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Quetzalcóatl Challenges the Christian Bible

Elsa Tamez

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The year 1992 invited the Christians of the world to make a historical accounting of our faith, looking at our faith as a religion, and in this accounting to reflect on the role of the Bible. The invitation came to us from Abya Yala,¹ a continent that has experienced the presence of Christianity for five hundred years. Biblical scholars and Christian theologians of our continent believe that we live in a new historic moment in the field of biblical thought and hermeneutics. Five hundred years after the European invasion, we recognize that we are in a different situation in relation to that Christian beginning. On the one hand, the prophetic, biblical voice is heard more powerfully today than during the time of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. There has been a reappropriation of the Christian faith, a rereading of the Bible from the perspective of those who are victims, who are excluded from society. On the other hand, there has been a resurgence of indigenous and African-American religions, reclaiming their space with the dignity of their own non-Christian faith. For some this has been cause for rejoicing, while for others it is alarming. We would also add the fact that many indigenous groups practice "indigenous Christianity." That is to say, they know Jesus Christ as savior, but within their faith they include the spiritual and ritual legacy of their ancestors. The syncretism here is not something pejorative, but the synthesis of a spiritual life that has been present for centuries but has not been recognized as valid. Readings from the Bible and from other sacred books such as the *Popol Vuh* are sometimes read during the same liturgy.

The title of this article is symbolic. The name of Quetzalcóatl could be replaced by another reality outside of our traditional, Western, Christian practice and thought. The title is intended to have many meanings: after five hundred years of the forced introduction of the Christian

¹A name now being given to Latin America. It is a Cuna indigenous term that means mature land. See Aiban Wagua, "Consecuencias actuales de la invasión europea. Visión indígena," *Concilium* 232 (1990) 422; English version: "Present Consequences of the European Invasion of America," *Concilium* (1990/6) 56, n. 6.

faith, Quetzalcóatl (God of millennial cultures) challenges our reading of the Bible and our Christian practice. According to the accounts of our Mexican ancestors, Quetzalcóatl is a God of life, Creator of humanity, a God who loves people and rejects human sacrifice, a God who sacrificed himself to give life to his creatures, a God who gives light like the morning star, breaking the dominion of darkness. I chose this title because the historical challenge comes at this very moment from the indigenous and African-American peoples who, together with women, are rising up as newly emerging subjects. They are the ones who, by their very presence, demand the critique of our practice, of our reflection, and of our readings of the Bible.

This article is organized under four points, each of which represents a different attitude toward the Bible. I will address: (1) Bible and conquest, (2) the rejection of the Bible, (3) the popular reading of the Bible, and (4) Amerindian hermeneutics. I will conclude with an invitation to all of us to move from a liberating hermeneutical struggle to a critical analysis of our own Christian biblical discourse.

Bible and Conquest

We will not develop a detailed analysis of the use of the Bible by the conquerors and the missionaries. The objective here is simply to show how the Bible was used, and for that purpose we have selected some samples from the time of the conquest. Here are some hermeneutical characteristics retrieved from these examples.

THE CONCEPT IS ESTABLISHED BEFORE THE EXPERIENCE

Columbus and the conquerors took on Spain's triumphalist spirit over the "infidels," that is to say, over non-Christians. The triumph over the Moors and the expulsion of the Jews helped to generate in Europeans the conviction that God directed these battles. It is not surprising to read in the letters of Hernán Cortés phrases like "we carried the flag of the Cross and fought for our faith. . . . God gave us such a victory that we killed many people."² This triumphalist spirit explains the fact that, from the time that Columbus arrived in these lands he considered himself the one chosen for the mission of bringing the Christian gospel to the natives. The prophesy of Isaiah 66:19-22 entered perfectly into his logic.

²Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de relación de la Conquista de México* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1970) 41.

One of the hermeneutical characteristics of a reading of the Bible that accompanies the invasion of one people over another is the rigid perception that concept precedes experience. The criterion of authority is the established, preconceived idea. This posture delegitimizes any other that might appear. Tzvetan Todorov analyzes Columbus' hermeneutics in this manner. For the admiral, the final sense is given from the outset: Columbus did not discover America, says Todorov, he found America where he knew it would be.³ This hermeneutical approach does not consider the existence of "the other," or respect "the other," nor the world such as it is. Columbus could not see beyond himself, so that everything that he saw was shaped to his own image and likeness. The objective of Todorov's analysis of the conquest is to show that disrespect for "the other" brings tragic consequences, such as the genocide of Amerindians in the sixteenth century.

EXPLANATION OF SUFFERING AS PUNISHMENT

The interpretation of suffering as a punishment is not new. Job justly protests against this retributive theology. What is interesting here is the way in which Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía interpreted the suffering of the indigenous peoples that was caused by the Spaniards. To him, this suffering represented punishment by God. The Spaniards were the divine instrument. The ten plagues that God sent on Egypt were reinterpreted in the light of this situation, but they became inverted:

God wounded and punished this land and those who were found in it, both natives and foreigners, with ten painful plagues. The first was smallpox . . . where they died like fleas. . . . The second was the death of many in the conquest of New Spain. . . . The third plague was the great famine that came after the taking of Mexico City. . . . The fourth plague was the death of the calpixques or peasants and blacks after the land was divided and the conquerors made their farms and towns. . . . The fifth plague was the great imposition of tributes and services upon the Indians. . . . The sixth plague was the death of who knows how many Indian slaves up to today in the gold mines. . . . The seventh plague was the building of the great City of Mexico. . . . Many Indians died there . . . because the Indians are the ones who do the work, gather materials at their own expense, pay the stone masons and carpenters, and if they don't bring food they fast. . . . The eighth plague was forced recruitment of slaves to go down into the mines. . . . The ninth plague

³Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquista de América Latina. El problema del otro* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1987) 26, 31. English version: *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) 17, 22.

was the work in the mines. . . . The tenth plague was the formation of gangs of Spaniards in Mexico.⁴

Other biblical themes used to justify the war or to rationalize theologically the invasion were the Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah. These themes were used by Dr. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. With regard to the first, he noted that God sent the universal flood for all the barbarians' impieties, adding that Noah's contemporaries were cannibals, incestuous, and performers of abortions.⁵ This is a rereading of the Flood in light of the criticisms that were being made of the indigenous peoples.

THE INVADERS ARE THE LIBERATORS

The first chapter of Motolinía's book, mentioned above, sums up the cruelty and the barbarism that were perpetrated against the inhabitants of Abya Yala during the invasion and conquest. For that reason, it is surprising to read the letter dated January 2, 1555, sent by this same friar to the Emperor Charles V. In this letter, Motolinía furiously denied the accusations of Bishop Fray Bartolomé de las Casas to the king and queen of Spain against the Spanish and missionaries for their abuses and inhumanity in their treatment of the indigenous peoples. One way to understand this disparity would be to look at the biblical-theological reading that was made of the situation. For Motolinía, it was God who wounded and punished with the plagues, not the Spaniards; it was through the Spaniards that God's will was accomplished. In reality it was the Spaniards who liberated the indigenous peoples from their idols and saved them from hell. Therefore, the Spanish were the saviors of these lands: "It is a wonderful thing that they have saved so many souls . . . and they have stopped and obstructed many evils and idolatries and murders and great offences to God."⁶ His evaluations of las Casas and Hernán Cortés are understandable because of his reading of the Bible: Fray Bartolomé de las Casas needed conversion to God and penance for having defamed the Spanish⁷ and Cortés deserved to be recognized for his love of the indigenous peoples:

"Who has loved and defended the Indians in this new world as much as Cortés?"⁸

The parable of the good Samaritan did not escape enlistment in support of the conqueror. For Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda this parable illustrated what the Spaniards had to do: take pity on the wounded neighbor and save him. Sepúlveda did not refer to the thousands of indigenous peoples who died because of the war and the diseases brought by the Spanish, but to those who were sacrificed by the godless barbarians. He wrote:

He who could but does not defend his neighbor from such offences commits crime as serious as he who does such crimes and other enormous abominations. . . . They must be punished therefore by the judges of the world . . . who are the avengers of the wrath of God. . . . For that reason alone and with excellent and natural right these barbarians can be compelled to submit to the empire of the Christians.⁹

TRIBUTE IS AN OBLIGATION ESTABLISHED BY CHRIST AND THE SUCCESSION OF THE EMPIRES IS PART OF THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

Motolinía rejected the affirmation of las Casas that all tribute is illegitimate, and he went to the Bible to affirm its legitimacy: Jesus affirms the tribute to Caesar and the succession of the empires has already appeared in the vision of Daniel. "How does las Casas come to say that all tributes are and have been illegally levied? We see that, when asked if we should give tribute to Caesar or no, the Lord answers 'Yes,' but las Casas says that they have been illegally levied."¹⁰ Further on he repeats: "During the reign of the Roman Emperors the Lord said that we should give tribute to Caesar."¹¹ For Motolinía, God is the one who "moves the times and ages and passes the kingdoms from one reign to another and this because of sin."¹² The statue in Daniel's vision represents the succession of the Babylonian, Persian, and Mede empires and then the Greeks (and after them the Romans). Christianity would be the next empire, and Motolinía asked his majesty to be diligent in the dispersing of "these infidels."¹³

⁴Ibid., 220.

⁵Stam, "La Biblia," 4; see also Sepúlveda, *Tratado*, 131.

⁶Motolinía, "Carta," 211.

⁷"Although he wants to be honest and leaves the decision to the Counsel of Your Majesty for them to decide which was more licit, tribute to the Romans or to the Spanish" (Ibid.).

⁸Here he alludes to the Kingdom of the Canaanites, which was passed on to the sons of Israel with great punishment (Ibid., 213).

⁹Ibid., 212.

⁴Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Historia de los indios de la nueva España*, Estudio crítico, apéndices, notas de Edmundo O'Gorman (México: Porrúa, 1984) 13-18.

⁵Juan Stam, "La Biblia en la teología colonista de Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda," unpublished lecture, June 1982. See Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986) 119.

⁶Motolinía, "Carta de Fray Toribio Motolinía al emperador Carlos V," *Historia de los indios*, 33.

⁷Ibid., 216.

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN:
A BIBLICAL PARADIGM OF THE INVASION

The story of the conquest of Canaan is the biblical foundation most frequently used in the conquest of this continent and of others. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, for one, used this biblical theme to legitimize the war against its inhabitants.¹⁴ Because he read the Bible through an Aristotelian perspective, the indigenous peoples were seen to be the losers. The conquest was just not only because it punished blasphemies, but also because these lands—like the Promised Land—are a special gift from God. The pope, understood as the vicar of Christ, was seen to have the authority to give the land. God chose the Spaniards to carry out divine justice against the infidels and to conquer their lands. Thus Sepúlveda affirmed that such a war was not only licit, but necessary because of the graveness of the people's crimes.¹⁵

What ever is the cause [of so many deaths], God is the one who knows, because his judgments are many and hidden to us. If the cause is the great sin and idolatry there was in this land, I do now know. However, I see that the promised land was possessed by seven idolatrous generations who were by God's command destroyed by Joshua, and afterwards was populated by the sons of Israel in such a way that, when David counted the people, he found in the ten tribes, counting only strong warriors, eight hundred thousand.¹⁶

His biblical reasoning can be reduced to this affirmation: this is the way it is in the Bible, and this is the way it must be. Such medieval arguments are still present today: in 1988 the invaders of Panama were the "saviors" of the people. In the same way the alliance of the democratic peoples of Europe and the United States invaded the Persian Gulf to "liberate" it. The invasion of Panama was called "Just Cause."

Suffering seen as God's punishment or God's will is a biblical-theological reading that hides the mechanisms that cause suffering. This reading is common in many of our churches.

The Rejection of the Bible

For the Mayan prophet Chilam Balam, Christianity and tribute form a hendiadys. In his book of prophesies, Christianity frequently

¹⁴Sepúlveda, *Tratado*, 115, 161.

¹⁵Stam, "La Biblia," 4; See Bartolomé de las Casas, *Tratados* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965) 231.

¹⁶Motolinía, *Historia de los indios*, 216.

appears as a synonym of tribute, exploitation, and cruelty.¹⁷ For many indigenous peoples, the Christian canon is an enemy of indigenous life. The Bible has been returned to Christians at various times in history as a symbolic rejection of Christianity itself. Five hundred years ago, according to a Spanish chronicler, Atahualpa, the Inca of Peru, "threw on the ground the book where the words of God were found." For that, he and many other people were executed. To Pizarro this rejection explained the providential and religious reasons for his victory.¹⁸

Five hundred years later, we take note of another such occasion in a letter that the indigenous peoples gave to John Paul II. This surprising act caused many biblical scholars and Christian theologians of our continent to reflect over the reading of the Bible, because the Bible was returned precisely at a moment in history when the popular, prophetic, and liberating reading has gained much ground on our continent. The letter reads as follows:

We, Indians of the Andes and of America, decided to take advantage of the visit of John Paul II to return to him his Bible, because in five centuries it has given us neither love, peace nor justice. Please take your Bible back again and return it to our oppressors, because they need its moral precepts more than we do. Because ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus to America the culture, language, religion and European values were imposed by force.

The Bible came to us as part of the imposed colonial change. It was the ideological arm of the colonialist assault. The Spanish sword, that by day attacked and assassinated the body of the Indians, and by night was converted to the cross which attacked the Indian soul.¹⁹

¹⁷"Enormous labor will be the burden of Katun because it will be the beginning of the gallows, the explosion of fire from the end of the white man's arm . . . when they come, the great entrance of the tribute with the entrance of Christianity, when the beginning of the Seven Sacraments is founded, when much work begins in the towns and misery establishes itself in the land" (Chilam Balam, *El libro de los libros del Chilam Balam* [México: UNAM, 1984] 68-71).

¹⁸"We come to conquer this land, so that you all may come to the knowledge of God and of the Holy Catholic Faith . . . and so that you know and depart from the bestiality and diabolic life in which you live. . . . And if you were taken prisoner and your people were destroyed and dead, it was because . . . you threw on the ground the book where the words of God are found, for that reason our Lord permitted your arrogance to be brought down, and that no Indian could offend any Christian." Cited by Luis Rivera Pagán, "La evangelización de América y la guerra justa," *Pasos* (1992) no. 2 número especial.

¹⁹Pablo Richard, "Hermenéutica Bíblica India: Revelación de Dios en las religiones indígenas y en la Biblia (Después de 500 años de dominación)," *Sentido histórico del V Centenario (1492-1992)*, ed. Guillermo Meléndez (San Jose: CehiladEI, 1992) 45-62.

Pablo Richard points out that we are passing through a traumatic time with regard to the Bible. According to Richard, this letter expresses the traumatic experience of the indigenous peoples because during the period of conquest and colonization the Bible was used as an instrument of domination. Today "this trauma becomes more profound" with the fundamentalist use²⁰ of the Bible and the manipulation of the Bible that goes against indigenous religions.²¹ The protagonism of the indigenous movement, demanding recognition of their religion and sacred traditions on a par with Christianity, has found us biblical scholars²² (*mestizos* and whites, Catholics and Protestants) unprepared. We believed that on this continent there existed no religion except Christianity, and we thought that the Judeo-Christian Bible was the only canon that had to be reread from the perspective of the oppressed. It is not only us, for in their meeting in Santo Domingo the Catholic bishops of the Latin American episcopate (CELAM) that met in Santo Domingo reflect difficulties in responding to the pluricultural Latin American reality in the theme that is already polemic for many indigenous peoples: "new evangelization."

The challenge does not come from tiny groups that live in the jungle, as many might think. In June 1992, thousands of Bolivian Aymaras and representatives of other indigenous nationalities and African-Americans of this continent met in Tiwanacu on the shores of Lake Titicaca to celebrate the Aymara new year with a millennial celebration. One of the newspapers of the area reported this with the headline "Tradition Intact 500 Years Later."²³ Non-Christian ceremonies occur in indigenous peoples' assemblies of diverse nationalities and in different countries.

Their initial reaction is to denounce the missionary endeavor of the Christians, to call the Christian religion western, and to perceive it (with reason) as something foreign that does not correspond to their world view. Nevertheless, they value the efforts of Christians who are committed to the self-determination of the indigenous peoples.²⁴

²⁰Richard cites here a popular Guatemalan saying: "When the Spanish arrived they told us Indians to close our eyes to pray. When we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they had our land" (Ibid., 45).

²¹Ibid., 46.

²²Except those non-indigenous Christians who live close to the indigenous experience. Indigenous and African traditions have always been present on this continent, although most of the time clandestinely.

²³*Presencia* (La Paz, Bolivia) June 22, 1992.

²⁴See the declaration from the spiritual leaders of the peoples of Abya Yala meeting in La Paz, Bolivia, June 19-23, 1992.

The reactions of *mestizo* and white Christians to this new reality varies. Some, with the Bible in their hand, see the devil in these practices and repeat biblical texts without any exegetical mediation, such as Acts 4:1-12 (there is no name other than Jesus Christ), and they firmly arm themselves to continue evangelizing according to the commandment "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all nations." Others try to reread and understand those texts that exclude others on the basis of their non-Christian faith practices. By doing so they seek to respond in part to the petition of the indigenous peoples gathered in Quito for the second ecumenical consultation of the indigenous peoples, in which they asked liberation theologians to recognize that the indigenous religions have their own history of salvation and that God has been revealed in these cultures.²⁵

The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), through its program on the Quincentenary, has developed a series of biblical studies at a simple level for church congregations with the intention of helping church members develop an open attitude toward other manifestations of faith. In these materials biblical themes that had once been used to legitimate the conquest and the imposition of Christianity are being reread in a liberative manner.²⁶

How the Spirit of God has surprised us here! Those of us who thought that this kind of reality belonged to Asian Christians, distant from and alien to us, now begin to realize (with shame) our ignorance and above all our arrogant attitude, especially in the way we systematize our Western Christian theological discourse. Dialogue with Asian and African biblical scholars who have lived within pluralistic contexts becomes imperative in order to learn how to read the Bible and how to elaborate theological thought that takes seriously "the other."²⁷

²⁵See *Aporte de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina a la teología cristiana* (Quito, Ecuador, 1986) 78.

²⁶Some of the biblical themes and texts studied are: the conquest of Canaan, Joshua and the Promised Land, idolatry (Hosea), election (Romans 9-11), Jesus as the only name for salvation (Acts 4:1-12), evangelization from the perspective of the excluded ones (Mark 7:24-30), and faith of the unconverted (Matt 8:5-13; 15:21-28). See *Martirio y esperanza. Reflexiones bíblicas sobre los 500 años* (Quito: CLAI, 1992). There are also other journals presenting rereadings of these texts in relation to the Quincentenary, among them: *Xilot* of Nicaragua and *RIBLA* (Revista de interpretación bíblica latinoamericana).

²⁷Harvey Cox is right in affirming that liberation theology contributes very little to the interreligious dialogue. See his *Many Mansions: A Christian Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) 162. The Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) is an excellent opportunity for biblical-theological interchange.

The Popular Reading of the Bible

During the time of the conquest and colonization, Bartolomé de las Casas and Guamán Poma, the former a Spanish Christian and the latter an indigenous Christian, presented readings of the Bible from the perspective of the impoverished and exploited, and from marginalized cultures. This manner of interpretation that we now call popular reading of the Bible has grown and become stronger in Catholic Christian base communities and also in various Protestant churches, with the rigorous, exegetical support of biblical scholars who have chosen to employ this way of reading Scripture. In fact, this essay would have followed this approach, had it not been for the eruption of the indigenous movement because of the Quincentenary of the invasion and of Christianity in this continent.

Despite its weaknesses, the popular reading of the Bible has made a significant contribution to Christian hermeneutics. In the context of oppression, repression, persecution, and exclusion in Abya Yala, this reading strategy has helped communities to discern the present times, to struggle for a dignified life, and to strengthen their hope that the situation of death will change because the biblical God is a God of justice, love, peace, and solidarity with the poorest of the poor. We therefore speak of a militant reading of the Bible where the text is understood from within the present-day context to respond to the challenges of daily and of global realities. This reading strategy seeks to overturn those elements of reality that deny life.

Thus the plagues of Egypt are not punishments inflicted by God on the conquered, as interpreted by Motolinía, but instead they show the power of God who is in solidarity with the exploited slaves. God hears the clamor of the oppressed and liberates them. No biblical theme can be used to discriminate against or to oppress another, as was done during the conquest. With regard to difficult passages, such as those that discriminate against women, some of us think that at times one must go beyond "the canon of the letter" to seize the spirit of discernment with the totality of the canon. That is to say, the Spirit of the Gospel must be granted a privileged place. That Spirit, according to Paul, orients one toward justice, life, liberty, peace, and the respect of human dignity. It goes beyond the "canon of the letter," not to put it aside, but to be able to follow it with greater fidelity; because it is precisely this canon, or rather the spirit of the canon in its totality, that serves as the criterion of discernment in order to identify with more clarity the true spirit of the text.²⁸

²⁸See Elsa Tamez, "Que la mujer no calle en la congregación," *Mujeres* (Alajuela: ALFALIT Latinoamerica, 1992) 7, 10.

The biblical themes that have been worked on most thoroughly are the Exodus, the historical practice of Jesus (including the cross-resurrection as a paradigmatic axis). Other common themes have been the prophets, apocalyptic literature, and Job. Most recently, the letters of Paul are being reread from a liberating angle.²⁹

What is the popular reading of the Bible? Who are the subjects of the reading? What methods of biblical analysis are being used? Which themes are being worked? What is the present situation? These are the questions to which I will now briefly respond.³⁰ We Latin American exegetes need to recognize that the popular reading of the Bible did not spring from our own intuition but from poor believing people. They took the Bible into their own hands and began to read it on the basis of their experiences of suffering and struggle.³¹ The academic reading that existed was a European copy, far removed from people's life and faith experience. The reappropriation of the Bible by poor communities offered the exegetes a new horizon that permitted them to rediscover that their task as scholars was to be in the service of God's reign. The conditions of poverty, and repression and a certain ecclesial opening in the 1960s combined to encourage this new way of reading the Bible.

The key to understanding this reading strategy can be summarized as the integration of the interpretation of life with the interpretation of the Bible as a single movement.³² In this movement, according to Carlos Mesters, the principal objective is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible.³³ Pablo Richard points out that the Bible is the fundamental criterion through which we can discern where God is today. The sacred Scriptures are, for this author, the historic and subversive memory of the poor.³⁴ Consequently, the concept of revelation is different. For Mesters, revelation is a present reality and the Bible helps us to decipher revelation within the world and to "transform the world into a great theophany."³⁵

²⁹See Néstor Míguez, *No como los otros que no tienen esperanza. Estudio de I Tesalonicenses* (Buenos Aires: ISEDET, 1989); Elsa Tamez, *Contra toda condena* (San Jose: DEI-SEBILA, 1991).

³⁰Those who have done the most work in the systematization of this experience are Carlos Mesters, Pablo Richard, and Milton Schwantes.

³¹Carlos Mesters, *Flor sem defesa, Uma explicação bíblica a partir do povo* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1983) 190.

³²This is how Teresa Cavalcanti summarizes the work of Carlos Mesters in her *A Lógica do amor, Pensamento teológico de Carlos Mesters* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1982) 14.

³³Mesters, *Flor*, 192.

³⁴Pablo Richard, *La fuerza espiritual de la iglesia de los pobres* (San Jose: DEI, 1987) 113.

³⁵Mesters, *Flor*, 199.

A vital element of the hermeneutical key to a popular reading of the Bible is the option for the dispossessed. Popular communities identify themselves with the Bible's stories of liberation, and the exegetes and theologians are in solidarity with them. Therefore this hermeneutics is partisan, in solidarity with the oppressed. It is evangelical because it takes as the paradigmatic axis of the Bible the solidarity of God with the weakest: orphans, widows, the poor, strangers, etc. All the biblical themes are being reread through this lens.

This biblical reading has spread widely throughout the whole continent. We can speak of a biblical movement: there is a broad network in which groups meet by regions to study the Bible from this point of view, and there are many Bible workshops. In Central America, for example, there are frequent workshops at the popular level, both rural and urban, in which the leaders share with their communities the hermeneutical keys for reading the Bible.

Women have challenged the popular reading, demanding a reformulation of hermeneutical norms in order to recognize that the Bible was written within a patriarchal culture. They are helping biblical scholars reformulate their hermeneutical presuppositions because they are asking new questions that were not considered before, such as the principle of biblical authority. We women reject as normative those texts that exclude and marginalize us. In this sense, First World feminist hermeneutics are helping us in our search that comes out of a popular reading. Black and indigenous hermeneutics, in which the subjects are blacks and indigenous peoples, are also calling the popular reading of the Bible to be accountable.³⁶ The contributions of rigorous exegesis are not foreign to the spirit of a popular communitarian reading. They are the systematization at an academic level of the intuitions and aspirations of the popular reading. In fact, the majority of exegetes share the faith experience in the popular Christian communities.

We are now entering into a process of maturation and are producing some important works. This began about twenty years ago with the rereading of certain biblical passages (e.g., Luke 6:20; 4:18-19), moved on to key biblical themes and clusters of meaning (Exodus, cross and resurrection), and is now entering into a process of producing biblical commentaries. We believe that the contribution of the biblical studies undertaken in connection with popular experience makes it possible to overcome any kind of fundamentalism.³⁷

³⁶Pablo Richard, because of his contact with indigenous groups, has systematized some of the guidelines. See his "Hermenéutica Bíblica India"

³⁷See *El Comentario Popular de la Biblia*, published by Vozes, Imprensa Metodista, and Ediciones Paulinas. The *Comentario Bíblico Hispanoamericano* (pub-

The methods of biblical exegesis vary. In the process of understanding the text, approaches have been perceived in which a combination of various methods has been used. The contributions of sociological, materialist, genetic structuralist, historic-economical exegesis, and so forth, have been very valuable. The methods of higher criticism are used when the information is functional for hermeneutics in the production of liberating meanings. The biblical science data that come from the first world, that help to understand the cultural socio-economic and theological context, are very much appreciated.³⁸ In relation to the Quincentenary, much has been produced on the rereading of those texts that were once used to legitimate the invasion. Nevertheless, we have not begun to work out the problematic of the relationship with other sacred books.

An Amerindian Hermeneutic

The challenge of indigenous Christians (Protestants and Catholics) initiates a new debate for the majority of this continent. We know that in Africa and Asia this discussion is already taking place, but we never imagined that this discussion would be necessary in our region. These indigenous Christians claim the Bible as canon and at the same time wish to incorporate their sacred traditions, a millenarian inheritance from their ancestors (these traditions are also mine, because of my indigenous blood). Orthodox Christianity is intolerant of these practices. Nevertheless, we observe in the faith experience of many indigenous communities this practice, which we contemptuously call syncretism, but which for them is part of a dynamic living faith.

That which Pablo Richard has pointed out as traumatic for the indigenous with respect to the Bible is also traumatic for us biblical scholars, *mestizos* and whites, who have been close to these indigenous communities. As Richard says:

We are so amazed with the Indigenous religious tradition, with the experience of God in that tradition, and with the Indigenous religious strength that has enabled them to survive for 500 years in spite of Christianity, that it seems to us inadequate to speak of our Bible, so distant in time and space, and so culturally alienating because of the western, colonial interpretation.³⁹

lished by Editorial Caribe), written especially for Protestant congregations, is also worth mentioning, because the contextualization of the Bible is an important concern for this commentary series.

³⁸See the works of Norman K. Gottwald, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Wayne Meeks, and Gerd Theissen, among others.

³⁹Richard, "Hermenéutica Bíblica India," 46.

Biblical scholars who are involved with a popular reading of the Bible are searching for new hermeneutical guidelines that will help us to understand that the merciful design of God transcends our faith and our canon. The problem is serious because it does not mean a discussion of Christianity *ad extra*, as Hans Küng would say in his call to Christians to dialogue humbly with other religions.⁴⁰ We are talking about a challenge *ad intra*, within the same religion, a challenge that comes from the indigenous peoples and from the various Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religious practices.

The experience of God within these communities will not permit a response to this challenge that comes out of a Western, analytic, dichotomous rationalism. To reject this experience (now five hundred years old) with negative value judgments, without any praxical or epistemological base,⁴¹ would be irresponsible both from a human and an academic perspective. To reduce this spirituality to the notion of a "syncretistic practice" that needs to be overcome is to ignore "the other."

Gustavo Gutiérrez is right when he says that if we were indigenous we would think in another way.⁴² The Cuna theologian Aiban Wagua is of the same opinion. For him it is very difficult to think about indigenous realities from outside of that reality, and this is the case even if one thinks in a liberating mode. From the option for the poor one has to proceed to the option for the poor as "the other." Wagua rightly shows that the Christian Church in Latin America has been sensitive to the poor but not to "the other." "The other" continues to be pagan or an infidel.⁴³

I do not yet know how to elaborate a biblical hermeneutics that is inclusive of other non-Christian practices, but I am reworking those parts of the Bible that are explicitly exclusive in order to avoid discriminatory attitudes toward "the other." What I do know, by experience, is that when I hear words from the *Popol Vuh* or other sacred traditions in a Christian worship service, I feel that God is speaking. We are conscious that it is not for us, the *mestizos* or whites, to elaborate an Amerindian or African-American hermeneutics. We are not going to take on this task, which belongs to the indigenous and black peoples

who are the subjects of this experience. Our task must be reduced to helping the non-indigenous and non-black peoples to expand their minds to be able to receive with joy and equality these different practices of faith.

Conclusion

We have considered four approaches to biblical interpretation that have come to us out of the conquest of Abya Yala. The first and the third are strong and common, they support either the legitimation of oppression or the hermeneutical struggle of liberation. The second and the fourth are being heard most clearly at present. These are new positions that challenge our orthodox understanding of the Bible. One takes place at the *ad extra* level, dealing with another non-Christian faith that has its own canon. Its position at the present time involves a radical criticism of Christianity and its Bible. When the Christians of this continent are able to recognize that God reveals God's self in other cultures and when we are able to ask both them and God to forgive us for the disaster our reading of the Bible has caused for so many years, then perhaps we can begin a fruitful dialogue between two different canons, without the intention of one being imposed over the other. The other current is taking place at the *ad intra* level. It challenges us to recognize the experiences of a millennial faith in intimate relation with the fundamental elements of Christianity. This implies a reformulation of fundamental concepts with respect to the biblical canon, but above all to move from orthodoxy to orthopraxis.

We all know that our planet is deteriorating at an alarming rate. I believe, with Hans Küng, Harvey Cox, and others, that we need to move beyond the stage of interreligious confrontations that have caused so much harm to humanity. As Christians, we must become critical of our own conception of the world. We believe ourselves to be the only and the best, but we Christians are no more than 21 percent of humanity, and according to some statistics we will be 16 percent at the end of this century because of the population growth in the Asian Third World.⁴⁴

To finish I would like to express to Christian exegetes and theologians present here a concern burning within me that came to me in 1992. Making a simple and quantitative accounting of the role of Christianity and the Bible, in its Catholic and Protestant versions, in all its history of almost two thousand years, and painfully admitting that it

⁴⁰Hans Küng, *Teología de la postmodernidad* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1989) 198-226.

⁴¹Following the axis proposed by Todorov in the process of knowing "the other." See Todorov, *La conquista*, 195ff.; English version *The Conquest*, 185ff.

⁴²Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Hacia el V centenario," *Concilium* 232 (1990) 37; English version: "Towards the Fifth Centenary," *Concilium* 1990/6, 3.

⁴³Aiban Wagua, "Consecuencias actuales de la invasión europea," 422-6; English version, "Present Consequences," 51-4.

⁴⁴See Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985) 4.

has caused more deaths than the concrete liberation of persons and people, I am aware of the possibility of an inherent ambiguity in the understanding of our Christian God. I ask myself whether it would not be better to go beyond the hermeneutical struggle to a sincere analysis of the biblical-theological discourse of the Christian religion. For five hundred years we have been involved in a struggle of interpretation, some of us from a liberation perspective and others from perspectives that legitimate oppression. The struggle for a liberating reading of the Bible is good. Yet, it seems to me that after taking a look at history and seeing ourselves as if in a mirror, we need to go further than the hermeneutical struggle. We need to reexamine the discourse of our written canon and the logic of Christian thought.

There may be even more profound problems that facilitate the rapid inversion of values. I am referring to such matters as the concept of biblical time understood as progression toward the final victory (the Day of the Lord, the struggle of Armageddon, the crushing of the enemy), which can be a double-edged sword. In addition there is the idea of a universalist, intolerant God presented in the following manner: "since God belongs to all, all belong to God,"⁴⁵ without distinguishing the differences; there is sacrificial discourse, above all, there is the sort of christological discourse that sometimes degenerates into the demands of useless sacrifices or into the logic of crucifying the crucifiers;⁴⁶ and other concepts such as God's elect and holy war that are too easily legitimated through the use of the Bible and through theology.⁴⁷ The challenge comes, I think, from the Holy Spirit and also from Quetzalcóatl.

(translated by Gloria Kinssler)

⁴⁵See Todorov, *La conquista*, 114; English version, *The Conquest*, 106.

⁴⁶See Franz Hinkelammert, *La fe de Abraham y el Edipo occidental* (San Jose: DEI, 1988).

⁴⁷See Elsa Tamez, "Los indígenas nos evangelizan," *Pasos* 42 (1992) 1-6; English version, "The Indigenous Peoples Are Evangelizing Us," *Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992) 458-66.