

Racism – a cultural construct

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Input in English

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RACISM: A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

Liberating Mission

In her presentation *Identity, Unity and Mission: Decolonization and Care – Paradigms of the Mission*, Afro-descendant Brazilian theologian Silvia Regina de Lima Silva invites us to think of the Mission with new theological paradigms. Her words are inspiring for us, "We hope these other paths reinforce the commitment of the liberating mission...liberating denied and invisible bodies, feelings, identities of our peoples; a perspective of mission that also means the liberation of nature. For this reason, the understanding of the mission is challenged to assume the task of decolonizing the minds and bringing freedom back to the soul and the spirit of Latin American and Caribbean women and men and assuming the care of the planet, our common house."

Races Do Not Exist, Racism Does

In 1946, the famous Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz wrote the essay *El Engaño de las Razas* (*The Deceit of the Races*) where he states that, "Races do not exist; racism does." He deconstructed scientifically and conceptually the application of racial bias to classify human beings and the intention to justify the superiority of some over others based only on the color of the skin.

In the Cuban case, racism as a cultural construct began with the submission and extermination of the indigenous people; added to the heritage of the colonial past and the exploitation of cheap African slave labor force brought inhumanely to the island. The white European that occupied the summit of the social pyramid in the plantation economy system not only exploited and oppressed slaves but also created the inferiority myth of the black population and their descendants.

Colonial Theology Controlling Culture and Subjectivity

Racism in Cuba, the Caribbean and Latin America came accompanied by a colonial theology that justified and legitimated it. This theology supported the conquest of the land; controlled culture (in its wider sense) and subjectivity which includes intolerance, misunderstanding, lack of empathy, disrespect of the other and rigidity. It is necessary to be aware of these elements at the moment of reflecting on the meaning of the mission.

Colonization ended in the 19th century, but the dimension of coloniality remains and includes racism and ethnocentrism. Colonialism comes before coloniality; the former refers to the political and economic domination of some nations over others. Coloniality is the permanence of the colonial imaginary. Coloniality pervades Latin American and Caribbean imaginary in what we have called *the imperial subjectivity*. Decolonization of our minds is the starting point to realize the prejudices that inhabit in us expressed in the way we see ourselves, the way we see others, the way we see society and the way to understand the mission. Thus, *decoloniality* is central to all the actions and practices of the missionary work.

The original peoples and afro-descendants were forced to abandon their ancestral religious practices and their relation to the sacred and to practice them clandestinely. Therefore, we are facing a colonization of the cognitive capacity, the colonization of the imaginary and of a whole universe of intersubjective relations with the world and with God. It is the complete denial of the other.

Maricel Mena, Colombian theologian who belongs to the Grupo Guasá of Afro-American theological reflection states, "The holocaust that black and indigenous people lived because of the colonial mentality has reinforced the divisions and antagonisms of current society and the concentration of power continues to generate racist, sexist, classist ideologies. Poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean, besides having a feminine face has a black face; that is, the face of a poor black woman."

The Dignity of Each Human Life

What can we do in the face of this reality that limits access to an honorable life to the people whose skin color is different? We have to recognize that in the missiological practices we still have ethnocentric habits of thinking that block the perception of the most elementary forms of otherness and dignity of every human life. We must achieve a new ecumenical type of relations among cultures, rejecting any concept of universality (only one dominating culture) that prevents us from searching for the intercultural and intracultural relationships. This is what should characterize the search for new paths and new theological perspectives that is the nature of religious and cultural religiosity for the achievement of a worthy life for all the people that embrace proudly and joyfully their culture and skin color.

The MISSIO DEI has to lead us to liberating missionary practices. Liberating practices that may achieve a mutual recognition and respect of our cultures, of the contextual theologies that we have developed. The ecclesial practices of inclusion constitute the fundamental elements of the ecclesiology of the INTEGRAL MISSION that is an invitation for life.

Vision of the Mission in our relationship with Europe and the United States of America

During the 18th and 19th centuries the countries of the "Christian West" took upon themselves the responsibility to evangelize the world. The First World Conference celebrated in Edinburgh in 1910 was inspired in that evangelizing enthusiasm.

The Protestant Missions and Churches sent missionaries to Asia, Africa, Latin America, The Pacific and other parts of the world.

Thus, the "model" of the mission was constructed by the concept of "shipping the North to the South" and the vision of "planting churches in the pagan world".

Taking Cuba as an example, it is important to mention that the missionary work was not able to identify itself with our "mulatto culture". Racism arrived together with pietism and the individualist and moralist ethics of the missionaries.¹

¹ A magnificent Analysis of the missionary work in Cuba we find it in the book *La Herencia Misionera en Cuba*, edited by Rafael Cepeda. Editorial DEI, San José, Costa Rica, 1986.

- The people responsible for the missionary work for this new epoch should be people that can understand the historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political and religious reality of the peoples, sensitive to everything that may harm or benefit these peoples. Developing the mission work in a traditional way does not work anymore in Latin America or in the Caribbean. We need new formulas. A very explicit example is the one lived in Argentina in the 70s, during the repression of the dictatorship installed in this country. Federico Pagura, a famous Methodist Bishop formulated the notorious phrase "Missionaries go home", when the mission work at that time did not understand the struggle for human rights of churches and leaders in Argentina.
- The Missionary Boards should not plan their work nor make decisions without first consulting and dialoging with the churches they should serve.
- The dynamics of the missionary work is no longer divided into those who generate it and those who receive it: there is a new mission, in which we all have to share; interrelation and mutual growth is necessary.
- The most beautiful missionary work we have nowadays is the struggle for peace and justice that our peoples live in these difficult times every day.
- It is fundamental for Theological institutions to include the study and research of the "Missio Dei" in the training of future leaders, as well as the essential ethical elements about the praxis of the mission. This way they can exercise a ministry towards the sectors of the population who feel vulnerable or perceive themselves as even marginalized from the work of the church (because of skin color, poverty, disability, old age, sexual orientation, childhood or adolescence).
- The missionary work should always be motivated by love, understanding, mercy and compassion.