

Evangelical Review of Theology

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Volume 34 • Number 1 • January 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

A Neopentecostal Experience of Aimara people

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KEYWORDS: *Neopentecostal, Aimara, indigenous communities*

I Background to the case study

The ideology used to design Bolivian State institutions to date is just another example that reveals the system of ethnic discrimination that makes Bolivia what it is today. The present indigenous government is making huge efforts to change this deeply rooted, unjust reality, but it is proving to be a long, difficult road. Daily life and lifestyles throughout the country show how most people are still victims of segregation because of their indigenous appearance and socio-cultural patterns. Production, education and health structures have forced them to leave their homelands because of poor state policies that fail to reach rural areas. These structures have marginalised indigenous groups because of their identity, relegated their indigenous languages, and rejected their traditional forms of practising medicine. The same is true of their vernacular justice system and forms of transmitting indigenous identity to new generations. Bolivia is quite different from neighbouring countries, like Brazil and Chile, where the indigenous population is the minority, or even Peru and

Ecuador, which have a higher percentage of indigenous population, but still not the demographic index found in Bolivia which has a high percentage of indigenous people both in rural and urban areas.

The religious ideas and practices of the native indigenous peoples of Bolivia, which were both well-defined and deeply-rooted, remained beneath a veneer of Roman Catholicism, which was alien to their existence and forced upon them by the Spanish in the 16th century.¹ From its earliest days, Protestant evangelical Christianity,² brought to Bolivia by European and North American missionaries more than hundred years ago, has also maintained a relationship with Bolivian culture in which there has been mutual influence. This exchange has become more dynamic and diversified, as evangelicals have increased in numbers and influence.

The capital La Paz is the most cul-

1 José Carlos Mariategui, *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (Lima: Amauta, 1976), 172-173; Herbert S. Klein, *Bolivia: the evolution of a multi-ethnic society* (New York: Oxford University Press Blackwell, 1992), viii.

2 'Evangelical' is a word that in Bolivia identifies what in other places is known as Protestant. In most Latin American studies these two words are interchangeable.

turally indigenous Latin American capital. Of the Andean nations, Bolivia preserves the most indigenous identity inherited from the two most influential pre-colonial cultures of the region: Aimara and Quechua. Herbert S. Klein says: 'It is also the most Indian in the American republics: as late as the census of 1976 only a minority of the population were monolingual speakers of Spanish.'³ These cultures remain despite a systematic opposition to their existence from the colonizing Spaniards and the Creoles of the Republican era. The invaders used the sword and the cross as their weapons to subdue the people and with them they pursued and fought the natives. However, even if their intention had been peaceful and respectful—which was obviously not the case—they brought an exogenous, cultural system from foreign lands. This system represented very different political, economic, religious and social realities that could not substitute the strong Aimaran identity and related lifestyles.

In addition to all this background, the Aimaras have been affected by new and numerous impacts during the last century. They have been moulded by political, social, economic and religious influences and changes. Modernity and globalization have hit them with all their force via education, democracy, legislation, trade unions, and non-Catholic religious groups. The proliferation of new forms of Christianity has brought new sources of tension and profound changes. Evangelical or Protestant denominations have made inroads into Aimara indigenous com-

munities, none with more success than the Neopentecostals, although these, just like previous invasions, have failed to erase the fundamental components of their ethnic identity.

At first sight, Neopentecostals are blazing a trail for indigenous women to play leadership roles within a context of gender equity. They are also using their own language for services and adopting symbols and rituals that come from their own indigenous identity rather than Protestant tradition. Whether it is recognised or not, the Aimara identity proposes new ways of living and representing the Christian faith. It is, therefore, important to learn to read and interpret these languages. The urgent task is to listen to what people are feeling and understanding about their decision to join a Neopentecostal congregation and to share with people who possibly have very little theoretical or theological knowledge what they think and believe, even when this does not coincide with the official position of the church that represents their new-found faith.

It is the purpose of this analysis to concentrate our attention on the identity and mission of Neopentecostals from the city of La Paz, Bolivia's administrative capital, where the Aimaras are the largest, dominant ethnic group, particularly those who belong to the 'Power of God' Church.

II The distinctive nature of Aimara culture

This section will take different aspects of the Aimara, including their worldview, indigenous spirituality, lan-

3 Klein, *Bolivia*, vii.

guage, multi-ethnic sense, three-dimensional logic, and integral epistemology as the basis for the analysis of Neopentecostals.

1. Worldview, spirituality

What makes the Aimara culture distinctive? What do the Aimaras think about themselves and about the world? How do they perceive who they are and the world around? How do they conceive the spiritual and material worlds? The great obstacle when trying to respond to these questions is that our effort to understand these issues tends to be monocultural. In other words, we try to mould our understanding based on a modern western paradigm. Our mind tends to conceive life divided into separate, independent compartments. We automatically dichotomize and by doing so impoverish the reality. The mind of the native Aimara conceives life in a way that is different from and, often, contradictory to the westernized mindset. Life and the world for them are an integrated whole that is fundamentally spiritual and in harmony with the cosmos.

How do the Aimara understand their world and how do they fit into it? With the arrival of Christian spirituality and morality, a foreign worldview was incorporated into the Aimara metaphysical outlines. It was an adaptation that both left their own continuities alive and strengthened them. However, inevitably, changes and modifications occurred which, in turn, became apparent in their own discontinuities. For example, the western world view makes a clear moral distinction between heaven and earth,

while, for the Aimara, even today, the '*alajjpacha*' (heaven) and the '*manqhapacha*' (hell) have mixed elements of wickedness and kindness. Not all the bad is in the '*manqhapacha*' not all the pure is in the '*alajjpacha*'. Although there are forces that work for wrong, these same forces can work for good and this is part of the framework of the belief and morality of the ancient Aimara.⁴

2. Social life: Multicultural and intercultural

The interrelationships found in each event and in the Aimara personality are a vital foundation for their identity and this aspect is utterly contrary to the individualism prevailing in globalized societies, where relationships and events have a marked anthropocentric character. In the Aimara conscience, however, the human being is not the centre. Man and woman are not taken into account in an isolated or individualized form. Nature and the cosmos coexist, they feed each other, they protect and mutually respect each other. Community life is where needs, preferences and a sense of life are generated. The human being is placed in the physical and spiritual atmosphere surrounding, to form one indivisible, integral whole. It is impossible to live without the diverse fabric and multifaceted nature of interdependent cosmic relationships.

However, not everything is perfect

4 O. Harris & T. Bouysse-Cassagne, 'Pacha: en torno al pensamiento aimara' in Xavier Albo, *Raíces de América: El mundo Aymara* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial & UNESCO, 1988), 246.

in the Aimara *ayllu* (the community life as an ancestral base of coexistence). Community life, be it in the rural areas or urban context, combines values that are highly human and integrating with anti-values of domination, perversion and discrimination. The historic context of marginalisation, poverty and suffering influences many aspects of Aimara life. Their creativity is expressed with a sense of originality; their sense of festiveness in the imaginary of celebration; interdependence in reciprocity and complementarity. However, there are also shadows of fatalism, where fate is stained with pessimism; accommodation to the belief that natural and supernatural forces are pigheaded and unavoidable. Frivolity, cheating and vengeance are seen as acceptable forms of behaviour and despair is commonplace because life is seen only in terms of the present, with few positive roots in the past or indications of a better future.⁵

3. Language

The Aimara culture is a spoken relational culture. Its channels, its sources are not written documents produced by isolated individuals. There are no enlightened individuals who apply a discursive rationality. The Aimara do not determine tradition by conceptualizing or idealizing their utopias in written texts. The Aimaras' main 'text' is a colourful fabric of live 'perceptions' in minds and hearts. It is a treasure of accumulated community wisdom shared by means of an oral ancestral

tradition that manifests itself in beliefs, customs and forms of life. Rather than being textual, Aimara communication has been and still is a living experience. Language, as a result, is central. The Aimara language gives its speakers an abundance of linguistic resources. It is enough to know some of the grammatical system to have a clear idea of the wealth and complexity of this language. The extensive demarcation of the sources of information, the affirmation of humanity and its differentiation from the non-human by means of language, and the dynamic interaction between language, culture and the perception of the world are also aspects of the Aimara language. Neither the Aimara culture nor the language is sexist as are the Spanish and English languages. When the Aimara speaks about human beings, they do not exclude half the human race by referring to someone only in masculine terms.⁶ The language gives the Aimara woman an equal social level in a way that could serve as a model for the contemporary world, with its glaring inequities in terms of gender and justice.

4. Three-dimensional logic

Implicit within the cultural Aimara language is a trivalent logic.⁷ The logic of its beliefs, for example, is not bipolar.

5 Juan J. Tancara, *Teologiapentecostal: propuestasdescomunidadespentecostales de la ciudad del Alto* (La Paz: ISEAT, 2005) 5.

6 M.J. Hardman, 'Jaqi aru: la lengua humana' in Albo, *Raices*, 155-216.

7 Blithz Lozada Pereira, *Identidad y vision del mundo Aymara'II Seminario Internacional del Pensamiento Andino Cuenca* (UNESCO, 2005) 10.

In other words, it is not conclusive or absolutist on one hand, or static and individualistic on the other. It does not have the binary logic of belief or non-belief, of the legitimization of a unique, exclusive, closed system of beliefs. This trivalent logic implies the compassionate submission to its imaginary religious community and its syncretistic practices, but at the same time, the construction of elements that modifies the established 'pantheon'.

The Aimara worldview starts, in the same way as the Vedic tradition of India,⁸ in the non-duality of reality. Reality is not conceived in dimensions that are in conflict or opposed to each other—good and bad, sacred and profane; masculine and feminine, visible and invisible, true and false. Neither one nor the other can exist without the possibility of there being a third alternative. God exists and so does the Devil; human beings and Nature; spirit and body. In the Aimara concept of cosmos, there is room for a third alternative of equal importance. The parts do not counterattack each other; on the contrary, they are complementary, inclusive. This three-dimensional—and sometimes more—Aimara logic is sustained by the relational cosmic system mentioned earlier with its principles of reciprocity and solidarity.

Is the Neopentecostal experience at Power of God Church specifically and

profoundly Aimara? Is its vital identity moulded by the singularity of this culture? Do their principles, values, sacred holism, their cosmic interrelationship, orality and linguistic inclusivism, their three-dimensional logic and thirst for the unknown, place them outside inadequate overseas moulds?

III Conclusion

The indigenous worldview, so essentially different from the globalized one, exercises a powerful influence in Bolivian society and defines the religious and social behaviour of the majority. The advance of Neopentecostalism is taking place specifically in the Aimara cultural context in the city of La Paz, without completely eliminating or replacing indigenous religiosity.⁹ The indigenous Aimara identity still builds values, behaviour and spirituality in Bolivia. All evangelicals, and Neopentecostals in particular, are strongly influenced by this indigenous worldview.

There is a lack of wholeness in the church witness and mission in relation to cases like the Aimara people. Instead of establishing the kingdom of God in each culture with the purpose of home-grown wholeness and redemption, the most common experience has been prejudice in imported forms, contents and spirit.

8 Josef Estermann, *La filosofía andina como alteralidad que interpela: una crítica intercultural del androcentrismo y etnocentrismo occidental* (La Paz: ISEAT, 2004), 6.

9 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press & Orbis Books, 1995), 215.