

The Catholic Church and the Indigenous Movement in the Peruvian Amazon Region

In December 2009, the front page of *El Comercio* (Peru's historically most important newspaper), accused Catholic missionaries in the Amazon region of promoting violent acts among the indigenous population and against the State. The headlines referred to a draft of the final report made by the official committee investigating the violent events which took place near the city of Bagua in June 2009. Curiously, two of the members of the Committee are Catholic missionaries: Father Ricardo Alvarez-Lobo and Sister Carmen Gómez. However, sister Gomez as well as Jesús Manacés, the Committee Chair seriously objected the final report and decided not to sign it, while Father Alvarez-Lobo did. The following day, the president of the Peruvian Bishops' Conference, Bishop Cabrejos as well as Bishop García de la Rasilla, who is in charge of the jurisdiction where the violent events took place, publicly denied such acts. On the contrary, during and after the events of June 2009, Bishop García de la Rasilla as well as other Catholic institutions, such as CEAS (The Social Action Commission of the Peruvian Bishops' Conference), CAAAP (an NGO created and supported by the Bishops of the Peruvian Amazon region), the Jesuit Social Apostolate as well as the local parishes have supported all victims of the violent acts and have demanded an objective research about the tragic events of June 5th near Bagua.

This recent episode brings to light the complex relationship established throughout time between the Catholic church and the indigenous movement as well as with the Peruvian State. Precisely, this research project would address this complex relationship, focusing on two crucial historical moments: the origins of the indigenous movement during the 1970s and in present-day Peru.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region has undergone important changes throughout history, and particularly in the 20th century. During the colonial period, especially between the mid 17th century and the end of the 18th century, the main purpose of the Catholic Church in this region was the conversion of indigenous peoples, and thus established two important missionary networks in the Peruvian Amazonia: the Jesuit missions in the Northern part (linked to

the city of Quito) and the Franciscan missions in the central area (linked to the city of Lima). After political independence from Spain in the early 19th century, the presence of missionaries in the Amazon region was radically reduced. Nonetheless, throughout the 19th century and until the mid 20th century, the Catholic Church continued its role as main social institution and as representative of the Peruvian State in the region. This role was assumed in practice, even during colonial times, due to the absence of any official State representatives. Thus, most of the social services that the State usually provides, such as health and education, road building, river and air transportation, radio communication, etc. were provided by the Catholic Church in the Amazon region.

By the 1920s, however, the increasing arrival of an already christianized mestizo population in the region led to a crucial shift in the Catholic Church's objectives in the Amazonía. The conversion and the establishment of mission posts among the indigenous population was no longer its main concern, although, of course, it did not entirely disappear. In this context, other churches also arrived in the Amazon rainforests and replaced the Catholic Church in many places as intermediary between the State and the indigenous peoples.

In the 1960s a new period began in the history of this relationship. In these years, the Catholic Church experienced an important transformation, especially in Latin America. A group of Catholic missionaries working with native peoples became more critical of the Church's own past and responsibility in the destruction of indigenous cultures. Their "mission" was understood, not primarily as to "baptize and Christianize" the "heathen savages," but rather to live and work among the indigenous communities, learning from their culture and spiritual beliefs, and sharing their lives and their struggles. Many missionaries began to realize that for them, christianizing had been reduced to baptizing and to imposing a Western way of life. According to father Castonguay, a Canadian missionary in the Peruvian Amazon region, since colonial times, for many indigenous peoples, missions "meant submission."

These changes led some of these missionaries to become actively involved in the new indigenous organizations that were being created at the time. In some cases, the Catholic Church explicitly promoted the creation of these new organizations, as in the case of the Shuar Federation in the Ecuadorian Amazon region. In other cases, the

missionaries supported the indigenous initiatives. This support was not limited to priests and nuns living in indigenous communities, but it also included the bishops of the region. Between 1971 and 1980 the nine bishops of the Peruvian Amazonia organized five regional assemblies and published several public statements regarding indigenous rights and demanding adequate state policies for the indigenous peoples.

Between the mid 1980s and the beginning of this decade, the number of public statements made by the Amazonian bishops has been very small. In these years, the 1960 and 1970 committed missionaries have grown old, while most of their younger replacements lack the commitment to a life-time of living in indigenous communities, learning their languages and their culture. Thus, for the last couple of decades, although the presence of the Catholic church has not disappeared in indigenous areas, in many places the link with the indigenous movement has weakened.

Nowadays, however, we are perceiving signs of a possible change and a closer relationship again between the Catholic Church and the indigenous movement. After two decades of very few public manifestations of the Church's support for their struggles, in the last couple of years there have been half a dozen published in major national newspapers. These public statements explicitly express their solidarity with the indigenous claims for their lands and rights.

Therefore, the research project will analyze these two historical moments: (a) the role of the Catholic Church at the birth of the indigenous movement; and (b) the role of the Catholic Church today, in the context of globalization and the international demands for indigenous rights.

The primary research methods will be qualitative. I will rely on two types of sources: personal interviews and documents. I will try to interview past and current missionaries, indigenous leaders and other socially significant witnesses of the relationship between the Catholic church, the indigenous movement and the Peruvian State. I will also analyze different types of documents, mainly newspaper and internet articles, as well as other published material. Whenever possible, I will try to obtain permission to consult private archives of some religious congregations in charge of the different church

jurisdictions, especially because sometimes church institutions mistrust certain research projects.

In terms of academic contribution, I hope that this research project will contribute to different academic fields: anthropology, political science, history, and religious studies. In the Peruvian case, there are some studies dealing with the relationship between the theology of Liberation movement and grass-root politics, and even some regarding the relationship between the Catholic church and Andean communities in Highland Peru, Ecuador or Bolivia. There are some testimonies of the Salesian congregation and their experience with the Shuar and Achuar in Ecuador, and there are also some studies dealing with the influence of different churches, including the Catholic Church, in local communities in Brazil, some of them located in the Amazon region, but there is not a more detailed study of the relationship between the Catholic church and the indigenous movement.

As to possible publication outlets, there are two academic journals that usually publish articles about the Amazon region in Peru: *Amazonia Peruana*, published by CAAAP since 1976, and *Anthropologica* published by the Catholic University of Peru. However, the subject matter of this research project may also be attractive to other journals published in other countries, such as: *Mana* (Brazil), *Mundo Amazónico* (Colombia), *Latin American Research Review* (USA), *The Americas* (USA), *The Journal of Latin American Studies* (Great Britain), *Journal de la Société des Americanistes* (France), *L'Homme* (France), *The journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Great Britain), etc.