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Was America Discovered or Invaded?

THE QUINCENTENARY of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the West Indies in 1492 will soon be celebrated. In a spirit of triumphalism which is completely at odds with the historical facts, the Church has already started preparing for these celebrations at the highest level. On 11 February 1988, the *Asociación Indígena Salvadoreña* (Salvadoran Indian Association) published *I Encuentro espiritual y cultural* (Spiritual and Cultural Encounter I) in which it repudiated the foreign invasion of America and called a halt to the genocide and ethnocide of its peoples and cultures and also demanded a complete rejection of the celebration of 500 years of that *foreign invasion*.¹ The fact is that the first Europeans reached these lands towards the end of the fifteenth century—the Spaniards came first, followed by the Portuguese and then the Dutch, English, French, etc.; and it is claimed that they 'discovered' (they revealed what was covered) that these lands formed a continent. It is further claimed that they 'evangelised' the indigenous peoples of the continent. There is not much awareness of the fact that both of these terms already indicate an interpretation which conceals (which hides or covers over) the historical event. From the European point of view (from above), something was discovered; from the point of view of the inhabitants of the continent (from below), what we are really dealing with is an invasion by foreigners, by aliens, and by people from outside; people who murdered the menfolk, educated the orphans and went to bed with ('lived with' was the sixteenth century Spanish euphemism) Indian women. ' After killing off all those who wanted, yearned for or even thought about liberty, or to be relieved of the torments they suffered, as all *native leaders and adult males*

did (because they normally allow only youngsters and women to survive these war)', then those who are left alive are 'subjected to the hardest, most horrific and harshest servitude that man or beast could ever endure'.²

I. THE INVENTION OF AMERICA

Incredible as it may seem, it is now more than 30 years since the historian Edmundo O'Gorman presented the thesis which became the title of his famous book *La invención de America* (The Invention of America).³ Inspired by Heidegger, his thesis is a masterly ontological analysis which far exceeds the limits of perfunctory anecdotal material. Taking as a point of departure the European concept of 'being in the world' of the likes of Columbus or of Amerigo Vespuccio, then the notional 'American being' is generated from the idea of 'Asian being' since the islands of the Caribbean were understood to be properly situated in the great ocean adjacent to the continent of Asia, just like the archipelagos of Japan or of the Philippines. As far as Europe was concerned, there only existed Africa to the south and Asia to the east. America simply was not there. 'When it is claimed', writes O'Gorman, 'that America was invented, we are dealing with an attempt to explain a *being (Dasein)* whose existence depends on the way that it is understood by Western culture. The coming into being of America is an event that depends on the form of its appearance.'⁴ Accordingly Western culture has the 'creative capacity of giving its own existence to a being which that culture understands to be different and alien'.⁵ This vision which to a certain extent is creative *ex nihilo* of being or of the meaning of entity is the way in which many historians conceive what is essentially South American; this also applies to Church history. The native American was seen as a mere material being, devoid of feeling, of history and of humanity-evenhis name, 'Indian', was of Asian origin since it was believed that he was a Hindu from India; he was merely a potential *recipient* of evangelisation who could not and was not expected to make any contribution of any kind-an invented non-being. This is an extreme, euro-centric point of view which has, nevertheless, been postulated by a South American historian-an extraordinarily absurd piece of self-deception!

2. THE DIS-COVERY OF AMERICA

Theologically, dis-discovery seems at least slightly more positive to an American than mere invention. Dis-discovery at least presumes the prior existence of something which was covered and was not created from a

vacuum. However, the use of the term 'dis-cover' implies that the point of departure in this process is the European ego which is a constituent element of the historical event: 'I discover', 'I conquer', 'I evangelise' (in the missionary sense) and 'I think' (in the ontological sense). The European ego turns the newly dis-covered primitive native into a mere object-a thing which acquires meaning only when it enters the world of the European. Fernandez de Oviedo wondered if native Americans were even human and he stated: 'These people of the (West) Indies, although rational and of the same race as those of the holy ark of Noah have become irrational and bestial because of their idolatries, sacrifices and devilish ceremonies'.⁶ Thus, the European ego (of conquistador, missionary or merchant) considered the other as something which only acquired meaning because it had been dis-covered (revealed): what it had already been was of no consequence.

Accordingly, any discussion about dis-covery inevitably limits parameters to *one* perspective which is incomplete, is in favour of those who dominate and is from above. In the same way, mission or evangelisation, the basic activity of the missionary, only takes into account the ecclesial ego which, along with the conquistador from Spain or the merchant from Holland or England, preaches the doctrines of Christianity to the newly dis-covered 'for the greater glory of God' (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Nearly every history of the Church describes events in the mission areas of South America, Africa and Asia from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century as a glorious expansion of Christianity. As Hegel stated: 'Europe became the missionary agent for civilisation throughout the world'.⁷ In this process, one has to note both the deification of civilisation and the secularisation of mission; in fact, both amount to the same thing and euro-centralism is basic to both.

3.FOREIGN INVASION (A COPERNICAN UPSET FOR AMERICAN SUBJECTIVITY)

The notions of invention and dis-covery, as well as those of conquest and evangelisation are centred on Europeans as constituent egos. But if we take a Copernican leap and abandon our accepted world view of the European ego to look around and try to understand things from the perspective of the primitive American native where the American Indian ego becomes the core of this new solar system, everything takes on a new significance (from below). Tupac Amaru was an Inca and a rebel; he was put to death by being pulled apart by four horses at Cuzco in Peru in 1781 because he had tried to gain freedom for his own oppressed Indian people. In a statement found in his

pocket when he was imprisoned, he wrote: 'For that reason, and because of the voices which have cried to Heaven' (as in Exodus),⁸ 'in the name of the Almighty God, we ordain and order, that not one of these said people, render any payment to or obey in any way these intruding European agents'.⁹

The word 'intrusion', from the latin *intrusio* (a violent entering), means an entry into someone else's world which is uninvited and without permission. Amaru, a great rebel and popular liberation theologian,¹⁰ saw Europeans as intruders into our continent; intruders who had invaded, occupied, and taken over a particular space: the space in which the world, the culture, the religion and the history of American man belonged. Faced with the unfamiliar European, the first reaction of the native inhabitant was one of bewilderment: an inability to know what to think or what to do. As has already been pointed out, the native American was given the Asian misnomer Indian which had no bearing on his world; and, within terms of that world, his only natural solution to the extraordinary problem of his encounter with Europeans, with their fair skin and fair hair, with their horses and dogs which he had never seen before, with their cannons and gunpowder and their metal armour, was to see them as gods: 'They really inspired fear when they arrived. Their faces were so unfamiliar. The Mayans took them to be gods. Tunatiuh¹¹ slept in the house of Tzumpam'.¹²

The emperor Montezuma of Mexico experienced the same wonder when he met the invader Herniln Cortes, since 'having already consulted his own people', as Jose de Acosta writes, 'they all assured him that without doubt his ancient and great master Quezalcoatl¹³ had returned as he said he would and that that was why he had come from the East'.¹⁴ The aboriginal American neither invented nor dis-covered the new arrivals. He admired them with a sacred respect as they invaded his land; he found his own understanding for them which was quite different from that of the European invaders. At first, Europeans interpreted what they found in terms of an Asian being and then in terms of an American being when it was understood that America formed a fourth part of the known world along with Europe, Africa and Asia. The invaders were understood with the same kind of limitations by the native Americans¹⁵ who saw them as gods who had appeared amongst them. This understanding, in its turn, demanded answers to such questions as why the divine beings had come, whether they had come to demand their rights and to punish or whether they had come to bless and endow. This initial encounter created feelings of expectation, of unease, of admiration:

'The admiral and others noted their simplicity-as Bartholome de las Casas told us on 12 October 1492-and how they took great pleasure in and enjoyed everything; the Spaniards took careful note of the Indians (sic) and how much gentleness, simplicity and trust they showed towards people they had never seen. They seemed to have returned to a state of innocence such that it seemed a matter of a mere six hours or so since our common father Adam himself had lived'.¹⁶

4.THE VISION OF THOSE WHO WERE CONQUERED (A DESTROYED SUBJECTIVITY)

The original face-to-face encounter did not last very long and the American Indians soon discovered why these gods had come: 'They soon found out what they were really like and that they were the most cruel and hungry wolves, tigers and lions who threw themselves at them. For the last forty years and including this very day, they have done nothing but tear them apart, kill them off, cause them distress, hurt them, torment them and destroy them by every conceivable and unimaginable form of cruelty'.¹⁷

In actual fact, from within his own world, the native American lived in great terror through the invasion by these divine beings: ' Ahuau Katun 11¹⁸ the first one in the story, is the original katun ...it was during this katun that the red-bearded foreigners, the children of the sun, the fair skinned ones, arrived. Woe! Let us lament because they arrived! They came from the east, these messengers of the sign of the divinity, these foreigners of the earth. Woe! Let us lament because they came, the great builders of stone piles;¹⁹ the false gods of the earth who can make fire burst from the ends of their arms.²⁰ 'Woe! Heavy is the weight of the katun in which Christianity first appears! This is what is going to happen: there will be an enslaving power, men will become slaves, a slavery that will include even the Chiefs of the Thrones'.²¹ 'The hearts of the Lords of the people will tremble and be full of fear because of the signs of this katun: an empire of war, an epoch of war, words of war, food of war, drink of war, a journey of war, a government of war. It will be a time for old men and old women to wage war, for children and brave men to wage war, for young men to wage war on behalf of our honoured gods'.²²

This glorious conquest and even the accompanying evangelisation will always be closely linked to that perverse ethical activity: a generative evil and a structural oppression which still weigh so heavily on our lives even as we approach the end of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the original inhabitants, within terms of their own world, had a very personal perception of the events which followed the discovery. The world of the foreign oppressor saw things in terms of a discovery *cum* conquest while within our

subjective American world it was a process of bewilderment, servitude and death. The same events, therefore, generated two quite different sets of feelings and effects.

5. THE CREATIVE RECEPTION OF THE GOSPEL AND AN HISTORICAL INDEMNIFICATION

In his Testament (1564), Bartolomé has written an explicit piece of liberation theology:

'God saw fit to choose me to try to make good to all these peoples we call Indians, owners of these countries and lands, some of the insults, the wrongs and the injuries of a kind unseen and unheard of, which, contrary to all reason and justice, they have received at the hands of us Spaniards, to restore them to their *first liberty* of which they have been so unjustly deprived and to *liberate them* from the violent death they still suffer'.²³

'These peoples'-the Indians-were free and were masters of these lands. They were invaded and dispossessed, oppressed and impoverished. However, they did get the Gospel message, even if that occurred frequently in spite of the missionaries. Christ crucified and bleeding (more a feature of the South American baroque style than of the contemporary Spanish style),²⁴ made the Indians aware of their identity with the Son who had been put to death. They lived out in their own bodies, in their complete poverty, in their absolute nakedness, impoverished in the fullest sense of the word, the cross which the missionaries preached about. It was no mere passive apprenticeship or a learning by rote of Christian doctrine by those who had been conquered, but a creative acceptance of the Gospel from below. Can the fifth centenary of that kind of evangelisation be properly celebrated? Would that not be yet another insult of the kind indicated by Bartolomé de las Casas?

The word insult implies an offence against the honour and reputation of someone's rights. In actual fact, the dis-covery and the conquest were not only insults but forms of practical oppression and structured servitude, involving the killing off of a people and the destruction of a culture and a religion. The process involved more than insult; it was an offence, a humiliation, an assassination and the gravest sin against the dignity of others.

For these reasons, what has to occur in 1992 is an *historical indemnification* made to the American Indians. Although, I do believe that

the one great protagonist who will be absent from the preparations for the commemoration of 12 October 1492 will be the *Indian himself*.

Indemnification surely involves, at the very least and even if it is so late, the making good of the offence committed against another person, fully satisfying the humiliated party and making compensation for the prejudice which has been inflicted. Can we do that? Is it too idealistic to restore all that has been taken away from the Indian? How can indemnification be made for the irreparable damage which has been done and is still being done?

In any case, the American Indian was never conquered. Hundreds of rebellions occurred during the period of colonial rule from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and nowadays revolt is occurring in the struggles of the 'Second Emancipation',²⁵ in the *processes of liberation* being lived out at this very time in Guatemala, in El Salvador and in Nicaragua and in the whole of South America, wherever there is any problem or suffering. With Mariategui²⁶ I believe that the Indian problem is most closely linked with the future of South America. An *historical indemnification* in 1992 would be a sign, a milestone on the road towards the Kingdom, leading to the freedom of the Indian in a liberated South America. A clear awareness of all this can come to us only from an historical conspectus which emerges from below.

Translated by John Angus Macdonald

Notes

1. See *El Dia* (Mexico, 12 February 1988) p. 6. On the theme of 'discovery', see p. Chaunu *Conquete et exploitation des Nouveaux Mondes* (Paris 1977); E. Schmitt ed. *Die grossen Entdeckungen* (Munich 1984); I. P. Maguidovich *Historia del descubrimiento y exploración de Latinoamérica* (Moscow 1972); Z. Todorov *The Conquest of America* (New York 1985) in which my own hypothesis of viewing the Indian as 'other' is taken up in a Levinasian theory which I first postulated in 1972.
2. See E. Dussel *Filosofía ética de la liberación* (Buenos Aires 1987) vol. I p.5. For further explanation of this text see my own articles: 'Histoire de la foi chrétienne et changement sociale en Amérique Latine' *Les luttes de libération bousculent la théologie* (Paris 1975) pp. 39-99; 'Expansion de la cristiandad y su crisis' *Concilium* 164 (1981) pp. 80-89. For general information about the period see my 'Introducción General' to the colonial period in *Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Salamanca 1983) and *History of the Church in Latin America* (Grand Rapids 1981).
3. *FCE Mexico* 1957.
4. *Ibid.* p. 91.
5. *Ibid.* p. 97.

6. See E. Dussel 'La cristiandad moderna ante el otro' *Concilium* 150 (1979) p.499.
7. See E. Dussel 'One Ethic and Many Moralities' *Concilium* 170 (1981) pp. 54-55.
8. See E. Dussel 'Paradigma del Exodo en la teología de la liberación', *Concilium* 209 (1987) pp.99-114.
9. B. Lewis *La rebelión de Tupac Amaru* (Buenos Aires 1967) p.421. For information about other Indian rebellions see J. Golte *Repartos y rebeliones* (Lima 1980); S. M. Yañez *Sublevaciones indígenas en la Audiencia de Quito* (Quito 1978); M. T. Huerta and P. Palacios *Rebeliones indígenas de la época colonial* (Mexico 1976).
10. See E. Dussel *Hipótesis para una historia de la teología en América Latina* (Bogota 1986) p. 33.
11. In the Mayan language 'tunatiuh' means the Sun God. They gave this name to the Spanish conquistador Alvarado, a brutal fair-haired soldier whose locks were taken by the natives to be the very rays of the sun.
12. See *Memorial de Sololi I. Anales de los Cakchiqueles* 11, 148 (Mexico 1950) p. 126; N. Wachtel *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens du Perou devant la Conquête espagnole* (Paris 1971); On American religions see W. Krickeberg, H. Trimborn, W. Mueller and O. Zerries *Die Religionen des Allen Amerika* (Stuttgart 1961); also M. L. Portillo *El reverso de la conquista* (Mexico 1964); F. Mires *En nombre de la cruz* (San Jose 1986) includes very fine piece of writing 'Discusiones teológicas y políticas frente al holocausto de los indios (periodo de conquista)'; S. Zavala *Filosofía de la conquista* (Mexico 1977); J. O. Beozzo 'Visão indígena da conquista e da evangelização', *Inculturação e liberlacão* (Sao Paulo 1986) pp. 79-116.
13. A 'god' of the peoples ruled over by the Aztecs (like the Greek Zeus vis a vis the Romans). The overlord had a 'bad conscience' and believed that the god of the underlings was coming to take his revenge for the oppression of his faithful. Cortés left from Tlaxcala, from the temple where Quezalcoatl was adored; the name means the 'divine duality' or 'the feathered serpent'; *coatl* means dualism and *quezal* refers to the splendid feathers of the quetzal bird which was itself a sign of the divinity.
14. *Historia Natural* vol. VII; Chap. 16; (Madrid 1954) p. 277.
15. Even the name 'American' is foreign and dominating and properly belongs to an Italian geographer and not to an 'American' as such'.
16. *Historia de las Indias* vol. L. Chap. 40 (Madrid 1957) p. 142.
17. B. de las Casas *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*; *ibid.* p. 137.
18. The proper name for an epoch, a 'kairos' of fear.
19. The reference is to the Spaniards' building of Churches in the sixteenth century.
20. *El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam* Part II. (Mexico 1948) pp. 124-125. The reference is to gunpowder and shotguns used by the Spaniards.
21. *ibid.* p. 126.
22. *ibid.* p. 137.
23. See *Obras* op. cit. p. 539.

24. See E. Dussel 'L'art chretien de l'opprime en Amerique Latine. Hypotèse pour caracteriser une esthetique de la liberation' *Concilium* 152 (1980) pp. 55-70.
25. The 'First Emancipation' took place against Spain and Portugal from 1809. The 'Second Emancipation' began in 1959, but today the neocolonial metropolises are the industrialised countries on the 'centre'.
26. See his *Siete ensayos sobre la realidad peruana* (Lima 1954).