1492–1992
THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS

Edited by
Leonardo Boff and
Virgil Elizondo

1492: The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity

Pablo Richard

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I. The violence of the conquest

There is no reason or excuse for being unaware of or forgetting the truth of the events which began in 1492 in what is now Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1492 death came to this continent: the deaths of human beings, the death of the environment, death of the spirit, of indigenous religion and culture. I want briefly to review here the basic details of the death of human life, which is the culmination of all deaths.

Modern studies calculate the indigenous population south of the Rio Grande (modern Latin America and the Caribbean) in 1492 at 100 million people.¹ It is thus terrifying that the estimate of the indigenous population in 1570 is no more than 10–12 million.² There can be no doubt that this is the greatest genocide in the history of humanity. Bear in mind that in that century Portugal had around one million inhabitants, and Spain and England about three million each. No European city, perhaps with the exception of Paris, was bigger than the capital of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlán, which, when Cortés arrived in 1521, had 300,000 inhabitants. The Roman empire at its greatest extent was not greater than the Inca empire.³ The indigenous population of Brazil in 1500 is put at five million; today, in a Brazil which has more than 140 million inhabitants, only 250 million indigenous survive.⁴ According to C Santiago (the Brazilian Catholic Church’s agency for indigenous peoples), ten ethnic groups will disappear for ever in the next decade. In Mexico in 1532 there were around seventeen million indigenous; in 1608, just over one million were left, a genocide of sixteen million in seventy-five years.

In addition to the indigenous genocide, in Latin America we have the slavery of the blacks brought from Africa. This too was a long-drawn-out
and far-reaching genocide. Three million black slaves were brought to Spanish America during the colonial period. For Brazil the figure to 1850 is four million. To this we must add three million black slaves in the English and French Caribbean. This gives a total of ten million black slaves in South America and the Caribbean, and these figures are conservative: other writers double this figure, and the number increases if we include the Africans who died on the voyage.

This genocide has many causes. First there were the extremely cruel wars of the conquest, in which massacres of whole indigenous communities were frequent. Another factor was the ill-treatment and the forced labour imposed on the conquered indigenous, the disintegration of families resulting from the forced labour of women. And there were the diseases. But another factor which had a direct influence on the genocide of the indigenous communities was the cultural and spiritual destruction of the people who inhabited this continent. The indigenous accounts of the conquest are impressive, with their subjective and collective interiorization of death. I will quote here only one of these texts, which admirably summarizes the indigenous vision of the conquest and the genocide and brings out the magnitude of the crime:

It was only because of the mad time, the mad priests, that sadness came among us, that Christianity came among us; for the great Christians came here with the true God; but that was the beginning of our distress, the beginning of the tribute, the beginning of the alms, what made the hidden discord appear, the beginning of the fighting with firearms, the beginning of the outrages, the beginning of being stripped of everything, the beginning of slavery for debts, the beginning of the debts bound to the shoulders, the beginning of the constant quarrelling, the beginning of the suffering.

It was the beginning of the work of the Spaniards and the priests, the beginning of the manipulation of chiefs, schoolmasters and officials . . .

The poor people did not protest against what they felt a slavery, the Antichrist on earth, tiger of the peoples, wildcat of the peoples, sucking the Indian people dry. But the day will come when the tears of their eyes reach God and God’s justice comes down and strikes the world.
This is the truth of the events, the truth of history about the genocide of the indigenous and Afro-Americans in America. Of course, there were also positive things during the conquest, and there were prophets who denounced the ‘destruction of the Indies’. Many missionaries showed goodwill and generosity, and we can also recognize that, despite the conquest, there was some evangelization of America: the indigenous peoples were able to distinguish the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ from oppressive Western Christendom. But the whole of the positive side cannot wipe out the horror of the greatest genocide human history has known. We have to answer for this genocide, in radical solidarity with the victims, as theologians and as a church.

II. The violence of theology

The genocide and the massacre which began in 1492 would not have been possible without an appropriate theology. The historical violence was accompanied by theological violence. It is not possible here to go into the complex discussion of the theology of the sixteenth century, and I wish to concentrate, as an illustration, on a single theologian of this century, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, and on one of his writings, Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios. Sepúlveda was born in Spain around 1490 and finished his treatise in 1545. Why do I choose this theologian? First, because he is usually ignored. Second, because he represents the antithesis of Bartolomé de las Casas. Third, because he is a tremendously lucid and universal theologian (he says clearly what everyone thinks and does), and, finally and most importantly, he is a theologian who uses theology to break with the biblical and theological tradition and to subordinate theology to the historical rationality of the conquest, which he calls ‘natural law’. Sepúlveda’s treatise was banned, not because it contradicted Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and the King, who at this point was keeping a certain distance from the conquistadores, but because Sepúlveda set out too clearly the rationale of the conquest and the war against the Indians, arguing for actions which ignored the imperatives of the gospel and faith. Sepúlveda, in offering a reasoned justification of what was happening in America, destroyed the very imperial ideology of ‘evangelization’ as a justification for the conquest. He used theology to prevent the production of a theological critique of domination. While his book may have been momentarily banned, his thinking is a faithful reflection of the reasoning behind the conquest and the genocide.

It would be impossible to summarize Sepúlveda’s ideas here. I shall simply mention the theoretical elements of the Tratado which explain the sixteenth-century genocide. Sepúlveda discusses the conditions for a just
war, first in general and then as applied to the American situation. The first three general causes are: the need to repel force with force, the need to recover things unjustly taken and to inflict due punishment on evildoers. But these conditions would seem to justify the Indians’ war against the Spaniards. Accordingly Sepúlveda adds a fourth general condition, which he regards as less theological and more ‘natural’:

Bringing to submission by force of arms, if this is not possible by any other means, those who by their natural condition should obey others but refuse their authority. The greatest philosophers declare that this war is just by law of nature (p. 81).

When Sepúlveda returns to the conditions for a just war and applies them to the American case, what was the last condition becomes the first:

It is just and natural that prudent, honest and humane men should rule over those who are not so . . . [and therefore] the Spaniards rule with perfect right over these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands who in prudence, intellect, virtue and humanity are as much inferior to the Spaniards as children to adults and women to men, since there exists between them as great a difference as that between wild and cruel races and races of the greatest clemency, and between the most intemperate and the continent and temperate, and I would say between apes and men (p. 101, emphasis added).

The Spaniards’ war against the Indians (whom Sepúlveda calls ‘barbarians’ and hombrecillos, ‘midgets’) is just, he says, because,

though being by nature servile, the barbarians, uncultured and inhuman, refuse to accept the domination of those who are more prudent, powerful and perfect than themselves, a domination which would bring them very great benefits, and it is in addition right, by natural law, that matter should obey form, the body the soul, appetite reason, brute beasts human beings, the wife her husband, children a father, the imperfect the perfect, the worse the better, for the universal good of all things (p. 153, emphasis added).

In another place he adds:

What more beneficial and salutary fate could have befallen these barbarians than to be under the rule of those whose prudence, virtue and religion will convert them from being barbarians who hardly deserve the name of human beings into civilized men, insofar as they are able to be such, from being slothful and libidinous into being honest and
honourable, from being irreligious and enslaved to demons into Christians and worshippers of the true God (p. 133)?

One is struck by the oppositions Sepúlveda constantly makes:

- barbarians: Spaniards
- children: adults
- children: parents
- women: men
- apes: human beings.

The relationship of subordination is as essential and natural as that between:

- matter and form
- body and soul
- appetite and reason.

If the body and the appetite rebel, the soul and the reason must exercise violence against them; in the same way, if the Indians rebel against the conquistadores, the conquistadores must exercise violence against them. Sepúlveda even justifies the torture of Indians, who ‘thanks to terror combined with preaching have received the Christian religion’.

These texts, and these intrinsic relationships, are so clear that they need no commentary. What is extraordinary is the intrinsic correlation in Sepúlveda between colonial domination and racist, patriarchal and sexist domination. All these texts assert a logic of conquest and domination which totally escapes from theological and biblical reflection. Everything derives from necessity, obviousness and nature. Theology and faith are made subordinate to this natural and necessary logic, and Sepúlveda thereby succeeds in subordinating the church to the conquest and the logic of the gospel to the logic of oppression. And this was in fact what was happening. Faith was left on the fringe of the exercise of domination. Imperial ideology justified the conquest by evangelization. Sepúlveda justifies the conquest directly by an appeal to the logic of domination, presented as natural law, and subordinates the church and theology to this logic.

III. Current challenges for the church and theology

In the conquest and colonization of America, both through the violence of the events and through the violence of theology, Western colonial Christendom lost all its credibility, especially for its victims, the indigenous and black peoples of this continent. If Christendom continues to
survive, it is not because it has credibility, but because it has power to impose itself. The future of Christianity and of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean involves a radical critique of Christendom. This is what the theology of liberation is doing, and the result is the birth of the so-called church of the poor. This is a new model of church, opposed to the Christendom model. It is not a different church or a parallel church, but a different way of being church. The church of the poor, or whatever it is called, is the model which is trying to replace Western colonial Christendom, whose actions and theology brought about the massacre of the Indians and Afro-Americans on our continent. The theology of liberation and the church of the poor came into being the instant there was political and theological questioning of the conquest and of Christendom, and this happened from 1492 onwards. The essential source of this critique has been the victims and those who took their part.

There are two elements which I believe to be essential to a critique of Christendom, elements which could enable Christianity and the church to recover their credibility after the abandonment of Christendom. One is defending the lives of the indigenous peoples and the other is the construction of a liberating indigenous hermeneutic by the indigenous themselves. There are many other elements, but I shall show that these two are essential and, moreover, give us a strategy for this period of the commemoration of the 500 years.

(a) **Defending the lives of the indigenous peoples**

Today in Latin America and the Caribbean there are about fifty million indigenous people. That is 10% of the population, since our continent has about 500 million inhabitants. The countries with the largest indigenous populations are: Bolivia (71%), Guatemala (66%), Peru (47%) and Ecuador (43%). Then come Belize (19%), Honduras (15%), Mexico (14%) and Chile (10%). All these figures are conservative, since governments try to reduce significantly the statistics of indigenous peoples in their countries. Many people think that the number of indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean could be as high as eighty million.

Death faces the indigenous peoples today exactly as it has ever since 1492. Genocide continues in countries like Guatemala. Almost everywhere indigenous peoples are deprived of their land, or confined to 'indigenous reserves', where indigenous groups live as though on borrowed or mortgaged land, since they have no greater legal protection. Indigenous peoples are marginalized and discriminated against in education and health services, and in housing. Normally they are not allowed formal education in their own languages, and their cultural and religious traditions are not
respected. Their nutritional and health standards are abysmal. They are exploited commercially and by foreign tourism. The natural environment where they live is destroyed, and the earth raped. Worst of all, they are continually humiliated, marginalized, discriminated against, banned, as peoples, races, ethnic groups and cultures. The dominant churches, for their part, continue to be European, Western and white; any sign of the growth of an Indian church is banned and checked. Indigenous liturgy is banned. Indigenous religion is relegated to the sidelines. Attempts to develop an indigenous theology of life are frustrated. There are very few indigenous bishops or priests.

If the church which was part of the system of colonial Christendom took part in and gave legitimacy to the conquest and the genocide of the indigenous peoples, this church can only regain its credibility by defending the lives of indigenous peoples. This is not just a matter of a work of mercy or compassion, or a purely preferential option. What is at stake in the survival of the indigenous peoples is the glory of God, the essence of the gospel, and the future of the church. After 500 years, whether the church lives or dies is bound up intrinsically with whether the indigenous peoples live or die. The church has irrevocably entered the history of the indigenous peoples. As Christendom it entered as a force for death; as the church it can only be a sign of life within their history if it saves the Indians’ lives. Saving the Indians’ lives means saving them as peoples, as ethnic groups, as races; it means saving their physical lives, saving their land, their labour, their health, their homes, their culture and religion, their environment, their participation, their identity, their spirituality, their freedom. At stake in all this is the life of the church and the credibility of God.

Recently the church has begun to do something. We should single out Bishop Leonidas Proaño, ‘the Indians’ bishop’, who died on 31 August 1988. As bishop of Riobamba, Ecuador, he fought for an ‘indigenous church’; he did much, but Christendom never listened to him. In Ecuador Bishops Alberto Luna and Gonzalo López have continued his fight. Many other bishops are committed to the cause of indigenous liberation: Pedro Casaldáliga in Brazil, Carlos María Ariz in Panama, Samuel Ruiz, Bartolomé Carrasco and José A. Llaguno in Mexico, and many others; many priests, religious and theologians (women as well as men) and lay people have also given their lives to the indigenous cause. They are still isolated and persecuted prophets, because the Latin American church, as a whole and as an institution, still does not accept responsibility for the genocide of indigenous peoples, does not take the part of the victims of the conquest, and does not make the defence of Indian lives the centre of its evangelizing mission.
(b) An indigenous biblical hermeneutic

When John-Paul II visited Peru he received an open letter from various indigenous movements which contained the following passage:

John-Paul II, we, Andean and American Indians, have decided to take advantage of your visit to return to you your Bible, since in five centuries it has not given us love, peace or justice.

Please take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do. Ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus a culture, a language, religion and values which belong to Europe have been imposed on Latin America by force.

The Bible came to us as part of the imposed colonial transformation. It was the ideological weapon of this colonialist assault. The Spanish sword which attacked and murdered the bodies of Indians by day at night became the cross which attacked the Indian soul.

This text challenges us and pushes us towards conversion, but I think we should adopt a more radical and dialectical attitude, not to give back the Bible but to make it our own. The problem is not the Bible itself, but the way it has been interpreted. The indigenous peoples must construct a new hermeneutic to decolonize the interpretation of the Bible and take possession of it from an indigenous perspective. The Bible gives us testimony of the word of God, but it is also the canon or criterion of discernment of the Word of God today. It is important for the indigenous people of God to take possession of this canon in order to use the Bible as an instrument of prophetic discernment of Christianity and a radical critique of Christendom, so that the Bible and Christianity can regain the credibility which colonial Christendom destroyed.

An indigenous biblical hermeneutic must follow two basic principles. The first is to recognize the history, the cosmos, the lives and the cultures of the indigenous peoples as God’s first book. The Bible is God’s second book, given to us to help us to read the first. This idea is based on an ancient idea of St Augustine’s, according to which God wrote two books, the book of life and the Bible. The Bible, God’s second book, was written to help us to decipher the book of life. The Bible was written to give us back eyes of faith with which to look at the world, so that we could transform the whole of reality into a great revelation of God. The Bible is an instrument, a criterion, a canon, for discerning the presence and revelation of God in indigenous culture and religion.

The second principle is the recognition of the indigenous as the authors of biblical interpretation. Indigenous people must be able to appropriate the Bible and interpret it in terms of their own culture and religion. Of course this indigenous appropriation of the Bible must take place in the
church, with its tradition and its magisterium, but the authors remain the indigenous people. These two principles summarized here are already being applied in the Latin American biblical movement associated with the Christian base communities, through the method we call a people’s reading of the Bible. This indigenous hermeneutic of liberation is growing up in the indigenous communities themselves. It is the indigenous people themselves, as the people of God, who are liberating us from oppressive colonialism and rebuilding a future of credibility and hope for the church.

Translated by Francis McDonagh

Notes

6. E. Dussel, op. cit., p. 239.
8. On this see the excellent book by F. Mires, En nombre de la cruz. Discussiones teológicas y políticas frente al holocausto de los indios (periodo de conquista), San José 1986.
10. This is the main thesis of my books Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church (New York 1987) and La Fuerza espiritual de la Iglesia de los Pobres (San José 1989).