

# **To confront or to conform? Christian misión and power relations in multiethnic societies in Central America**

**Profesor Karla Ann Koll, Latin American Biblical University, Costa Rica**

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*Karla Ann Koll serves as professor of history, mission and religions at the Latin American Biblical University in San Jose, Costa Rica. Before she came to Costa Rica in 2013, she worked in theological education for several years in Nicaragua and Guatemala. She holds a Ph.D. in mission, ecumenics and the history of religions from Princeton Theological Seminary. She is an ordained pastor and a mission co-worker of the Presbyterian Church (USA).*

The power dynamics between the different ethnic groups in Latin America were established through the processes of colonization in the sixteenth century, the time of the construction of the Atlantic world and the first experience of globalization in history. The Iberian invaders massacred and subjugated the indigenous peoples. They proceeded to organize the conquered to extract their labor as well as the riches of the land. As we all know, the task of evangelizing the peoples of these lands served as a justification for the colonial enterprise.

There were priests such as Bartolome de las Casas, who defended the full humanity of the indigenous peoples, denounced the abuses committed by the conquerors, and promoted peaceful models of evangelization. However, even these missionaries did not question the presence of Spanish Christians in the Americas. This Defender of the Indians at one time even advocated for a practice that had already started, bringing enslaved Africans to work in the mines and on the plantations. Many priests and religious orders not only controlled the life of indigenous people in the reductions, but they also were owners of enslaved persons.

The Spanish arrived on this side of the Atlantic already armed with an ideology of pure blood. This purity was defined in religious terms on the Iberian Peninsula, as the Christian authorities sought to exclude anyone with Jewish blood from access to spheres of power. In America, this purity took on racial connotations. In some contexts, it formed the basis for the development of a hierarchical system of castes in which the percentage of Spanish, indigenous or African blood –in that order– determined the rights persons enjoyed. The societies of Latin America were constituted as racist, with the blessing of the Roman Catholic Church.

The social relationships of power that had been established through the colonization process survived the political independence the Latin American nations achieved from the Spanish crown and the formal end of slavery a few years later. We call the continuing existence of power relationships constructed through colonization, as well as their lingering influence on thought structures, “coloniality”.

The Christian groups who arrived in the region after the colonial era had to decide how to interact with the power relationships they encountered. For our reflection and to show some of the complexity involved, I want to offer the example of the Presbyterian mission from the United States in Guatemala. The Presbyterian missionaries arrived in that Central American country in the 1880s. They were invited by the Liberal government to start an educational institution.

The mission board in New York shared the vision of the Liberal government that saw the culture of the Maya people as backward. Like the government, the mission board insisted that Maya should learn Spanish and assimilate into the dominant culture as soon as possible. However, the mission personnel on the ground soon recognized the value of working in Mayan languages and in indigenous communities. They worked to translate the biblical text and to form congregations. The work of various Protestant missions and the Bible Societies in different Mayan languages has contributed to a revitalization of these languages. After the Revolution of 1944, the new government wanted to establish bilingual education in public schools. They sought the help of several Protestant mission, including the Presbyterians. Starting in 1959, Maya Presbyterians organized their own presbyteries or regional church bodies, in which they use their own languages.

The relationship between Christianity and the Mayan cultures in Guatemala today is complex and changing. For some Mayan persons and groups, conversion to an evangelical form of Christian faith serves as a bridge for entering into the dominant culture. For other Mayan groups, conversion has served as a way to revitalize their millennial cultures and to defend their interests. Today an active debate exists in Guatemala about how to be both Christian and Maya, with people and communities taking a variety of positions that enrich the conversation about the relationship between Christianity, racism and the empowerment of communities.

What does it mean for the Latin American Biblical University to promote a contextualized and liberative theological education in a region where Christianity was imposed as part of the colonization process, yet Christian faith has also served to empower ethnic groups to combat racism and to fight for more just societies? Our theological task calls us to take up as a central theme of our work the decolonization of theologies and church practices. It is not an easy process. There is no vantage point outside of the existing coloniality from which we can work to dismantle racist relationships and eliminate forms of exclusion. We are on the inside.

Among other steps, our educational efforts focus on:

- Recognizing and analyzing the existent coloniality in all of its dimensions. The analysis of our contexts is fundamental in our theological method. For this reason, our study plans include courses in social sciences and Latin American reality.
- Dismantling colonial Christianity. This calls us to study of the presence of Christianity in the region and to denounce its complicity with oppressive social structures. We also seek to understand the experiences of indigenous communities and communities of African descent who have appropriated the Christian faith within their own worldviews. We should celebrate the existence of a variety of Christianities in the region.
- Liberating the biblical text from colonial interpretations. There are many voices within the text to explore. Also, the different communities approach the text with their own questions. We offer tools so they can construct their own interpretations.
- Promoting an ecology of forms of knowledge. Christianity arrived in America and imposed its vision as the absolute truth. Today we recognize that there are many truths and many ways to understand the divine. For this reason, we have a required course on the spiritualities of indigenous peoples and Afro-latina communities.
- Training for dialogue. The ability to interact in respectful ways with people from different cultures and worldviews is fundamental in theological education.
- Constructing interculturality as an effort to provide life and dignity for all people. Our own institution seeks to be an intercultural space in which we value the perspectives of all. We strive to join forces with organizations and movements who are fighting against racism and in favor of just relations.