Christologies which have arisen in Latin America.

In order to find the freedom to develop uniquely Maya Christologies, indigenous leaders have found it necessary to distance themselves somewhat from the Christian traditions which they have been taught. Nonetheless, their debt to these traditions is quite evident. The hermeneutical tool of Maya Catholic theologians is liberation theology. The theological paradigm of the most articulate Maya Protestant theologians is Reformational theology. It is important to understand that there has been more discussion between Catholic indigenous theologians throughout the Americas and between them and traditional religionists, than among indigenous Protestants who have denominational barriers to surmount, theological hangups to overcome, and induced cultural hangups to circumvent. Until recently, Protestants interested in dialoguing with their own indigenous tradition mainly followed Catholic initiatives. For this reason, one must speak of an indigenous Catholic theology in dialogue with numerous ethnic spiritualities, followed by isolated attempts by indigenous Protestants in the various regions to develop their own theology in dialogue with their cultural traditions.

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[8] Antonio Pop Cal, 'The old face of the new evangelization', in Cook, *Crosscurrents*, Chapter 13. His precise use of evangelical terminology makes one suspect that, at some stage in his formation, he received Protestant teaching.

The Catholic Approach to an Ethnic Christology

Christology did not arrive in the New World in a historical vacuum. It had been warped by Medieval Roman Catholicism and totally distorted by the crusades. The Christ that the Catholic Spanish and Portuguese brought to Latin America was a complex mixture of contradictory and docetic visions—a crusading warrior and a crucified Saviour; a figurehead monarch at the side of his more powerful consort,[9] as well as the cherubic white baby that she cradles in her arms. These perceptions still inform many Catholics in Latin America.

Because Roman Catholic Christology is so dependent upon ecclesiology and so burdened by its history in Latin America, Maya Catholics who break with their church find it very difficult to develop a meaningful Christology, except by negation. This is, in effect, the recognition of Wuqub Iq, an ex-Catholic priest in Guatemala.

> Believers need help in defining their attitudes toward their present situation, and in discerning where the Creator and Former of Life (both personal and collective) is at work—the one who Christians call 'the Lord of history'. We find ourselves, however, seeking understanding by way of negation rather than affirmation, because the latter can all too easily be manipulated.[10]

So Maya Catholics must begin by re-thinking their theology, getting to know the God of their ancestors. The Supreme God of the Mayas was worshipped in their many languages in terms that are often reminiscent of Old Testament language, with one striking difference: though he is referred to in masculine terms, some of the divine names and qualities are feminine. Though the supreme Maya deity is absolute, incorporeal, and in essence nameless, He reveals himself as both male and female, Mother and Father. The female dimension is particularly revealed within nature. This deity, whose highest physical representation is the sun, is acknowledged as the Creator—Builder, Shaper—and the Mover and Integrator of Creation. God, the Defender of his people, is worshipped as Wonderful Lord. But his most arresting name, and the one by which God is often addressed today by culturally aware Mayas is Christological in its implications: 'Heart of Heaven and Heart of Earth'. These names, for many Catholic Maya, are proof enough that God was revealed to their ancestors through visions and scriptures, prophets, and for some, anthropomorphic manifestations. Might not Mesoamerica, they ask, have had its prophets and divine representatives?[11]

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[9] It has been suggested that this image was influenced by the ruling style of Isabella of Castile and her consort Ferdinand of Aragon. Cp. Georges Cassalis, in José Miguez-Bonino, ed., *Who is Jesus Christ in Latin America Today?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 74, 75.

[10] Wuqub' Iq', 'Understanding Mayan spirituality: A proposed methodology for dialogue with Christians', Chapter 16 of Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

[11] Several strands of the Quetzacoatl confusing myth need to be unravelled, since the legends are overlapping. He is a zoomorphic manifestation of the one true God that harks back to the dawn of Mesoamerican civilization. Several Mesoamerican priest-kings bore his name. The best known, a ruler of the central Mexican Toltec kingdom (ca. AD 950), is said to have banished war, instructed his people in the arts of peace, and taught them to worship the One God. Expelled from his land by rival tribes who introduced a warrior god that required human sacrifices, Quetzacoatl abandoned his throne and travelled eastward across the water, promising some day to return (cf. Miguel León Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, [London: SPCK, 1980], pp. 151–167ff). Centuries later, another Toltec Quetzacoatl imposed the feathered serpent cult with sacred warfare and human sacrifice upon the Mayas of Yucatán. This bloody cult was denounced by Maya prophets.

With this appreciation of their own spirituality, indigenous Catholic priests are turning to a Mayan way of understanding the Christian God—'the Only God', in Wuqub Iq's expression, through the spiritual experience of their own peoples. 'We are searching for guidelines that take our daily reality into account, throw light upon the future, and can orient our pastoral planning.' In order to know God and to understand Jesus Christ, says Wuqub Iq, it is essential to recognize that the Christianity which the 'conquistadores' brought 'was essentially unlike the fundamental human values which were set forth by the God of Jesus Christ'. What the Spaniards saw as a victory for the rule of Christ—the defeat of infidels and pagans—was not Christianity but 'a religious ideology for soldiers, adventurers, and zealots'.

Having placed a question mark above ecclesiastical Christology and its claims to absolute truth and authority, Catholic Mayas today value popular religiosity as a symbolic bridge between Christian and Maya spirituality. Catholic missionaries, after fruitless attempts to stamp out indigenous spirituality, eventually came to terms with the popular Christianity of the Mesoamerican peoples. Behind the images of the Lord God and of his 'deputy' Jesus Christ, the statues of virgins and saints and the huge crosses in village squares, loom the myriad manifestations of Maya divinity. The dual male and female nature of the gods of Mayan popular religiosity, is echoed in the relationship between Jesus and Mary. The Catholic religious calendar has its counterpart in the sacred calendar of the Mayas. Catholic Mayas find room for dialogue between Roman Catholic sacramental Christology and indigenous sacramental myths; but, in so doing, they must be careful not to threaten the authority of the church. What the outcome of this search for a culturally relevant Christology will be for a Maya Catholic Christology, remains to be seen.

A Protestant Approach to Maya Christology

The Christ that Protestant missionaries announced to the 'indians', was dressed in the garb of the English and American traders and missionaries who brought him to Latin America. Reflecting the virtues and vices of the Anglo-Saxon culture, the missionary message was a study in contradictions. It was monotheistic and dualistic, individualistic and pluralistic, austere and hard-working (the Protestant ethic), and at the same time caring and forgiving. Protestant Christology, even today, is both spiritual (mystical) and materialistic (pragmatic). The same Protestant Christ who was proclaimed to the indigenous peoples of North America and to the short-lived Reformed colonies in sixteenth century Brazil, sanctified the hellish trade of blacks from West Africa. The Protestant missionaries who began to arrive in Central and South America in the latter half of the nineteenth century were unable to perceive that the popular Catholicism that they condemned was, despite its most degrading aspects, a resistance mechanism that enabled the indigenous peoples to survive European exploitation.

Indigenous Protestants are relative late-comers to indigenous theology, perhaps because their history has followed a different course. The Christ that was brought to Latin America by Protestants was militantly anti-Catholic and is perceived by large numbers of indigenous people as a liberating alternative to the more oppressive elements of popular Catholicism.[12] The novelty factor may have also played a role. In some respects, the Christ that Protestant missionaries proclaimed to the indigenous people was more otherworldly than the Christ of Catholicism; socio-culturally, North American Christology focuses more upon the beliefs of individuals than the Spanish Catholic Christ who appears as part of a

[12] See Liliana R. Goldin and Brent Metz, 'An Expression of Cultural Change: Invisible Converts to Protestantism Among Highland Guatemala Mayas', in *Ethnology*, No. 30, vol. 4, (1991), pp. 325–338. It is reproduced in Cook, *Crosscurrents*, chapter 3.

Holy Family. However, neither understanding of Christ speaks to the uniquely communitarian ethos of indigenous spirituality.

Maya Protestant intellectuals, after going through a period of negation, seem to be moving toward a more affirmative theology and a more explicit Christology. Although the odd Protestant indigenous intellectual has exceeded most Catholic Mayas in proposing a radical return to their ancestral theologies, according to Fr. López Hernández, the handful of ethnic theologians in Mesoamerica stand somewhere between the extremes of Christian fundamentalism and outright rejection of Christianity.[13]

Mindful of the traditional Protestant nervousness about indigenous or vernacular theologies, Moisés Colop, who is a Ki'che' Maya and a minister in the National Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, cautions:

> Indigenous theology is not a distortion of Christian theology, but rather a proximate theological expression in a foreign language (Spanish), using methods that are not our own. Even as there is variety in Christian theology, there is also variety in the exercise and practice of indigenous theology.[14]

Mayan Protestant thinkers, though at first influenced by liberation thinking, are increasingly drawn back to their Protestant roots, the Reformation principles of 'solo Christo', 'sola gratia' and 'sola Scriptura'. Despite the suspicion that most Protestants who have been trained in a European academic system, have of 'pagan' practices, the 'Protestant principle' of dissent gives indigenous Protestants more room than their Catholic colleagues enjoy to explore new theological and ecclesial options. In any case, if they are expelled from their churches, they can always join the endless train of new Protestant movements in Latin America.

Most Protestant indigenous theology is still quite tentative and exploratory. Yet there are encouraging signs that serious reflection has begun. A paper prepared by a team of Maya Presbyterian village pastors approaches Christology from the context of their native Yucatan, Mexico. And they have gone to the considerable trouble of framing it in the categories of Reformed theology,[15] thus providing a bridge between the symbolic language of the Mayas and linear European logic. The document is a modest, and helpful, Protestant contribution to an ongoing Christological debate with Catholic and traditional indigenous leaders. It makes five basic points which I have summarized.

1. God reveals himself[16] to all peoples and cultures. God is the source of life for all peoples (Jn. 1:1–4, 9); it is the basic tenet of indigenous theology. He has granted to every person, and to every race and people, the right to be creative and unique (Ac. 17:24–27). God has revealed himself to all peoples and continues to communicate to them through their consciences (Ro. 2:14–16; 1:20). God liberates the oppressed: other nations and peoples besides Israel have experienced God's liberation and his judgment for disobedience (Am. 9:7, 9). He takes pleasure in the worship of all peoples who follow him in truth (Mal. 1:11). God has charged all peoples to administer his creation (Ps. 8:6). The universality of the divine actions herein summarized makes it possible to search for ways of expressing Christian theology in indigenous categories.

2. As Israel was rejected for not following in God's way, the Maya peoples were denounced for abandoning their monotheistic faith. Their prophets announced judgment and hope based upon the return of the true prophet-king Quetzacoatl. The Maya peoples were not always idolatrous. They worshipped one God. Although he was associated with the sun, there is no evidence of an image or painting being made of the supreme Maya

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[13] López Hernández, chapter 10 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

[14] Colop, chapter 11 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

[15] Pr. Facundo Ku Canché, 'Towards an Indigenous Theology: A Reformed Protestant Perspective', chapter 10 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*. There are six chapters in this collection by indigenous Protestants.

deity Hunab Ku'[17] The idolatrous elements, Mayas insist, were imposed by Toltec and Itzá invaders from central Mexico. Traditions recorded during the Spanish invasion period a few centuries later speak of this fact.

> For a time, they knew about one God who surveyed heaven and earth and everything, from his heavenly seat. They had dedicated a temple to him, with priests who received presents and alms from the people to be offered unto God. This was their way of worship until a great lord came from afar who, with his people, were idolaters and whom the whole land began to follow in their idolatry . . . having idols for everything (Relación de Motul).

The ancient wise men of Yucatán 'relate that some eight hundred years ago there was no idolatry in this land'. But after the Mexicas[18] 'conquered us, a captain who called himself Quetzacoatl (feathered serpent) . . . introduced . . . the idolatrous worship of gods made of wood and mud', to whom they even offered human blood (Relación de don Martín de Palomar).

Although many Mayas became idolaters, there were also those who preserved their monotheistic faith. There were poets and rulers, and above all prophets, who like the Old Testament Elijah, called their people back to the worship of the One True God. Their pronouncements, known collectively as the *chilam balam*, after the best known of five leading prophets,[19] are collections of predictions which were compiled shortly before the coming of the Europeans, and later transcribed into Latin script. Erroneously described as 'prophecies of a new religion', Mayas insist that they are, in fact, prophecies of the resurgence of the monotheistic faith which had been distorted by northern tribes. They announced the imminent destruction of the oppressive religious system of the Itzá invaders.[20]

> Bow before the true God, omnipotent above all things . . . Creator of heaven and earth . . . My words shall be painful to you O Maya Itzá, water witch of the Mayas; you who refuse to hear about another God, who believe that your deities are worthy. But you shall come to acknowledge the truth of my preaching! (Prophecy of Natzín Yabún Chan).

When Hunab Ku', the only deity, is manifest he shall bring peace to his peoples, including to the Itzás who are called to adore him. It shall be the dawn of a new monotheistic faith, the beginning of a new humanity (the Prophecy of Chilam Balam). Mayas today understand these to be valid prophecies upon which to base a renewed indigenous theology in which, for Christians, there is ample room for incarnational revelation.

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[17] *Hunab kú* is a composite name, somewhat akin to Yaweh, which denotes oneness (*hu*), being (*nab*) and divinity (*ku*).

[18] *Mexicas*, bands of tribes from the Central Plains of North America that gradually overwhelmed the Maya related Mesoamerican civilization in central Mexico. A minor tribe gained the ascendancy and went on to found the Aztec empire.

[19] Chilam Balam, in his own words, was 'a priest who travels to every province on earth explaining the word of the Lord Kú, the only true deity' (Chilam Balam de Chumayel).

[20] The Itzás were a semi-barbarian race of traders along the Gulf Coast, providing cultural links between the Mayas and the Toltec empire in central Mexico. The Maya city of chichén Itzá (whose Toltec style ruins are still the marvel of thousands of tourists) was built, presumably by the Itzás, around the middle of the ninth century AD. According to Maya documents written after the Spanish conquest, the city was also conquered by Toltecs (or Toltecized Mayas) from the north who brought in alien religious practices. The relationship between both invading groups is unclear.

3. Catholic and Protestant Christianity failed to respond to the promise of these prophecies. The Europeans came at the time announced by the prophets, bringing a new religion of one supreme God, his Son Jesus Christ, and his mother, the Virgin Mary. For the Maya, these were implacable deities, in whose name every Maya representation of God had to be destroyed. If the dedicated, and often fanatical, friars who learned the indigenous languages had been able to understand the monotheistic undercurrent in Maya theology, would they have acted differently? Probably not. The Catholic monarchs and their armies had, after all, expelled monotheistic Jews and Muslims from their newly unified kingdom, in the same year of Columbus' 'discovery' of the 'Indies'. In order to survive, indigenous religiosity fused with popular Catholicism. The priests of Hunab Kú, the one God, went underground while the official religion was being smashed. They continued to resist and to await the fulfilment of the prophecies. This spirituality is strong in the resurgent Maya religion.

When Protestant missionaries began to arrive at the end of the nineteenth century, they proclaimed a one true God and his Son Jesus Christ, but in western cultural terms that made it difficult for indigenous converts to build bridges to their own traditions. Today, Maya Protestants are beginning to rethink their relationship to Jesus Christ; they are searching for ways to inculturate the Christian message so that it can become wholly good news to their people.

4. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, is the only mediator between God and man. If Christ is being rejected by indigenous theologians it is because his mediation was announced to them with a hidden agenda: they were invited to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, then told to reject their cultural identity. But this was not the intent of the original Christian message. Jesus became a Jew but did not require his followers to become Jews, challenging them to discover and proclaim Christ within each new culture. God is not limited in his revelation. Might he not have revealed himself as the 'non-incarnate Word' to people of other races and cultures (Gn. 16:7–16; 21:8–21) as he did on a number of occasions to the patriarchs. In an interesting exegesis indigenous theologians ask whether 'the goings out' (*iatso*, sudden manifestations) of him who was to be born in Bethlehem Ephratah that 'are from old, from ancient times' (Micah 5:2)—might refer to unrecorded manifestations of the Christ to peoples of other races. Some kind of divine manifestation is imbedded in their collective memory. Fr. Diego de Landa, recorded in his memoirs[21] that the Yucatan Maya celebrated an event which they called 'em ku'—'the descent of god'.[22]

5. Mayas have a right to discover the one God in their own culture and to follow Jesus Christ in their own way. Every people has unique frames of reference from which to discover the one God. If the Church Fathers could use the categories of Greek philosophy to explain Christianity to the Helenistic world, Maya thinkers wonder why they are not allowed to formulate Christian theology in indigenous frames of reference. But they are not satisfied with formulating culturally coherent Christological statements. True Christology is always substantiated by its fruits. The fruits of western Christianity have become bitterly apparent to indigenous peoples in the Americas. What are the fruits of indigenous spirituality?

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[21] Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. Edición de Miguel Rivera, (Madrid: Historia 16, 1985). Fr. Landa was at the same time an admirer of the Maya people and culture and a fanatical destroyer of their religion.

[22] The temple of Chichén Itzá was positioned in such a way that the supreme god Kukulcán (Quetzacoatl) could descend from heaven once a year, the rising sun rippling down the 360 steps, to be with his people—and with countless tourists who continue to observe the phenomenon yearly at the March 21 solstice.

In Protestant indigenous theology, comments pastor Colop, there is a 'commitment to the Supreme Being, who is one and the same as the Trinitarian God of Christianity[23], who is manifested in every culture of the world'. This Supreme Deity 'requires harmony, fraternity, and respect, both between human beings and for the whole of creation'. Indigenous theology has, in fact, 'deepened our faith and spirituality'.[24] Maya spirituality has a profound sense of the sacred which is akin to the Old Testament ethos. Concepts such as sin and blessing in relation to God and his creation are very much part of Maya belief and practice. A Maya theologian finds similarities between a Maya confession and an affirmation from Luther's Minor Catechism.

> . . . that God is the Tata Ixel (Divine Father); that everything that surrounds us, animals and plants are our sisters and brothers, because He cares for us all alike. God the Almighty One protects all of us, feeds us, watches over our ways and grants us the gift to live joyfully.[25]

IV ISSUES IN DIALOGUE

The above statements might seem to provide a Christian agenda for dialogue. But from a radical indigenous perspective, this is not enough, because it seems to take their own theology less than seriously and introduces a problematic figure, Jesus Christ.[26] For their part, Christians are prone to throw at least two roadblocks in the path of dialogue—'idolatry' and 'syncretism'. These need to be seriously addressed before meaningful dialogue can take place.

The Bible, Idolatry, and Divine Mediations

The radical monotheism of the Old Testament would seem to place an insurmountable obstacle in the way of dialogue with indigenous religions. Let us explore this further. On the one hand, God is a mystery and finite minds are incapable of fathoming infinity, eternity, perfection and all the other attributes that are ascribed to God. Nevertheless, human beings, created in the image of God, have, since Eden, always striven to understand God, to cut the deity down to size, to imagine the Creator in images of the creation. On the one hand, Scripture condemns our human obsession with packaging God, on the other, we find a recognition that human minds and spirits can grasp only very small 'pieces' of divine reality, and need to put names to these perceptions. There is a need for mediations or symbols of divine reality, such as the rainbow, pillars of fire and cloud, symbols that derive from minerals (rock, water), plants (rose, seed, wine, tree), animals (blood, desert serpent, lamb, lion, dove, eagle), and humans (Adam, prophets, priests, kings, Melchizedek, Cyrus), kingdoms.

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[23] Although I have not found this developed in writing, I have heard Maya Christians comment that Trinitarian theology is more a development of the western penchant for developing a logical system out of the various manifestations and names of the One True God. Mayas believe that the Creator God is expressed uniquely as a Duality (Father/Mother), and that he is represented in the Sun and Moon, and in many other natural forms which are akin to those that the Christian Scriptures use to speak about God and Jesus Christ (Jb. 38:1; 40:6; Ps. 18:2; 84:11; Jn. 1:29; Rev. 5: 5, 6; 22:16).

[24] Colop, pp. 64, 65.

[25] Pr. Antonio Otzoy, 'Traditional Values and Christian Ethics: A Maya Protestant Spirituality', chapter 17, in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

[26] See chapters 16 and 13 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

To name something or someone in the Semitic culture was to establish proprietary rights over them (Gen. 2:19). Yet the God who reveals himself through evocative names (Yahweh, El Shaddai, Yaveh Sabaoth) allows himself to be named (Adonai), even by a pagan name (Elohim). None of these names escaped being used in idolatrous ways. Thus, mediations can easily become idols. The fine line that divides a sign or a symbol from an image or idol is often almost invisible. Yet we cannot do without symbols. They are essential to communication. But an important characteristic of symbols is their flexibility and adaptability. The moment they become static they lose their capacity to communicate, to free people up, to make them alive. In a word, they become idols—symbols of death which need to be destroyed.[27]

At the heart of the divine image in human beings is the gift of imagination. To be able to imagine the past, use our imagination creatively in the present, and imagine a better future for ourselves, our families and our peoples is what human communication and community is all about. But when images grow static, when movements become monuments, when ideas (*eidos*) close in upon themselves and are imposed as ideologies (*eidologia*) or are made sacred and are idolized (*eidolatria*), they take the place of God and are called an abomination. Obviously, political systems that we abhor and peoples whose cultures and religions that we find strange are not alone in making images to 'strange gods'.

What is the difference, asks Eric From, between the human sacrifices that the Aztecs offered to their gods and today's human sacrifices that are offered in war to the idols of nationalism and the sovereign state, even in 'Christian' nations? Or, we might add, to the idols of the ideology of neo-liberalism and gods of consumerism and materialism which are often touted by devout Christians.[28] Every religion, including the Christian religion, uses symbols, myths and even magic (manipulation) to explain, maintain and project its beliefs.

John A. Mackay, a much respected Presbyterian missionary to Perú, an authority on hispanic culture and literature and one time President of Princeton Theological Seminary, has stated that at the four essential dimensions of the Christian faith— divine revelation, the encounter of human beings with God, the community of God's people and human obedience to God—the Christian church is always tempted to fall into idolatry. We worship ideas (doctrines), emotions (feeling), ecclesiastical structures and particular ethical interpretations.

> When theology, the role of which is to interpret reality, becomes an end in itself, Christian doctrine, however orthodox, becomes an idol . . . loyalty to ideas . . . and not to God whom these ideas represent . . . An idol can also appear out of a real encounter with God . . . In this case an emotion or a feeling becomes an idol . . . The organized community, as well, the institution can become an end in itself . . . Even when the church takes the place

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[27] We have an interesting example of this in Scripture. When the Israelites were being bitten by vipers in punishment for their sin of rebellion against God, Moses interceded for his people and God ordered him to make a bronze serpent, to tell the people to gaze upon the image and they would be healed (Num. 21:4–9). This is, indeed, a strange passage, given the clear prohibition in Exodus (20:4) against making graven images and worshipping them. Several centuries, later, that life-giving image had become an unclean idol—'Nehushtan'—a double entendre which sounds both like bronze snake and unclean thing in Hebrew (2 Ki. 18:4). But this is not the end of the story. Jesus uses the 'unclean image' to teach Nicodemus, an idol hating Jew, about his own redeeming death (Jn. 3:14). This symbolism is, by the way, especially significant for the Maya peoples for whose ancestors a serpent is a symbol of divinity, partly because of its capacity to take various forms and shapes.

[28] Erich Fromm, *And You Shall be as Gods*. From the Spanish translation, *Y seréis como dioses* (Buenos Aires Paidós, 1980), pp. 43, 44, 48, 49.

> of God it substitutes God in the loyalty of human beings . . . Finally, at the very moment when a specific precept, a scruple, or perhaps a high ideal is absolutized . . . it then becomes an idol.[29]

If Christianity has had trouble understanding God without making idols of divinity, do we have a right to demand otherwise from a pre-Christian religion that never knew the Jewish Decalogue and Shema, nor read the New Testament because it existed centuries before Judeo-Christian revelation? Furthermore, the versions of Christianity which they have received from the West have been plagued with idols— images, cultural baggage, racism, dogmas and alien social organization.

Syncretism and the Incarnation

The charge of syncretism is often used against attempts at inculturating the gospel in an 'alien' environment—i.e. in contexts where cultural patterns and religious symbols are radically different from the Judeo-Greco framework within which Scripture and the Christian faith first appeared. The fear of 'watering down' or denaturing the gospel has been present in the church from the first moment that apostles and evangelists moved out of Jerusalem into the alien environment of Hellenism and Roman state religion. While the Greek cognate of syncretism is very ancient, its pejorative usage among Christians came much later.

The first recorded use of 'syncretism' in the present negative theological sense was in the seventeenth century during a controversy between a group of German Lutheran intellectuals over a proposed dialogue between all the Christian churches, including the Roman church. Those that used this derogatory connotation argued that syncretism derived from *sugkeranume* —mixed or hybrid. At the time in Europe's long colonial history when the white race was supreme, everything hybrid (mixed breeds and mixed ideas) were inferior and to be despised. This usage was hardened in the fires of religious controversy, and has persisted until today in both conservative and early ecumenical circles. More recently, *sugkrêtos* or *sugkratos* ('mixed together') has been suggested as the semantic root of 'syncretism'.

But is it? This was not the first time the term was used theologically or otherwise. The first recorded instance of the word, centuries before, was by the Greek writer Plutarch, who used it in a quite different sense. The Cretans, he relates, spent a lot of their time in fighting among themselves. But when they were attacked by outside enemies, they put aside their differences to combat a common enemy. 'And that,' says Plutarch, 'was it which they commonly called syncretism (*sugkretismos*).' This first recorded usage of the term is a compound of sug (together), *cret* (Crete), and ismos ('ism' or system). Juan Sepúlveda, a Chilean Pentecostal missiologist, concludes that 'together-Crete-system' means something like 'to unite or to federate, as did the Cretans'.[30] Syncretism is here the equivalent of our modern word 'solidarity'.

Erasmus picked up the theme in the sixteenth century, while he was introducing the writings of Plutarch and other classics to his contemporaries. He interprets 'together-

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[29] Juan A. Mackay, *Realidad e idolatría en el cristianismo contemporáneo* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1970), pp. 9, 10, 19, 20.

[30] Juan Sepúlveda, *Gospel in Culture in Latin American Protestantism: Toward a New Theological Appreciation of Synchretism*. Th.D. dissertation, University of Birmingham, UK, 1996 (second draft). He cites Plutarch, 'On brotherly Love', No 9, in Wm. W. Goodwin (ed.) *Plutarch's Morals*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1888), p. 62, Cf. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds.). *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London and New York: Rutledge, 1994), pp. 2ff. 2; and Henry G. Burger, 'Syncretism, An Acculturative Acceleration', in *Human Organization*: vol. 25 (1966), p. 104.

Crete-system' metaphorically to signify 'common interest' even when 'sincere love' is lacking. The Dutch philosopher, a Catholic, soon began to apply the proverb to concrete situations: urging the reformer Melanchon to set aside their differences and, 'Cretan with Cretan stand against the foe'. In another letter he described the way in which St. Paul adapted the Christian message to the Corinthian church as 'syncretism' (*sugkretizein*). Going even further, he argued that the apostle was only following the method of his Master who 'adjusted himself to those whom he wanted to pull over to himself'.[31] This usage is very close to the technical term 'contextualization' (used by Protestant evangelicals) and 'inculturation' (used in Roman Catholic and ecumenical circles). Sepúlveda suggests that this metaphorical use of 'syncretism', as used theologically by Erasmus, sounds very much like 'incarnating oneself into the characteristics of those whom one wants to address'. Erasmus was applying the term to the necessary cultural mediation of the gospel.[32] We are forced then to ask whether it is possible to communicate the gospel meaningfully without 'syncretism', in this sense. Erasmus' usage of syncretism has implications for our understanding of the incarnation, as well as enscripturation.

The preceding paragraphs are meant as a caution against too hasty a use of the term and a challenge to recover some of its positive connotations as we strive to inculturate the gospel among people of other faiths. Whatever the case, the negative exegesis of synchretism will long remain with us, so we need more humility to recognize the negative syncretisms in each of our versions of Christianity.

V UNDERSTANDING THE MAYA

But what does all this mean for the subject of this article? Who are these people who are attempting to express their faith in Jesus Christ in new and creative ways? What has transpired in recent history to foster this awakening of Maya self-awareness and renewal of their spirituality?

In order to begin to understand their worldview, we need 1) to consider the nature of the culture and spirituality of the Maya, the indigenous people on which this study is focused, and 2) the way that Mayas, perhaps more than most other indigenous peoples, have both resisted and adapted to cultural imposition in creative ways. Their resistance to modernity has produced a renewed pan-Maya identity that had not existed for almost a millennium.

The World of the Maya

The ancient religions of Mesoamerica were cyclical. The unique contribution of the Maya may have been to mesh this with a linear concept of time. Their need to understand and to master time energized their spirituality and caused them to make amazing astronomical and mathematical discoveries. Time was also at the heart of their continuing worldview which is based upon the tension between the totality and complementarity of all things. 'Nothing is excluded from Maya spirituality.' In Maya religion, 'unity is to be found within plurality or diversity and vice-versa'.[33] This is the locus of divinity—

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[31] Sepúlveda, 7, 8 quoting from *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Margaret Mann Phillips and R. A. B. Mynors (ed.) (Toronto University Press, 1982), and other sources.

[32] Ibid, 6, 9.

[33] Vitalino Similox Salazar, *La expresión y Metodología del Pensamiento Maya Contemporáneo en Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Editorial Cholsamaj, 1992). Licentiate thesis, Universidad Mariano Gálvez, p. 43. A part of this thesis by a Maya Presbyterian pastor can be found in Cook, *Crosscurrents*, chapter 1.

ultimately, one, all powerful, often nameless, Creator God, who is revealed in many complementary ways, both masculine and feminine. Earth and heaven, light and darkness, death and life, are all manifestations of divinity, evidences of the One God, whom peasant Maya see all around them in nature. Although the face of the One True God was hidden by the pomp and circumstance of the oppressive and polytheistic official cult, documents survive which contain prayers to that One God, the 'Former' and 'Inventor' of all things.[34]

Resistance Strategies

The culture, social organization and spirituality of the Maya is a function of their holistic view of the universe and of their need to understand their myths and traditions. Over countless millennia, the people who came to be called 'Maya' ('the people of time') had migrated throughout Mesoamerica, overrunning tribes and being conquered by kingdoms. They developed thriving civilizations and powerful city states which collapsed, only to rise again or move on. As catastrophic as this event was, the Mayas at first took the coming of the Spaniards in their stride. They were prepared to outlast the Spaniards as they had outlived other conquerors. 'From the sixteenth century to the twentieth, they have ignored the European when possible, accommodated him only when unavoidable, taken from him what they could use, and fought him tenaciously whenever he has threatened to break the stalemate between his civilization and theirs.'[35]

New Forms of Survival

When indigenous spirituality came face to face with the Christian religion it was forced to find new forms of survival. Their 'altars and places of worship were moved to the highest mountains, while at the same time the signs and symbols were buried in the thick walls of the cathedrals and even placed within Catholic altars and symbols.'[36] Images and symbols of indigenous spirituality were adapted without losing some of their original meaning. One such symbol was the cross, which the Maya, from time immemorial, have considered sacred. They have associated it with the tree of life whose branches point to the four corners of the universe and whose towering trunk and thick roots keep together heaven and earth and the underworld. After the coming of Christianity, the Mayas had no difficulty in venerating the tall Catholic crosses as symbols of the Supreme God—the 'Señor Dios' and his deputy the 'Lord Jesucristo'.[37] Today, some Maya Christians suggest that the Maya cross might have been part of a pre-Christian announcement within their own culture of God's salvific plan.[38]

After two centuries of violently resisting the white invader, Mayas throughout the region have opted for more subtle resistance, maintaining their languages, dress and customs, despite the pressures of modernity, guerrilla warfare, and army brutality. At the same time, isolation, brought about by topography, migration, intertribal wars and colonial policy, have limited their capability for greater resistance and the opportunities for mutual enrichment. In the closing years of this millennium, however, events are

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[34] Cp. Miguel León-Portilla, ed., *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, (London: SPCK, 1980), pp. 109, 132, 230.

[35] Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The Indian Story*, (London: John Murray, 1992), pp. 150, 161, 175–187.

[36] Colop, p. 62. Cp. Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán*, 1517–1570, (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 163.

[37] Clendinnen, p. 182.

[38] Otzoy, p. 10.

bringing about a significant change in Maya self-awareness, relationships, and expressions.

The indigenous peoples have had to come to terms with modernity, with all of its promise and ruthlessness. In highland Guatemala, in the 1970s and '80s, forces locked in mortal combat disputed the soul of the Mayas. Young indigenous Catholic activists—armed with 'scientific' farming and health techniques and motivated by a post Vatican II religious ethic and social practice—began to displace the authority of the village elders and priests. The brutal tactics which the military used to destroy 'communism' in the burgeoning base ecclesial communities uprooted thousands of tribal peoples from their ancestral lands and decimated the village elders. When a devastating earthquake flattened many villages, thousands of homeless people swelled the shanty-towns of the capital city, further separating the people from their ancestral religion. With the military's approval, fundamentalist Protestant groups from the United States quickly moved into the vacuum with medicine, aid and denunciation of Maya religiosity as pagan and satanic. Despite their disparate aims, catechists, soldiers and missionaries all manipulated traditional Maya symbols for their own ends. This three-pronged assault seriously undermined the foundations of a land-based culture and a local mountain spirit-oriented religiosity. Yet this same situation, and the new ideas that were forcefully disseminated, created the conditions for a new form of resistance, religious revitalization—pan-Mayanism.[39]

From the ashes of seeming total destruction, the Maya people of Guatemala have arisen with surprising moral authority, to propose a new social contract for the nation based in part upon their own values. The Tzeltal Maya in eastern Chiapas state, armed only with wooden rifles—the Zapatista movement—have not ceased to pressure the national government for a restructuring of the corrupt Mexican political system.

The Rise of a Pan-Maya Identity

All of a sudden, it seemed, traditional Maya spirituality was emerging full blown right under the surprised noses of church leaders, scholars and rulers. In and around 1992—after five centuries of underground existence — a decision was made by Maya priests to make their spirituality known to the world.[40] What can we make of it? Is this phenomenon the same as the synchretistic Catholic popular religiosity? Is it identical with the ancient worship of the Aztec and Mayas? Or is it a religion which was being reborn, phoenix like, from the fires and ashes of oppression, war, and modernity? Whatever the answer to these questions, what cannot be doubted is the seriousness with which Mayas and other indigenous groups throughout the Americas are working together and locally toward the development of a relevant and coherent theology that is comprehensible to Christians. In the process, they are having to come to terms with five centuries of Christianity, and in particular with Jesus Christ, the person whom Christians call the Son of God and claim to follow and obey. The current responses to the Christian message among the Maya and

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[39] Cp. Richard Wilson, 'Anchored communities: Identity and history of the Maya-Q'eqchi', in *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol. 28, No. 1 (March, 1993), and chapter 7 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*. See also, by the same author, 'Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits: The Cultural Effects of State Repression among the Q'eqchi' of Guatemala' in *Critique of Anthropology*, (London, SAGE Publications, vol. 11, no. 1). See also *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences*, (London & Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

[40] There are indigenous publishing houses in Mexico City (CENAMI) and Quito (Abia Yala), both Catholic related. The Protestant COOPA, a sister traditional indigenous entity IETSAY, and the Liga Maya Internacional (also traditional religion) publish in Costa Rica.

other indigenous peoples must be understood in the context of their very long history, unique cultural and religious achievements, and frequent need to adapt.

CONCLUSION

The Maya peoples are convinced that their ancient wisdom has something positive to offer to a world that has run out of solutions to its problems. Maya spirituality holds high exceptional values concerning life, land, human responsibility, and divine interventions in history. Women maintain the continuity of the traditions from generation to generation and hold positions of honour such as traditional healers and priestesses. Indigenous peoples are overwhelmingly respectful of other religions. They would like us to respect their spirituality and to explore its values. However, many Europeans and 'mestizos' (mixed bloods) can barely contain their suspicion of anything 'native'. Unfortunately, we (religious leaders perhaps more than others) have a strong urge to control any new development. Christians are too prone to pin the labels of 'synchretism' and 'idolatry' on spiritual manifestations that we can't understand, because they use totally different symbol systems from what we are accustomed to in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

'Would that the intermediaries between Jesus and the Mayas would let him speak to us, walk with us, shine upon our pathway, without us being labelled pagans', exclaims Antonio Otzoy, a Kaqchikel-Maya Presbyterian pastor. 'The blind man', he adds, 'cried out to Jesus to have compassion upon him, but the multitude repressed him. Undeterred, he called out more loudly, Jesus healed him and he went on his way singing.'

> Our experience is like that of the blind man: we have heard the voice that tells us that our faith is making us whole and we continue to glorify his name (Lk. 18:35–43). We want people to let us know that Jesus who enthralled people, lifted up the humble, took unto himself the marginalized, and condemned the proud and the sinners can do the same today. We want to meet that Christ who fascinates us when we listen to him and doesn't put us off.[41]

The Maya peoples of Central America, and their indigenous sisters and brothers in other regions of Latin America, are expressing their Christian faith anew, as has always been the case where the gospel of Jesus Christ has been allowed to truly take root within a culture.

Is Christ being resurrected among the Maya? asks Ki'che'-Maya pastor Moisés Colop. His answer is a categorical No, 'because Jesus has never left us'. Actually, what has happened, he argues, is that Christ 'has been marginalized, vilified, and forgotten'. And because they have also been mistreated, the Mayas, Colop concludes, feel a kinship with him and are ready to recognize Jesus Christ as the one who has revealed himself to them as the 'Heart of Heaven and Heart of Earth'—one of the hauntingly beautiful Maya names for the One True God.[42]

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[41] Otzoy, in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

[42] Colop, chapter 11 in Cook, *Crosscurrents*.

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Book Reviews

HOLY FATHER: A DOXOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Sunand Sumithra

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(*Reviewed by Ivan Satyavrata*)

More than two decades ago in his *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Robin Boyd suggested that the main factor which tended to discourage the emergence of a 'formulated' Christian theology in India was the widespread dislike for anything *dogmatic*. He observed that there was, on the other hand, a tendency to regard direct *anubhava* (experience) of God as of primary importance in theological reflection in India (Madras: C.L.S., 1979, p. 3). *Holy Father* is a bold attempt to take this very Indian passion for an experience of God and apply it to a very neglected (some would regard as 'outdated') aspect of the Christian theological enterprise in India— theformulation of a Systematic Theology.

The author devotes the Preface to explaining his choice of title and to clarifying his distinctive approach. His purpose is clearly *devotional*—'The overall aim . . . dear reader, is to encourage you to trust, worship and obey God' (p. 11) and *doxological*—'. . . the study of theology should first and foremost lead the reader to glorify God' (p. 15). Convinced that the words '*Holy Father*' (in Jn. 17:11) constitute the shortest and best definition of God in the Bible, for the author the book is essentially a journey of discovery—'an attempt to discover what Jesus meant in so addressing God' (p. 12). The rationale for the simple three-part structure of the book is also explained in the Preface. *Part I: PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD* deals basically with introductory questions, some of which relate specifically to the book—structure, scope, approach—and others to theology as a discipline—definition, method, language and posture.

The approach to doing theology in *Holy Father* represents a distinct departure from the common approach which has come to us as a legacy of the scholastic period. Hence it does not attempt to place God under the microscope of objective scientific scrutiny: 'God