

Listening To Learn: an Aymara Case Study

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My story for today begins about thirty years ago with an Aymara student from the Altiplano of Bolivia named Carlos Intipampa. Carlos studied at our seminary in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for his Master's degree in theology and Church history. His thesis challenged the prevailing views on the Aymara concept of God. Not only the Spanish conquerors of Latin America in the sixteenth century but Anglo-Saxon theologians and historians of the twentieth judged the religious faith of the Aymaras to be polytheistic and animistic. His thesis, entitled "*Opresión y aculturación: La evangelización de los aymara*", was challenged by an outstanding professor and expert in the Indian religions. When Carlos returned to La Paz, Bolivia, a secular press soon published his thesis in this center of the Aymara people. When one speaks from the heart of his own religious experience, we do well to listen carefully if we care for authenticity and mutual understanding.

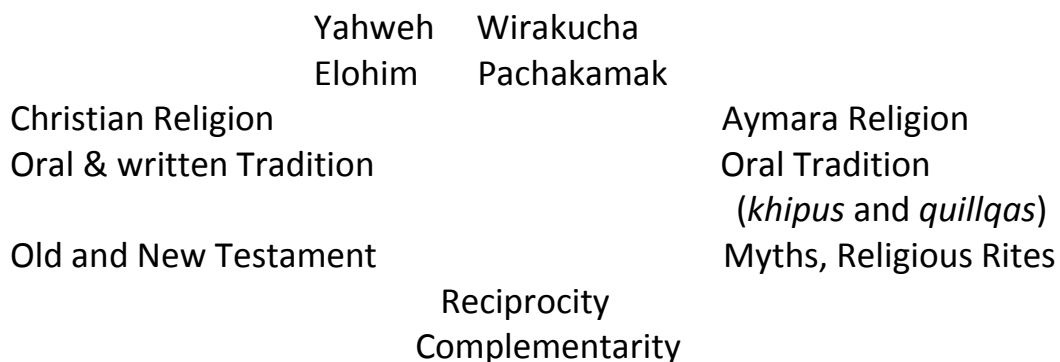
At that time and thereafter innumerable consultations were held on the subjects of contextualization and enculturation. Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, defined eight degrees of contextualization, from simply adaptation to syncretism with enculturation as an advanced step along the way. By enculturation we mean giving priority to the original culture in the process of the integration of the contributions or of truths from another source. So today when we speak of an Aymara case study, we do so from that position. The question is how will the Christian faith become integrated into the Aymaran culture. Or, negatively, it is not to ask how an Aymara can be integrated into the Occidentalized culture of traditional Roman Catholic or Protestant Christianity.

Intipampa proposed that unfortunately until recent history, the Christianization of peoples was conceived and practiced as the planting of churches from the Western nations by churches and missionaries who believed that their form and liturgy was the best and truest form of the Christian faith. So in Bolivia many of the early Roman Catholic missionaries demonized the Aymara forms of religion, their rites of initiation, marriage, divinities, and communication with the spirits of their cosmos. Protestant missionaries who came at the beginning of the twentieth century did likewise. To become a Christian, one rejected the Aymara cultural and religious form of believing to adopt a new identity which effectively separated one from family and *ayllu* – community. Those who were evangelized

by the Roman Catholic missionaries adopted the Christian rites and saints but continued and still practice much of their ancestral beliefs and practices. This two-story faith gave priority to the ancient cultural religion. Those evangelized by the Protestants were rejected by their communities, self-excluded from the fiestas and strived to leave their former cultural identity. The Protestant faith was accepted by a small minority and, often after years of militancy in the Church, many later returned to their families and former religious rites.

Intipampa first served as a pastor, then a bishop in the Bolivian Methodist Church and currently serves as a professor in the Theological Institute for pastoral training in La Paz (ISEAT – Instituto Superior Ecu­m­é­nico Andino de Teología). These last years he has been working on his doctoral studies at the Methodist University in Sao Paulo, Brazil, with Dr. Paulo Seuss, an outstanding missions scholar. Intipampa recently defended his doctoral thesis titled *Diálogo holístico, aymara – cristiano (Holistic Dialogue: Aymara – Christian)* published by the Roman Catholic press (*Editorial Verbo Divino*). What I now present is based largely on his published thesis.

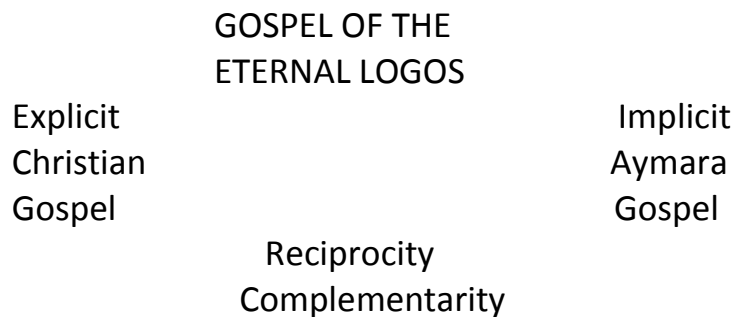
The dialogue begins with the presupposition that the God that the Aymara people worship is the same God that Christians worship. Intipampa diagrams that relationship in the following way: (Intipampa, *Diálogo*, p.312)



The two Hebrew names for God are culturally equivalent to the names from the Northern and the Southern regions where the Aymara religion exists and they represent the same person. However, we must realize that the self-revelation to humanity of this one supreme God comes in ways appropriate to different cultures, to each according to its particular characteristics and historical development. “Then we can understand the unity as the totality of the diverse experiences of faith.”

Intipampa explains with the metaphor of Lake Titikaka, which may be symbolized as the eternal fountain. From it through evaporation the water ascends, forms clouds, descends in mist and rain into numerous streams and rivers which eventually flow back into Titikaka. However, on the journey some of those streams will join other streams, some into rivers, each according to the topography, that is the historical-theological process of one people or another. Depending on climatic conditions and terrain, some waters are clear, some murky, some impure, some from afar, but each in its own time and circumstance finally reaches home. Everything depends on the will of our God who makes it rain both in the north and in the south.

He uses another diagram to illustrate his thesis, that of the original Gospel, that of creation in which Christ is also the key figure. As the Gospel of John tells us: “In the beginning was the Word (Logos) and . . . through him were all things created.” All peoples, all nations and tribes and tongues have their origin in this universal period of human history. So this process, relevant to the Aymara-Christian dialogue, can be diagrammed as follows: (Intipampa, *Diálogo*.315



Intipampa explains that there are here present three essences of the Gospel. First there is the Eternal Logos that continues forever and forever. It is the eternal Gospel that transcends all cultures, races, creeds, myths and rites, one which cannot be reduced to only one manifestation. This is the original Good News that is present in a variety of cultures and many different traditions. This Good News must be made manifest against all forms of bad news. It begins with the creation of the cosmos and will endure beyond the end of time. No one culture can begin to show its magnificence nor its mystery; each can only reveal but a small part of this Gospel of multiform created-Logos reality.

The second essence is the explicit Gospel present in the Christian context through the incarnation of Jesus into the Hebrew faith. Jesus is the clearest and final manifestation of God, especially in his identification with the poor and marginalized of humanity, rather than with the structures of power. He proclaimed the Gospel in the agrarian world, was born of a humble woman in the lowliness of a manger, announced the Good News of the Kingdom of God to lowly fishermen, and chose women to receive first notice of his resurrection. His transcendent ministry brought dedication to justice and mercy, his concern for love to all and solidarity with everyone: not doctrinal norms so much as a living testament of grace.

Here it is important to note that the Christian Gospel passed during the next centuries to the Occidental Roman and Greek cultures. In the course of history, theological battles emphasized correct doctrine and became incarnated in the political and religious elite of society. While Jesus was anointed to preach good news to the poor, the prisoners, the sick and the forgotten ones, with his message of salvation and liberation, the Gospel became identified in Latin America with conquering armies. This meant Bad News for the indigenous populations, destruction and disarticulation of the Indian cultures.

So it is important to note that here we have two variants of the explicit Gospel, the Hebrew one in which Jesus was incarnated, and the inculturated one present in the Spanish version that was transplanted to Latin America.

The third essence of the Gospel, Intipampa affirms, is the implicit Gospel present in the Aymara religious tradition which came into being through the revelation of the Eternal Logos into the lives of their people. Their sacred cosmivision, the harmony of the divine presence and the community, the sharing of material goods and the high ethical morality, all expressed in religious celebrations and rites, confirm the presence of this implicit Gospel. If we want to relate this implicit Gospel to that of Jesus, we do so in the commandments, also present in the Aymara faith, to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

Intipampa then presents fifteen Aymara words that portray as many qualities that characterize their community. Some of them include: (Intipampa, *Diálogo*, pp.317-319)

1. Spontaneous love seeking material good for others

2. Mercy that ministers to those in need
3. Defense of those who have no help available
4. Solidarity in time of grief or illness
5. Sensitivity to the other's need
6. Unity to confront challenges
7. Priority of the community over the individual
8. Remembering to emphasize good concerns for others
9. Sharing one's trials and problems for counsel from others
10. Reception to teaching and discipline from others
11. Divine precepts to fulfill humanitarian goals
12. Social conscience in accepting mutual tasks

In these precepts, Intipampa believes, there is coincidence with the message of Jesus. He quotes favorably Pope John Paul II who, when he visited Peru, considered the Aymara religion a valid preparation for the explicit Gospel. He said:

“Our Lord God disposed in his plans that the Gospel would arrive in your land by preparing beforehand the hearts of persons, of cultures and peoples, with the seed of religious and human values which can be called “a preparation for the Gospel”. . . . across history he has let his gracious presence be felt in many manifestations of your life and customs. You, my dear brothers, are the heirs of ancient languages, of traditions full of human value, such as your spirit of community and gift of sharing. The greatness and presence of God are visible in your customs and wise traditions for the promotion of life and the welfare of all the inhabitants of this dear land of Bolivia.” (Intipampa, p.319)

What does this new emphasis on enculturation mean for the Aymara people? There are presently, again according to Intipampa, four schools of thought on the matter. Some have reacted negatively to the Conquest and subsequently reject everything Christian. They have decided to practice their ancient rites and follow their traditional beliefs. Only a pure restoration without syncretism is the valid path forward for the Aymara people.

A second group are those who reject the Aymara religious practices and rites as diabolical and evil. These are mostly fundamentalist Protestants who have rejected the Aymara traditions and culture, and consequently have been rejected by the *ayllus* of their community origin. They have chosen not to attend

community fiestas and religious practices and would not be welcome if they chose to go.

The third group are the Christian nominalists who form the overwhelming part of the Aymara population. Though they have been baptized as Roman Catholics and follow some of its rites and practices, their fundamental commitment is to the traditional Aymaran customs and religious rites. They have appropriated the Christian symbols, worship in the sanctuaries, and identify the Saints with the gods and deities of their culture.

The final group, with which Intipampa identifies, claims adherents from Roman Catholicism as well as from progressive Protestant groups. They seek a profound dialogue between the two religious sources, not in search of syncretistic adaptations, rather a walking together because of a mutual need to enrich our faith through a more inclusive horizon. I have had reading and personal contacts with some members of this ecumenical group.

Another Aymara student at ISEDET in Buenos Aires, Humberto Ramos Salazar, became President of the Lutheran Aymaran Church in Bolivia and a professor at ISEAT. He also wrote on this subject. He was awarded by the Lutheran School of Theology the Doctor of Divinity degree posthumously after his accidental death in his homeland in October of 2004. The first chapters of his thesis were published in the book *Hacia una teología aymara*. He affirms that the Hebrew concept of *ruah* and the Greek *pneuma* of the Scriptures, translated as spirit, carry a broader meaning in the Aymara *kamasa* and *ajayu* where their meaning becomes not only spirit but the force of life itself which is expressed in every aspect of life and experience. There is no separation between the sacred and the profane. He asks: How are we to “describe a people judged as pagan and idolatrous, who in their daily life demonstrate an attitude consecrated to the God of Life, expressed in their attitudes and behavior to neighbors and to nature that surrounds them?” (Ramos, p.16) He continues: “During centuries and thousands of years the ancestors of this people have tried with sincerity and patience to understand the mystery of the Divine and to elaborate a worship worthy of their Creator.” (*Ibid.*) He analyzes and classifies the Aymara names for God and for the so-called deities and divinities in their cosmivision. Since the spirit force of God is to be seen in all of life, he judges that many of the names are attributes of God personified in creation. In this respect there is no *quid pro quo* equivalence in Spanish or English

that adequately expresses these differences of meaning.

We take one example: *Pachamama*. Ramos affirms that the Andean cultures have understood *Pachamama* as the greatest manifestation of God. They have understood her as the “deity” which provides life and have personified her. (see poem, Intipampa, pp.136,137) We need to remember that the Andean cultures were mostly agricultural. Life for every person depended on the production of the earth. For this reason, the *Pachamama* is the provider and sustainer of life. They consider *Pachamama* to be the manifestation of God, the supreme Being, and the expression of one of his attributes. One of the songs to *Pachamama* is a prayer: (Ramos, p.137)

<i>Pachamama</i>	<i>Madre Tierra</i>	Mother Earth
<i>Qasillata</i>	<i>A tu hijo el Inka</i>	To your Inca son
<i>Qhespillata</i>	<i>Poderoso</i>	Powerful
<i>Qhápaj Inka</i>	<i>Presérvalo</i>	Preserve him
<i>Wawaykita</i>	<i>En tu regazo,</i>	In your bosom,
<i>Marq'ariy</i>	<i>En medio de la paz</i>	In the midst of peace
<i>Jat'alliy</i>	<i>Y el bienestar</i>	And wellbeing

The Aymara theology incarnates a life-giving faith that from within the *ayllu*, the shared community, and in the mutual self-giving to one another comes the experience of the nearness of God who accompanies us in every part of life, from the highest mountains to the valleys below. “The inherent values of the Aymara culture of inter-relation with the Supreme Being, calls us to a continued reflection of profound religiosity.” (Ramos, p.139)

In this respect, both Intipampa and Lagos use phrases like: supernatural energies expressed as natural forces, symbolic images of divinity, not simply animated material reality, representative images of Divine transcendence, nature personified, symbolic representatives of protector spirits, vitalizing spirits. As such they are not to be adored, but as symbols have life and are animated parts of nature to whom reverence and respect are due. Thus the agrarian feasts, for example, are to be understood as rites and ceremonies to thank *Pachamama* as the Divine spirit force that gives food to her children. Ramos gives seventeen Aymara names for God and affirms there are many more that are really names

not for gods but attributes of *Wiracucha*, the only supreme creator God. He concludes: "Christianity has not revealed to him (the Aymara) the God who loves, who liberates, who saves us. . . Under Christian religious forms, his ancestral religious principles remain intact".

Marcelino Tapia, Aymara Baptist pastor and educator, analyzed the relation of Aymara theology and culture in comparison with the Christian religion and concluded that "to believe that God can operate through only one culture is cultural egotism. God is supernatural. He rises above all cultures and is in all cultures through general revelation." We need an "ethno-theological analysis which speaks to every culture, so that we can avoid the absolutizing of our anthropological and theological vision of humanity." (p.116, Ramos)

Leonardo Boff, a Catholic theologian of liberation, concisely synthesizes the same perspective: "The legacy of Jesus due to its mysterious character cannot be wholly expressed in a simple historical-social articulation, no matter how excellent it may be." (Intipampa, *Diálogo*, p.285) Others who affirm the unique contribution that each culture brings to the understanding of the Gospel, include: Jacques Monast, Hans van den Berg, Diego Irrarázaval, Enrique Jorda, Fernando Mires and Paulo Seuss.

Let us summarize what this case study says to us about listening to learn.

1. The contrast between cultures makes authentic communication difficult. Not only the same words carry different connotations, but often there is no corresponding word in different languages. Ramos goes so far as to say that a pretended accurate translation is often treasonous to the real meaning of a text. An example of that has to do with the presence of the Holy Spirit in all life forces according to the Aymara faith. So real and vivid is this so in this faith, that one can speak with the wind, feel the presence of the spirit among the trees, share bread with one's ancestors. The problem of eating bread as the body of Christ comes to mind, for he is really present in the spirit. But, of course, when we try to make a doctrine of it, we get various religious traditions in the different churches with the same Christian faith! For the Aymara, the spirit life force is there and needs no explanation.

2. The references by both Carlos and Humberto to the divinities and deities raises a red flag for the occidental hearer. They are considered to be real life

manifestations of the divine, personified in diverse aspects of nature, with which the Aymara lives in harmony. Before the life force present in the *Pachamama*, for example, one feels a personal relationship with the presence of the spirit, of whom the Aymara asks pardon to change or destroy her form. To damage or weaken the created nature destroys the innate harmony of the cosmos for which the *jaki* (the ideal human person) feels responsible as well as for the harmonious relation with the Divine. Prayer forestalls and/or heals the broken relationship with the divine through *Pachamama*.

3. Listening carefully to the Aymara story has made me more conscious of the weak cultural house in which I live. The slow but steady historical transition from the more unified Jewish mindset, or should I say “spirit-set”, to the intellectualized doctrinal control on what is good and right of the Roman and Greek cultures makes my house less perfect and more in need of what other builders have to offer. How we need to remind and correct each other’s limited perspectives! Through our finite attempts to gather all the truth, we stand awed before the imminent transcendence of the Divine and humbled by the grace that envelops and gathers us all.

Three lessons at least we have learned:

- Thankfulness for the presence of God in all of created reality and the inspiring spirit that makes it sacred to us all.
- Sensitivity for the delicate harmony of nature, community and the Divine and the ease with which they are distorted and destroyed.
- Humility for our own pretensions and gratitude for the gifts from others.

Appendix 1.

Carlos gives us a prayer to this supreme and only God of the universe, whose name is both masculine and feminine: *Apu-Dios-Tata-Mama*. Here is that prayer: (my translation)

**APU-TATA-MAMA, You who revealed yourself
From the time of our ancestors
With the name of Wirakucha and Pachakamac.
Invisible God who makes yourself visible in our
Father Sun and mother Moon.
You come near to your children
Through the divinities and pachamama
And the other gods.**

**Dios-ApuTata-Mama
Who reveals yourself to other peoples
With the name of Yahveh and Elohim.
God of our ancestors: God of Abraham,
God of Isaac, Dios de Jacob.
APU-TATA who reveals yourself to humanity
Through your Son Jesus Christ.
And your people of the Sullá-Suyu
Through the mythology of the Tunapa.**

**Today we implore with the name
Of Dios-Apu-Tata-Mama.
Protect us from all the adversities of evil,
Of all the idolatries of evil;
Evil which desires to end the identity of your people.
But you always protect the people (Kollas),
And your people come to you
Through the Andina divinities,
To feel the intensity of your Being.
Dios-Apu-Tatu-Mama
Now we want to walk in your secure pathway,
Pathway which orients the historical project
Of the Qulla-Suyus.**

**Just as the star in the East
Which oriented the wise-men:
The heavenly Andino star will guide us
In the correct pathway.**

**APU-TATA be compassionate with those who offend you,
Many times under other symbols
We have tried to abandon you;
Do not look at our unfaithfulness.
Have mercy with your people,
Who still continue in the pathway of the desert.**

**APU-DIOS-TATA-MAMA:
We confess you in our innocence:
You are the only Creator of the universe,
You are the alfa and the omega
The beginning and the end.**

Appendix 2.

Definition of Terms:

Complementarity

A relationship or situation in which two or more different things enhance or emphasize each other's qualities or form a balanced whole: a culture based on the complementarity of men and women.

Physics: the concept that two contrasted theories, such as the wave and the particle theories of light, may be able to explain a set of phenomena, although each separately only accounts for some aspects.

Complementary

Of two or more different things combining in such a way as to form a complete whole or to enhance or emphasize each other's qualities: the second TV network was complementary to the BBC.

Reciprocity The practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit, especially privileges granted by one country or organization (community, mindset, or religious convictions) to another.

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