Amos 5:21-24: Religion, Politics, and the Latino Experience

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I hate, I repudiate your festivals, and I do not enjoy the odor of your festive assemblies. Even though you raise up to me your burnt offerings and tribute, I will not be delighted. And the thank-offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the agitation of your songs; I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24, translation mine).

Introduction

No matter how some things change, other things remain the same. Certain patterns of human behavior are a constant throughout history. One of those constant patterns is the uneasy mix between politics and religion. Paradoxically, the mix becomes more complicated and problematic the more the ambiguity in the relationship between them is clarified. That is to say, whoever defines the relationship and structures the definition controls the dynamics of the relationship. Thus only in ambiguity with ongoing redefinition and reappropriation of meaning can the relationship between religion and politics make any real sense.¹

The alliance between religion and politics has taken many forms throughout history. The metamorphic capability of the alliance depends primarily on the available cultural expressions of a given sociopolitical, economic reality. With the prophet Amos as our guide in this discussion, we see that eighth-century B.C.E. Israel was a mix of rich and poor, with an ever widening gap between them. The gap was caused principally, though not exclusively, by economic exploitation. The rich and powerful tended to legitimize the disparity through religious reasoning. For example, a prominent belief current at the time was that

¹This is so given the perspective of the one doing the defining. Admittedly, in this scenario I am proposing that the defining and reappropriating be done by the common people. This will become clearer below.
wealth signaled God’s blessing. Apparently, the means toward achieving that wealth were not as important as the ends of possessing the wealth itself.

Into this morass of eighth-century B.C.E. injustice jumped the prophet Amos. Aware of the historical and economic realities of northern Israel, especially of the levels of injustice and the hypocrisy of religious activity, he made what I consider one of the strongest statements on the relation between religion and politics. He did this by relating cult with public life. Amos stated emphatically that the cult, and therefore religion, is meaningless unless it is rooted in the doing of justice. Amos’ theological commentary on the mixture of politics and religion is most aptly expressed in his treatment of justice and the cult as found in 5:21-24.

In order to understand Amos’ prophetic message regarding politics and religion, this essay will focus on 5:21-24, where justice, because of its social nature, represents politics, and the cult (ritualized interaction between a deity and its people) represents religion. The first part of the discussion deals with the cult and memory as its catalyst, and with the “Between Time” as the framework for the doing of justice. The second part discusses the Latino experience of religiosidad popular and its relationship to Amos and justice.

Amos 5:21-24

While forming a distinct unit of their own, these verses closely relate to the rest of the book and may even be said to be the center of the book theologically and textually. From the theological perspective, the early part of the book pronounces divine judgment against Israel’s neighbors primarily for sins committed against other nations in wartime. Subsequently, judgment is proclaimed against Judah and Israel, primarily for sins against their own people (considered far more serious than sins against other nations).

The indictments are like an ever tightening noose around Israel’s neck. Punishment is promised first to Israel’s neighbors and then to Israel. The escalating gravity of sins finds its culmination in the sin of injustice, which has several ramifications. The crime of injustice is compounded by its apparent justification through the cult. I say “apparent justification” because the very performance of cult by one who is guilty of an unresolved injustice is a mockery of the cult itself. Amos 5:21-24 seeks to redress that wrong. Punishments against Israel for unrepentant injustice are spelled out in the ensuing chapters of the book, especially through the literary genre of vision.

The link between justice and cult is not unique to Amos. In fact, it is a theme not uncommon among the pre-exilic prophets. Perhaps the closest parallel to Amos 5:21-24 is found in Isaiah 1:11-15. This parallel indicates a certain constancy of concern about the significance of the justice-cult issue emerging in the prophetic message.

What stands out above all in Amos 5:21-24 is the notion that the rejection stated in verses 21-23 is not of the cult itself, but of its abuse. It is an oracle in the first person where Yahweh, in no uncertain terms, spells out for Israel the real nature of the relationship between politics and religion, or, in other words, the distinct correlation between the treatment of people with what and how one believes.

The verbs used in verses 21-23 very emphatically state dissatisfaction with the cult as rendered. In fact, Yahweh’s rejection of the cult is expressed in terms of its unacceptable to the senses that underscores, in a somewhat anthropomorphic fashion, the gravity of the sin of cult abuse. For example, in verse 21 the verb translated as “take delight in” generally applies to the sense of smell. In verses 22-23 the

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4This is so because of the sense of community and of oneness as God’s people that made every miscarriage of justice against a fellow Israelite a crime against a family member.

4The various commentaries are quick to point out parallel passages. But one must examine these parallels with a critical eye because of the specific Sitz im Leben of each prophet. Worship and cult will be used interchangeably because, for all practical purposes, Israel’s worship was through the cult.

4Most likely as celebrated at Bethel, a key northern sanctuary. In verse 21 the verbs translated as “hate” (רָעָה) and “despise” or “reject” (רֹעָה) have cognates in Ugaritic and Akkadian that convey an equal intensity of feeling. See Paul, Amos, 189, no 8, 9. This notion of Yahweh’s rejection (רֹעָה) of anything is, as a rule, the reaction of Yahweh having been rejected by the people (1 Sam 15:23; Hos 4:6). See Hans Walter Wolff, Joel and Amos (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 262. A more technical treatment of Amos 5:21-24 from a prosodic perspective can be found in F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, Amos (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 523-9.

4Here it is the first person singular of the verb רָעָה. See also Gen 8:21; Exod 30:38; Lev 26:31; 1 Sam 26:19.
verbs "to look favorably" and "listen" round out the sensory basis for the assault. Even the list of worship modes mentioned indicates the totality of the worship experience, and thus relationship, between Yahweh and the people that is jeopardized by cult abuse. The abuse of the cult is no periodic peccadillo: it is serious business with serious consequences.

However, it is in verse 24 where redemption for this transgression transpires. In one of the most potent of prophetic images, Amos paints with a fine brush on the canvas of his audience's imagination a picture of justice as it ought to be related to the cult.

Cult

It is a truism to state that the need to celebrate is one of the most human of needs. This need for celebration expresses itself in many ways, and worship is a common way in which a perceived relationship between a person and its god is celebrated. Worship is the measured human response to the sense of the sacred that people experience in their lives in relationship with a deity. Cult is the specific ritualized form that the response often takes.

In the case of Israel the two became indistinguishable because cultic worship was constitutive of Israel's identity. Israel was a worshiping community. Civilizations other than Israel in the ancient Near East often celebrated cultically their earthly institutions as having heavenly archetypes, for example kingship and temple. But for Israel, the cult celebrated a personal relationship with Yahweh as its god. This relationship was forged principally by historical deeds of salvation that elicited a response from Israel to honor the covenant terms of the relationship. This, together with an appreciation for creation, proved to be the ongoing measure of acceptance or rejection of Israel as God's people. The indelible character of that relationship is found in the notion of covenant as codified at Sinai. The Sinai covenant demanded a responsibility for the other. This meant that in Israel every expression of cultic worship was to have an ethical dimension, even if it were merely the ritualized reaffirmation of the covenant relationship itself with implied loyalty to that relationship.

While the Sinai covenant established a sense of responsibility for "the other" (another way of saying "justice") as the primary dynamic of Israel's relationship with God, the reaffirmation of that relationship became a kind of mantra in her cult. It can be said that covenant renewal was an ongoing concern of Israel's cultic celebrations. Even the important feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and Ingathering (Booths) may be said to be celebrations of covenant renewal. In fact, "the ceremony of covenant renewal may well have been celebrated more regularly in North Israel than in Judah." If this was the case, then Amos' struggle with Amaziah within a cultic framework takes on particular significance (Amos 7:10-17). Amos, by his call to proclaim justice within the cult, proved to be a threat to Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. For Amos there was no doubt that the cult was framed in covenant terms, which involved the doing of justice. This particular attitude did not sit well with Amaziah, who...

*In addition to responsibility for one's fellow human beings and responsibility to Yahweh through the Sinai covenant, the cult also expressed, at yet another level, a particular relation to creation—a Noachic remnant. "Worship clearly expresses a response to the Holy that is designed, among other things, to ward off the powers of chaos and destruction. . . . Worship of God, then, offers a means of evoking God's power to forgive, to restore, to heal a broken humanity and a wounded earth. And fidelity to God's will in daily life offers the means for the earth's continuing fruitfulness and for God's continuing blessing upon His people." (Harrelson, *From Fertility Cult*. 13)

10See Harrelson, *From Fertility Cult*. 21. In addition, Passover, later combined with the feast of Unleavened Bread, may be said to celebrate God's covenant relationship with the people because of its salvific origins. With the introduction of the Davidic covenant promises through Nathan (2 Samuel 7), the cultic reiterant of "the chosen one" for special treatment shifted from the people to the monarchy. This had severe political as well as theological and ethical consequences.

11Bethel was an important cultic shrine since the time of the patriarchs (Gen 28:10-22), and its significance perdured throughout the period of the northern kingdom.

PR. E. Clements argues persuasively for a direct linkage between cult and covenant in *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM, 1965) 86-107, especially 94ff. Regarding Amos he says, "The very foundation of Israelite life was its covenant relationship to Yahweh, which was affirmed through certain cultic rites. . . . These prophets [Amos and Hosea], by rejecting the sacrificial worship of the shrines did so on account of the failure of such cult to accord with the nature and demands of the covenant. The prophets, and not the cult of the sanctuaries, made known the true
was a strict preserver of institutions. In this mentality, preservation of the institution took priority over justice for the individual whenever there was a conflict between the two. A latent motif in this situation of conflict was the perceived and practiced polarity between the Sinai covenant (which focused on the community of individuals in relationship to Yahweh) and the Davidic covenant (which focused on the institution of the monarchy in relationship to Yahweh).

Memory

Memory is another crucial element in understanding the relationship between cult and justice. It had an important function in the cult when viewed as expressive of the Sinai covenant relationship. That function is the remembering, the making present, of the deity’s salvific action, forged in relationship, on behalf of the community. The key process of making present in cult through memory is called “representation.” This process of representation combines the dimensions of past, present, and future in a unitary experience. The collective memory of the faith community, exercised in the context of the cult, served as the catalyst for the coalescence of past, present, and future. The experience becomes a kind of “eternal now.”

The case of Israel serves as a model for us. In Israel’s perspective there was only one redemptive history: it was the ongoing care and concern of God performing salvific deeds on behalf of the people. Saving events that occurred long ago, such as the Exodus, continued to take place with each succeeding generation. And it is the memory, usually in cult and always in awareness of covenantal relationship, that served as catalyst for the ongoing process.

Concerning the text from Amos under discussion, verses 21-23 remember the time when cultic ritual and sacrifice were completely acceptable to Yahweh. The factor of injustice as rationalized through the cult (e.g., 2:8) elicits the intense negative reaction from Yahweh described earlier. Within the cultic framework, the memory of the good is marred by the doing of the bad. The doing of injustice is incompatible with the rendering of cult, especially if the former tends to be legitimated by the latter, as seems to be the case in Amos 5:21-23.

There is also the issue of the relation between chronological time and redemptive history and the role of memory in both. Chronological time for Israel is the lived experience of a reality at a certain point along a temporal continuum, and it becomes redemptive time through generational acceptance of the challenge to be obedient to her traditions, principally the Sinai covenant. This is particularly evident in 3:1ff., where appeal is made to the people’s memory of the formative and saving events of Exodus and the Sinai covenant. But because of injustices the people are promised punishment. This challenge to respond can be expressed intentionally through the cult even when done through the literary genre of irony and hyperbole, as in Amos 4:4-5 where the invitation to the Bethel/Gilgal sanctuaries is made.

Memory activates the actualization process, which “is the process by which a past event is contemporized for a generation removed in time and space from the original event.” The contemporization occurs when possibilities for decision making are presented. For example, Amos has Yahweh presenting to Israel the consequences of its behavior and some alternatives to those consequences in chapters 4 and 5.

Amos 4:7-11 underscores Israel’s hardness of heart. In spite of various punishments by Yahweh in chronological time, Israel refused to
participate in redemptive time by rejecting covenant responsibility. The severity of this response may be reflected in the use of the divine warrior motif in 4:13 ('Lord, god of hosts'), which has a distinct castigatory flavor. In chapter 5, alternatives are provided presenting hope (5:4-9, 14-15). These positive alternatives are bolstered first by Amos' reversal of the meaning of the Day of Yahweh, from delight to destruction (5:18-20), and second by the positive image of justice as flowing water (5:24). The cultic context of 5:21-24 allows for the actualization process of contempering and decision making through memory's active recollection of redemptive history from chronological history, providing those decision making possibilities based on covenant responsibilities.

Brevard Childs proposes a significant perspective on memory when he says that in the Old Testament there is no "original event," merely various witnesses to an event. Some witnesses are closer chronologically to the original happening than others and so remember it more strongly. In light of this, our question concerning remembered traditions should be not how do interpreted events relate to "objective event," but, rather, how do the successive interpretations of an event relate to the primary witness of that event? This posing of the question is more an issue of reliable memory than of objective fact. It appears that in the Old Testament context witness is the only access to the original event and is remembered and reinterpreted by succeeding generations, which makes the value of memory in interpreting and reinterpreting the testimony of the various series of witnesses exceedingly important.

We may suppose that Amos saw himself as heir (contemporary witness) to the ongoing testimony of living tradition of the primary witnesses to the original events of Exodus and Sinai, formative events in the life of the Israelite people. Subsequent generations recalling these events were actually witnessing to their own commitment to accept the fidelity of the tradition, that is, the positive conviction of the earlier witnesses. This commitment was made and ritualized through the cult. So, in the case of Amos 4-5 we have a situation where response to the consequences and alternatives presented by Yahweh to Israel depended on how the people valorized earlier witnessing to the saving events (redemptive time) of Exodus and especially Sinai. Obviously, some would depreciate the earlier witness value (consequences) and choose injustice, while others would take seriously the earlier witnessing (alternatives).

Admittedly, Childs' theory could wreak havoc with the 'brute fact' school of history, since there is virtually nothing to substantiate beyond doubt events that occurred in the Old Testament. But whatever direction the discussion goes, this theory does give value to witness, reinforced by memory, which, in turn, gives support and credence to the traditions that were the basis of Israel's belief.

Those traditions deriving from the Sinai covenant that had ethical implications deserved to be remembered from generation to generation, since they were so formative for the people. As a preserver of such traditions, the cult thus became a framework for the renewal of commitment to those covenant traditions. In so doing the ethical dimension of the covenant became inexorably linked to the cult.

Deepening our understanding of memory helps us to realize its impact not just on cult, but on other aspects of behavior as well. For example, Childs underscores the active aspect of memory with effect on behavior. On a higher plane, the nuancing between God's remembering and Israel's remembering remains critical: these were ongoing reciprocal activities based on mutual commitment. As Childs puts it:

"... in terms of God's memory Time-sequence plays a secondary role. ... His [God's] remembering is not conceived of as an actualization of a past event in history: rather, every event stems from the eternal purpose of God. Only from Israel's point of view is each remembrance past. God's memory is not a re-creating of the past, but a continuation of the selfsame purpose. ... His [God's] memory includes both the great deeds of the past as well as his continued concern for his people in the future." 25

On the other hand, Israel's memory involves each generation's participation in the recollection of the traditions that elicited a decision in obedience to the dictates of the covenant. This dynamic functions as the ongoing redemption first experienced by the ancestors. Through the cult, each new generation in chronological time was challenged to enter redemptive time. In other words, sacred time and sacred space (cult) allowed for a dynamic quality in history, which made the wor-

23Ibid.

24In the sense that in Greek the verb "to remember" (mimnēskomai) sometimes refers to an action; for example, to "remember" one's parents means to take care of them, and to "remember" the dead means to bury them (Childs, Memory and Tradition, 25).

25Ibid., 42. With regard to the deity's remembering it is important to distinguish here between memory and myth. Myth is the past harmonized to conform to the present, whereas memory is the present related to the past. In cult there is often a confusion between the two.
shiper’s ongoing participation in redemptive history. In effect, “for the Old Testament, redemptive history is conceived of as resulting from God’s action and Israel’s response.”

The “Between Time”

The discussion of memory in cultic worship has served to call our attention to the matrix of chronological time and redemptive time, which is the point of ethical decision making. This matrix is the moment at which chronological time becomes redemptive time. It is the period when the individual is presented with consequences and alternatives to certain ethical choices and decides in favor of one over another. This matrix is the moment of ethical choice when the past and the future momentarily fuse into the present. It is this matrix that we call the “Between Time.”

Within the framework of cult the Between Time is actualized through the use of symbols. It is the imagination that sets the symbolic world into motion, thus making possible for the worshiper not only a re-presentation of past salvific events by God on behalf of the people, but also a pledge of hope for future continuity of that selfsame salvific activity. The covenant relationship of mutual responsibility coupled with the awareness of the past (the “no longer”)—present—future (the “not yet”) continuum makes for the moment of choice, the point of ethical decision making.

In the words of Childs, “God remembers Israel and Israel remembers God—the same verb is used—and so God’s action and Israel’s response belong together.’’ “The redemptive events of Israel’s history do not come to rest, but continue to meet and are contemporary with each new generation” (Memory and Tradition, 83). Norman Porteous supports Childs’ position in this regard: ‘‘In memory each new generation in Israel was able to reinterpret the formative events of her history as the living God of the Covenant challenged her to new obedience’’ (Norman Porteous, “Actualization and the Prophetic Criticism of the Cult,” Living the Mystery, collected essays [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967] 139).

There are some similarities to Gadamer’s theory of horizons and the concept of Zwischenzeit, popular with German scholars in the first half of this century. However, I am more indebted to the insights of the philosopher Ernst Bloch for my discussion of the Between Time, especially his treatment of the “not yet” (nicht noch). See Bloch, Men on His Own (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Note especially the foreword by Harvey Cox (7-18) and the introduction by Jurgen Moltmann (19-29) for an insightful look into Bloch’s thought.

When I speak of covenant or covenant responsibility it is the Sinai covenant to which I am referring because of its twofold characteristics of bilateralism and conditionality expressed in the Decalogue, thus making personal responsibility for one’s neighbor a significant factor in relationship with God. Furthermore, in deal-

This Between Time activated by the use of symbols means that the quality of the Between Time will depend on the nature and function of the symbols utilized. For a symbol to be fruitful it must be derivative from the culture in which it is used. In sum, cult is the context of chronological history interacting with redemptive history. The reactualization of redemptive history is done by memory, which also allows for future possibilities for ethical choices (consequences and alternatives). The Between Time, expressed symbolically, is the cultic present’s fusion with the “no longer” of the past and the “not yet” of the future, where a choice is made to participate positively in the redemptive history or not. Ultimately, the choice made is one with definite social and ethical implications.

In the case of Amos 5:21-24, the time for decision making, the time for the shift from chronological time (sins of injustice committed against the neighbor) to redemptive time (the doing of justice), is presented by way of the symbol of rolling water in verse 24. The symbol of rolling water marks the Between Time when Israel’s memory is challenged to recall the reasons for the repudiated cult (it was not always so), and to choose the reestablishment of covenant relationship through the doing of justice.

Justice

We see that Amos is very comfortable in the cultic context and so frames much of his message from that perspective. And the message that is most prevalent in Amos, from the cultic perspective, is the need for the doing of justice. It might be said that the doing of justice is the central theme of Amos’ message and that its relationship

19See Henning Graf Reventlow sees Amos’ natural “home” in the cult as the context of covenant ritual (Das Amt des Propheten bei Amos, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und neuen Testaments [Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962] 111). Scandinavian scholar Arvid Kapelrud concurs by classifying Amos as among the nadj, those with special relationship to the temple (Central Ideas, 5-6).

20We can see, for example, the various references to and inferences from the cult in various parts of the book. For example, at the outset Amos appears to frame his entire message within a cultic context when he has Yahweh speaking the ensuing words of judgment from Jerusalem (1:2).
with the cult is crucial both for effective justice and for meaningful cult.30

What is the justice of which Amos speaks? Using 5:24 as the axial verse of the entire book we note several things. First, the word translated as “justice” is mspt, and it is paired with sdh, which is usually translated “righteousness.”34 The pairing generally serves to focus attention on the significance of mspt as justice. Rather than understanding a juridical meaning for the idea of justice it is more accurate to attribute a relational dimension to Amos’ understanding of the concept.35 This would keep all discussion of justice in the realm of ethics and covenant responsibility.

An understanding of justice in Amos as relational reality would automatically expand its meaning to include the idea of integrity,36


34Much has been written about both terms. However one wants to nuance it, there is clearly a strong ethical dimension to their use, which is connected with the Sinai covenant. “In 5:24 justice and righteousness are held up as opposite to what the people are doing. But no definition is given: Amos seems to consider that unnecessary…” It is not clear how Amos uses MISPAT and SEDQA here, but the terms seem to have a rather wide meaning. As he has just mentioned the behavior of the people it is likely that also justice and righteousness may here be used to characterize the behavior Yahweh expected from his people” (Kapierud, Central Ideas, 65).

35The relational perspective of justice is more in keeping with Amos’ use of Sinai covenant thinking and his ethical focus. One of the major prophetic strands of theological givens is that Yahweh and Israel are in special relationship, which is why any violation of that relationship is taken so seriously. “But it is Israel itself who has broken the Covenant: it is forgotten or it is not understood that Yahweh like El has ethical demands to which his followers had to adhere. They have been living in a changing society without realizing that the ancient ethical obligations were valid also under new circumstances” (Kapierud, Central Ideas, 48). Kapierud goes on to say that because of the stress on doing justice in Amos, sacrifices were considered useful but not necessary. In fact, moral conduct was the norm for the divine-human relationship (ibid., 80ff.). The work of Hemchand Gossai, Justice, Righteousness, and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets (American University Studies VIII: Theology and Religion, New York: Lang, 1993) 141, is a comprehensive study of sdh and mspt. Gossai maintains that both terms are of a relationship-oriented nature, and thus form a basis for the social critique of eight-century b.c.e. prophets.

wholeness, and right relationship—much along the lines of the theological meaning of shalom.38 As wholeness, integrity, and right relationship, shalom bespeaks a certain basic oneness among people. When we consider the particular prophetic notion of justice as oneness (shalom), right relationship between two parties (in Amos’ case between Yahweh and Israel), then it is easy to see how the transition into the world of symbolism takes place. It is the symbol, with its polyvalence, that can describe the nature of the right relationship, or the condition of justice, at any given moment.

Amos 5:24 uses the powerful image of water to speak of justice. That is to say, the oneness of right relationship between Yahweh and his people is represented by a gushing stream: “But let justice [mspt] roll down like waters, and righteousness [sdh] like an overflowing stream.” The poetic device of synonymous parallelism underscores the connection between the ethical sense of justice (right relationship) through the symbol of rushing waters and the cult as the framework for the motivation to do justice (5:21–23).

The symbol of water reaches deeply into the collective memory of Israel in order to show both its chaotic and constructive sides.37 But it is the prophetic imagination that gives the symbol its meaning. It is the prophet’s imagination that plumbs the possibilities, the significant alternatives to the current situation of tension. Walter Brueggemann cites Latin American theologian Rubem Alves for the classic explanation of prophetic imagination: “The practice of imagination is a subversive activity not because it yields concrete acts of defiance (which it may) but because it keeps the present provisional and refuses to absolutize it.”38


31For example, the waters of the flood (Genesis 6–9), the crossing of the Yam Suf during the Exodus (Exodus 15), crossing the Jordan (Joshua 3) were all both destructive and constructive. On the themes of order and chaos in Amos see Daley Heynes, “In the Face of Chaos: Border Existence as Context for Understanding Amos,” Old Testament Essays 6 (1993) 72–89. For an alternative position to the one presented here, see Jon L. Berquist, “Dangerous Waters of justice and Righteousness: Amos 5:18–27,” Biblical Theology Bulletin 23 (1993) 54–63.

32Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination, 119, n. 1. Brueggemann places the issue more forcefully, it is “the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one. Indeed, poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality” (ibid., 45).
That is to say, the imagination provides future alternatives that are not a continuation of the present. This provision is the possibility of something new, of something that may be referred to as the "liberative dimension of the present." In effect, through the use of the symbol the prophet probes the polyvalence of its semantic field, comes into contact with certain aspects of historical memory, and gives an interpretation or a reinterpretation into something new that is distinctively different from the present. The horizon of possibilities is greatly expanded.

For Amos the symbol of water became a powerful tool for testing Israel's sense of ethical responsibility. In its collective memory Israel experienced water as punishment (flood—Genesis 6-9) and redemption (crossing the sea in Exodus 15). But it was the memory of the redemptive aspects of the waters that remained most strongly, hence constant reference to the Exodus as motive for right behavior. So when Amos, in the face of multiple and flagrant injustices, utilized the symbol of water, he reminded his listeners of its destructive aspect (especially at creation when proposed as the chaos motif). Out of watery chaos God brings order (Gen 1:2).

In a cultic context, Amos 9:1-8 presents the punishment to be meted out to Israel through the symbol of water. Amos 9:3 appeals to the myth of the destructive chaos dragon of creation residing in the primeval waters (Leviathan). Verses 4-6 are cosmic in their scope as the waters of chaos symbolically promise to become the instrument of punishment for a sinful Israel. These are the same waters of chaos that destroyed a sinful people at the time of Noah (Genesis 6-9). But these waters are not only destructive, they are redemptive as well.

Amos' prophetic imagination plumbs the people's memory with regard to the symbolic power of water in order to propose an alternative, evoking water's redemptive aspects. As Amos did with the symbol of the Day of Yahweh earlier (5:18-20) so also with the symbol of water (5:24), the symbol is reinterpreted by reversing a current connotation. In Israel's memory, the waters of chaos were destructive of the right relationship that existed with Yahweh. Amos 5:24 presents an ethically-based alternative, showing that now, in the Between Time, once-chaotic waters could become redemptive as the rolling, flowing, moving, active waters of justice. This justice is nothing less than the affirmation of the right relationship with Yahweh, which implies right relationship with the neighbor (the promotion of the shalom of "the other"). This reaffirmation of shalom occurred within the context of cult.

In Amos, ethics and relational concerns are the point of convergence of religion and politics (justice and cult). For Israel at the time of Amos the most significant relationship was with Yahweh in covenant, and it is the echoes of the Sinai covenant that we see in 5:24 that give the relationship between religion and politics (cult and justice) its strong ethical dimension. In the framework of cult, in the context of the Between Time, Amos 5:24 uses the conditional language of covenant ("if . . . then") to propose an ideal combination of politics and religion: if there is to be a valid cult, then it must be accompanied by the doing of justice. Bruce Birch states the case quite succinctly: "Israel itself did not make sharp separations between the cultic and the ethical, and the numinous character of God's holiness is as important to the explicit moral and ethical references as to the cultic."**

Let us now turn our attention from Amos to a contemporary reality where Amos' perspective could prove quite useful: the Latino experience of religiosidad popular or devotional piety.

**The Latino Experience: Religiosidad Popular**

The experience of religion and politics is a universal human phenomenon that goes back to the very origins of human history. The underlying question has been, and continues to be: how does one relate belief in deity, with all its ramifications, to one's daily life? The Latino experience, particularly in the United States, has been a history of an infelicitous mixture of religion and politics. The Latino religious reality has been more a matter of personal beliefs deeply ingrained in cultural categories than of any dogmatic system of credal formulae encased in Mediterranean or European paradigms.

**According to Abraham Heschel the prophets have a keen sensitivity to evil so that even minor injustices assume cosmic proportions (Heschel, The Prophets [New York: Harper & Row, 1962] 1:4). This may help to explain why Amos uses such strong language and why injustice is seen in such cosmic terms.

**Exodus references in Amos 3:1 and 9.7 are reminders of Yahweh's salvific acts on behalf of the people and include implicitly both the covenanting at Sinai and the crossing of the Yam Suf, which is gloriously celebrated in song in Exodus 15. Compare the chaotic and redemptive qualities of water in Amos, e.g., 4:7-8; 5:8; 24:8.8, 11-15; 9:6.


**So as not to become needlessly embroiled in the semantic war between "Latino" and "Hispanic" I will state simply that Latino here has a wider cultural and historical reference than Hispanic (which I would restrict to devotional piety [religiosidad popular] because of its strong and unmistakable influence from Spain).**
The Latino political reality has involved survival as a powerless people in a society where social, political, and economic structures are often determined by others. Consequently, religion as religiosidad popular has served Latinos as a bulwark against the politics of encroachment by reaffirming those cultural elements that give people a sense of dignity and empowerment. Thus, to speak of the Latino experience in the United States in terms of religion and politics is to speak of the experience of a group of people whose culturally based religious beliefs are their primary resource for self-determination in a world of potential oppression.

Given that religiosidad popular is the principal culturally based devotional expression of religious faith among Latinos, it thus becomes necessary when confronted with the politics of potential oppression to bolster that faith with resources from the wider corpus of Christian belief, namely, the Bible. It is in this spirit that I propose Amos’ treatment of politics and religion as being of great value for the Latino experience of religiosidad popular.

Amos, Justice, and Religiosidad Popular

It may seem at first blush that the pairing of Amos and religiosidad popular is a bit peculiar if not downright impossible, until one has taken the time to examine carefully the premises of both regarding politics and religion. The crucial point of contact between the two is the premise that relationship with God is predicated on mutual commitment. For Amos it is the Sinai covenant, for religiosidad popular it is a personal expression of membership in a community in relation with God based on baptism or its equivalent. The underlying dynamic of behavior in this covenant-based relationship between God and God’s people is primarily a behavioral ethic. How does one best express or act out a relationship with God? The Scriptures provide the fundamental resource of responses for both Amos and religiosidad popular.

The temptation to use the Bible as a moral guidebook is strong but fraught with danger. As Birch clearly states, “Simply put, the Bible cannot be used as a prescriptive codebook.” Rather, it must be used with other sources of authoritative moral insight. Hence, our discussion of Amos in relation to justice and religiosidad popular must be more suggestive than determinative.

In the first place, both Amos and religiosidad popular deal with God through the framework of cultic worship. The very idea of popular devotion places it well within the parameters of what we would call worship. This means that the divine-human relationship for both Amos and religiosidad popular, in the context of cultic worship, is based on a bi-level interaction, namely, the mundane and the sacral. The mundane level of interaction would include the broad framework of historical activity where God may or may not intervene. The sacral level of interaction, where some species of dialogue is undertaken, seeks significance from what has occurred on the mundane level. This initial mix of the mundane and the sacral, in the context of cultic worship, can be said to begin the integration process of politics and religion.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the cultic framework for both Amos and religiosidad popular is the covenant relationship that both presuppose, a relationship that is both bilateral and conditional. We note that bilaterality and conditionality are the chief characteristics of the Sinai covenant out of which Amos operated. The two basic consequences and implications of this are freedom and mutuality.

Freedom for God in this covenant relationship means that God is not domesticated, that is, access to God is not controlled. God is free, not at the beck and call of any human official or authority. Amos challenged the cult of his day that domesticated the deity. In fact, the reason given by Amaziah for Amos’ expulsion from the Bethel sanctuary was that “it is the king’s sanctuary and a royal temple” (7:13). There is no doubt that in this case cultic access to God was controlled by the king. Amos 5:21-24 challenged this, affirming divine freedom by stating that justice, and not the king, is the means of access to God in the cult. By the same token, human freedom is the ability to recognize and accept God’s freedom at the moment of personal encounter. In the case of religiosidad popular, the devotion itself becomes the framework for the divine/human encounter, and the recognition and acceptance of the fact that God may or may not answer a prayer makes the devotee free. The “bargaining” element of various devotions is actually an affirmation of the freedom of God and the devotee.

Mutuality means basically a responsibility to and for the covenant relationship. The very structuring of the Sinai covenant through its “if . . . then” phrasing is an indication of mutual commitment between Yahweh and Israel. From Yahweh’s point of view, the commitment is a gratuitous love and loyalty freely given to Israel without any

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Amos 5:21-24: Religion, Politics, and the Latino Experience 37

The question of God’s “domestication” is very obly dealt with in Birch, Let Justice Roll Down, 224-8. This is a good example of the mix of politics and religion.
merit on its part. It is in response to this covenant love and loyalty, called *hesed* in the Hebrew text, that Israel keeps the Commandments. In other words, Israel’s mutuality in the covenant relationship is the promotion of the well-being (*shalom*) of the other, the promotion of justice.

Freedom in the covenant relationship makes a human choice possible: whether to accept or reject God’s own freedom to love gratuitously. Rejection means acknowledging the “king’s” right to control access to the deity and thus to set the terms of the relationship—as did Amaziah. Acceptance of God’s freedom to love freely means awareness of consequences of acceptance and rejection and choosing the suitable alternative. Amos railed against the cultic practices of his day because they implied a rejection of the mutuality of the Sinai covenant relationship: Yahweh had become domesticated. Injustice was perpetrated and often rationalized through the cult, and Yahweh was not allowed to be free.

In 5:21-24 Amos clarified the implications of mutuality in covenant relationship by bringing together the power and significance of memory and symbol within the context of cultic worship. He reminded the people of the mutuality of the covenant relationship. Yahweh was faithful and Israel was not. Israel abused the covenant relationship. Through the use of the symbol of running water for justice, Amos activated the memory and imagination of the people in the Between Time of cultic worship in order to transform chronological time (historical memory of salvific events) into redemptive time (recommit to the salvific experience).

In the case of *religiosidad popular* it is, as already indicated, a context of worship that means a context for the divine-human encounter and the bi-level mix of the mundane and the sacred. There is an implied covenant relationship based on the Sinai model of conditionality and mutuality, which means that there is a strong ethical orientation in the relationship. In other words, there can be no true devotion unless there is a genuine concern for the promotion of the well-being of “the other.” *El otro* should be a preoccupation in all the genuinely mature expressions of devotional piety. Whatever the specific expression of *religiosidad popular*, the dynamics of relationship between God and the devotee remain basically the same: those suggested by the prophet Amos. In the context of cultic worship (a specific devotion) there is a divine-human encounter where the presupposition of the relationship is one with definite ethical implications.

As a concrete example, for illustrative purposes, let us take the common practice of the home altar. Because it is an expression of *religiosidad popular* the devotion of the home altar is an act of cultic worship and therefore very much a part of religion. The moment of encounter between the devotee and God occurs at the altar when a dialogue with God (or a given representative) is begun. The initial state of the ritual involves memory that “re-presents” (actualizes) past experiences of blessings either personal or familial. Historically, there might have been some “unanswered prayers,” but the faith quality in the nature of the relationship with God is such that the memory of blessings predominates. Otherwise, the devotee would not be doing this again and again.

Memory makes present chronological/redemptive history from the past in order for the devotee to make a contemporary decision whether or not to make redemptive time out of chronological time. This is the moment of the Between Time, the moment of the *Entretiempo*. Will the ethical choice be based on the mutuality of the implied covenant relationship or not? The emergence of the Between Time (the *Entretiempo*) actualized through the use of symbol and set in motion by the imagination provides the framework for the proper ethical choice, and thus makes redemptive time out of chronological time.

For example, the devotee at the home altar chooses memories of past blessings, when prayers were answered, to motivate a current dialogue (petition or gratitude). There may be a serious problem under consideration at the moment that only dialogue with God can bring to resolution. It may be personal or family illness or some other debilitating factor. Entrance into the dialogue provokes a hopefully positive outcome for the devotee. The implied covenant relationship, in the framework of memory-induced blessings, favors, or salvific acts, makes possible in the *Entretiempo* a responsive decision with ethical implications. The imagination presents the future hope as an alternative to the present status of need by proposing symbols to be acted upon.

A frequent symbol in the home altar devotion expressing the hope of probable resolution to a problem is the pilgrimage or *manda* (promise to fulfill a pledge) as covenant reciprocity. Pilgrimage is a powerful symbol with powerful polyvalences. It would not be too great a stretch to see in the pilgrimage the same type of symbolic energy that Amos sees in running water. 

6There is no need to propose the significance of pilgrimage, suffice it to say that just as Amos communicates the importance of running water as a symbol for justice (5:24)—for example, the Hebrew word *gâl* in its Niphal form can have the meaning of “roll on under its own power,” thus indicating an inner force going to completion (eg., Isa 55:10-11)—so the pilgrimage can symbolize justice as indicated below in the text.

6Amos’ fellow northern prophet Hosea spoke very eloquently on this issue. Hosea 11 remains one of the most theologically rich chapters in the Bible that treat of Yahweh’s gratuitous love (*hesed*) for his people.
The pilgrimage or *manda* has ethical implications in the sense that well-being (*shalom*) is sought. The pastoral agent has a unique opportunity to promote this well-being beyond the personal into the communitarian areas of concern of the devotee. The potential is there. The well-being of the devotee, resulting from participation in the devotion, can be said to be contingent on the well-being of others as promoted by the devotee. This is true because of the implied covenant relationship with God, which has its basis in the promotion of the well-being of others. This is a concrete way of promoting justice. With his emphasis on the proper relationship between religion and politics as expressed through the cultic practice and deeds of justice, Amos provides a model for *religiosidad popular* to do likewise.

**Conclusion**

The mix of religion and politics is an inevitable reality that can have a positive or negative outcome depending on who defines the terms. Institutions dominated by excessive self-interest tend to place religion at the service of politics through a process of symbol manipulation. People for whom religion is a form of self-affirmation and of achievement of dignity tend to subordinate politics to religion. For them religion becomes a way of life, a basis for relating to God and others. Consequently, there are of necessity ethical implications in the relationship. Politics becomes the arena of public behavior because of its social dimensions. Thus religion and politics are inextricably linked because of the ethical implications of relating to God and others in public situations.

Guidance for this ethical behavior is provided by the culturally based value systems of people. Those cultures whose value systems are shaped by the Bible generally tend to look to the Bible for resource material, not the least of which are parallel experiences. For Latinos these parallel experiences are particularly inspirational because of the guidance they can provide. Relating to God in the midst of a variety of experiences, and in reaction to being acted upon by other people, makes for a solemn and intensive search for those parallel experiences that have personal significance. This is one of the major reasons why the Hebrew Scriptures in particular are so appealing to Latin American theologians—the parallel experiences of suffering and exile between the Israelites and Latinos are so evident.

A radically based cultural expression of religious belief for the Latino is *religiosidad popular*, that aspect of devotional piety that comes from cultural consciousness and which finds favor in biblical symbolism. A crucial task for *religiosidad popular* is to seek its cultural counterpart in the symbolism of the Bible so that it is empowered from within to effect positive change in the life of the believer. Its task is to integrate religion and politics. It may not always be successful in this regard, but it will always be significant.

The prophet Amos provides a case in point, with his promotion of justice within the context of the cult, a relationship that can find its parallel in *religiosidad popular*. The promotion of justice, or the well-being of *el otro* in the expressions of *religiosidad popular*, is a challenge that can be met and that must be met by different entities, from the believer to the pastoral agent to the theologian and biblical scholar and beyond. 48

48 Though it came to my attention too late to be incorporated into this article, Pedro Jaramillo Rivas' *La injusticia y la opresión en el lenguaje figurado de los profetas*, Institución San Jerónimo 26 (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1992) discusses figurative language in the prophets who deal with injustice and oppression. The treatment of Amos 5:24 and the symbol of water for justice is of particular interest.