

Catholic Fundamentalism in Latin America

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I. What is fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is a concept widely used today but its meaning is less than precise. Within the Christian tradition, fundamentalism is a kind of return to the fundamentals which are supposed to be found in the scriptures or in certain traditions which for a variety of reasons have been neglected or abandoned. In that sense, it is taken to be a positive term which means going back to the founding principles. Because of this, many Christian fundamentalist groups do not hesitate calling themselves in this way. But other definitions have a more derogatory slant and add up elements such as intolerance, militancy, irrationality, indoctrination, etc., which are negative. For instance, The American Heritage Dictionary defines fundamentalism as “a usually religious movement or point of view characterized by a return to fundamental principles, by rigid adherence to those principles, and often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism.” Sometimes opposition to modernity is mentioned as its main characteristic. The term is also used to refer to conservative or militant religious groups that want to impose their views over society through the power of the state.

The last version is perhaps the more widespread nowadays and it is mostly linked to some Islamic or Jewish movements. As far as Christian fundamentalism is concerned, the hope to use the state to impose their religious views seems less marked in contemporary times; it is still present in some punctual struggles but not so much as a desire to impose a whole mode of religious life over society. For some movements or members of the hierarchy of the Catholic church in Latin America, it is more a nostalgia for a past in which religious and political power were fused, but they know that a kind of medieval Christendom is very unlikely to return. Having abandoned the hope for a new Christendom with political connotations, some Catholic intellectuals and bishops have turned their

attention to culture, that is to say, they hope to keep and enhance what they consider to be a Catholic imprint in Latin American culture. This is the phenomenon that I am interested in exploring: I would call it more precisely Catholic cultural fundamentalism which basically seeks to show that Latin American culture has an indelible Catholic character that cannot be changed and determines Latin American identity for ever.

II. Origins in Latin America

No doubt the origins of Catholic fundamentalism in Latin America can be traced back to colonial times, that is to say those 3 centuries in between 1492 and 1810. The Spanish and Portuguese brought with them a Catholicism steeped in the idea of Christendom for which there were no sharp distinctions between the evangelising mission and the commercial and economic interests of the Spanish. The defence of the “true religion” and of the political and commercial interests of New Spain were all the same thing. The rather narrow and intolerant Catholicism brought by the peninsulars was the central element of the cultural identity of the region, the central nucleus of all aspects of life. Although the centrality of Catholicism began to decline with the process of independence and the influence of the European Enlightenment, it took a long time before the Catholic Church lost its predominant position in society. And this fed its longing for a privileged status. During the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there were numerous, sometimes very serious confrontations between the Catholic Church and liberal governments. The Mexican revolution of 1910 was perhaps the most radical of these confrontations.

A rekindling of fundamentalism arose in the 1940s with the work of Hispanist historians who tried to rescue Hispanic culture and identity as the essence of Latin America. Among the many elements of Hispanic culture was Catholicism. According to these authors, the true Latin American historical tradition consists of being conscious of the human dignity and of the moral law which rules international life, all this founded on a Christian conception that subjects the individual to the state in matters temporal, puts the state at the service of the human being and considers the latter as essentially ordered toward God. Whereas the sense of justice in other cultures is based on the utility for each one, in the Hispanic culture it rests on the right to salvation which all human beings have, making them basically equal.

Crucial to the authors' vision is the idea that foreign cultural models that have their origin in North America or Northern Europe must be abandoned. Among those are liberal ideas and ultimately, democracy itself. They identified themselves with the anti-democratic corporatist regimes of the Hispanic peninsula: Francisco Franco and Oliveira Salazar. They thought that democratic values were in crisis and on the verge of disappearing. When this happens, one of them maintained, the truth of the Spanish values would impose itself again. These ideas are the immediate antecedents of the Catholic fundamentalism which arose in the 1980s in the Southern cone and on which we are going to concentrate.

III. The context of the last version in the 1980s

The context is one of crisis that was as much economic and social as religious. At the beginning of the 70s an international recession increased unemployment, inflation and political instability everywhere. At this time in Latin America the processes of industrialisation and development entirely lost their dynamism. As a consequence, labour agitation and social and political problems became widespread, ultimately determining a wave of military take-overs and dictatorships which affected the whole of the southern cone. Economic growth came to a standstill, even becoming negative during the 80s, prompting ECLA to call it a "lost decade".

Although it could be argued that the dictatorships with their neo-liberal shock policies sowed the seeds for a future economic expansion, this has either not happened in many places (Bolivia, Ecuador, Perú) or has taken many years to arrive (Chile). In the meantime they abolished democratic institutions, systematically violated human rights, dismantled forms of social participation and consistently sought to destroy social organisations and trade unions representing the poorest sectors of society. The exclusion of wide social sectors was increased as unemployment levels soared and salaries plummeted. The exhaustion of dreams of rapid industrialisation and Westernization which had been held in the 1960s, the collapse of dreams of economic independence and socialism which had been held in the early 1970s and the brutality of the military regimes during the 1980s could not but inspire a sense of failure, a true crisis of identity which naturally led many intellectual sectors to critically revise the attempts of modernization and the type of rationality that underpinned them.

From the religious point of view the context is also one of crisis for Catholicism. After the renewal produced by the Vatican II Council and

the new climate of openness to the modern world occurred in the 60s, the radicalization of certain church sectors which supported left-wing causes, the emergence of the so-called theology of liberation and the expansion of Christian base communities provoked a strong reaction from the official Roman hierarchy which in the end succeeded in dismantling such movements. Another aspect of the religious context is the strong expansion and popular penetration of Pentecostal churches and the notorious decline of traditional religious practices. In this context, the opening to modernity fostered by the Vatican Council received various restrictive re-interpretations leading to a return to more traditional values which were supposed to refound a Catholic revival.

The socio-economic crisis fuelled the suspicion of some intellectuals that the anxious search for modernity, especially by following the Western ways and principles, was inherently opposed to the true Latin American identity and that this was the reason why it failed time and again. The crisis within the Catholic world also ended up by calling into question the openness to modernity. From these 2 elements the idea emerged of an opposition between two different cultural patterns: the European rational enlightened and the Latin American symbolic dramatic.¹ The former strongly believes in instrumental reason, that is to say, in reason as a means to master nature and bring about material progress. The latter is suspicious of instrumental reason and has a religious-aesthetic approach to reality that could be called a “sapiential rationality”. The rational enlightened pattern emphasises abstract and conceptual discourse and appeals to reason; the symbolic dramatic pattern emphasises images, dramatic representations and rites, and appeals to sensations.

Although the opposition between 2 types of rationality or 2 types of culture has been used in Latin America by theories which do not have a specifically religious character, it is obvious that it lends itself very well to religious approaches. In fact by the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s a Catholic sociological discourse arises which seeks to show that the Latin American cultural identity has an inherent Catholic substratum which is only compatible with Baroque modernity, an alternative to the enlightened modernity. In this way, it does not only resolve the problem

1 I take this terminology from G. Sunkel, *Representations of the People in the Chilean Popular Press*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1988, p. 42. It can also be found in C. Parker, *Otra Lógica en América Latina: Religión Popular y Modernización Capitalista* (Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), p. 370.

of Latin American identity and its modern character, but also replaces the need to renew a Catholic identity in crisis by the certainty that the true essence of Latin Americannes is Catholic. The official documents of the Latin American bishops' meetings showed very early the impact of such a discourse. For instance the Puebla document stated:

In the first stage, from the 16th century to the 18th century, the basis of the Latin American culture and of its real Catholic substratum is constructed. Its evangelization was profound enough for the faith to become constitutive of its being and of its identity, thus providing the spiritual unity which subsists despite the ulterior division in diverse nations... with all its deficiencies and in spite of the ever present sin, the faith of the Church has put a seal to the soul of Latin America, thus marking its essential historical identity and constituting itself into the continent's cultural matrix...²

IV. Main elements of the Catholic fundamentalist discourse

At the social level, a discourse is not a mere passive result of the work of certain identifiable authors who must assume all the responsibility for its contents. On the contrary, in society discourses that make a bid to be accepted construct themselves with a certain autonomy from individuals, upon the basis of many different contributions and readings and circulate by interpellating individuals in order to convince them, to constitute them as subjects who adhere to their proposed conception of things. Just as it is possible to identify at the social level a neo-liberal discourse or a feminist discourse, it is also possible to speak of a specific fundamentalist Catholic discourse which began to circulate in the 80s in Latin America. In order to describe it, it is necessary to refer to certain authors who propound it, but none of them is alone fully responsible for the whole of it or its many versions. The authors whose work I shall use to construct an ideal type of such a discourse are those I consider the most prominent, although they may differ among themselves in important respects. It would not be surprising that some of them might even deny that they have anything to do with such a discourse. Nevertheless, in my opinion, all of them contribute from their own point of view and to a greater or lesser extent to the constitution of a discourse with common characteristics. Of course, their conscious or unconscious contribution

² See the document of the Latin American bishops' general conference, which took place in Puebla in 1979 (Santiago: Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, 1979), numbers 412 y 445.

to such a discourse in no way exhausts their contribution to the social sciences, of which they all are distinguished practitioners.

The most important contributions to this discourse come from Alberto Methol Ferré (Uruguay) and Pedro Morandé (Chile). Carlos Cousiño (Chile), Cristián Parker (Chile) and Juan Carlos Scannone (Argentina) are also contributors or followers. The first 3 tend to be more conservative, the last 2 more progressive. The Chilean law historian, Bernardino Bravo is yet another follower in whose writing the discourse achieves its most antidemocratic expression. In spite of many differences, they all share common ideas on Latin American culture. Having clarified these preliminary issues I shall synthesize the main elements of the Catholic fundamentalist discourse in 8 points.

1. Latin American culture and identity have a Catholic or at least Christian substratum

In Morandé's vision, Latin American cultural identity is supposed to have been formed in the encounter between indigenous values and the Catholic religion brought by the Spanish. The Catholic emphasis on rites and liturgy was matched by the Indian cultures' cultic and ritual conception of life. Both the Catholic and the Indian cultic practices were based on ritual sacrifice carried out or represented in temples. In both Spain and the Indian empires, work was organized by the liturgical calendar in accordance with the seasons. The agricultural cycle corresponded with the religious cycle. This is why the place of the encounter, the cradle of the Latin American culture, is sacred and it could be said that "Latin American culture has a real Catholic substratum" which was "constituted between the 16th and the 17th centuries".³ Consequences of this are clear. Reviewing the Puebla document quoted above, Morandé literally says that "secularism is not only a threat for the Catholic Church, but, fundamentally, for the very Latin American culture, since she has been constituted upon a Catholic substratum".⁴

Parker challenges this tenet and accuses Morandé of essentialism, that is to say, of holding that the basis of Latin American culture has a Catholic substratum. But what he proposes is not substantially different. For

3 P. Morandé, *Cultura y Modernización en América Latina*, Cuadernos del Instituto de Sociología (Santiago: Universidad Católica de Chile, 1984), pp. 139-140.

4 Ibid., p. 141.

him “in the significant nucleus of the Latin American popular culture... it is possible to discern the dynamism of the Christian faith, not in an exclusive, but in a decisive way.”⁵ This is the nucleus Parker wants to project into the future in order to build a Latin American civilisation of the 21st century, based on popular Christianity and on an alternative vitalist anthropology whose project is the “integral man” based upon a praxis of “love-solidarity”.⁶

2. Instrumental reason propounded by the enlightened modernity is not a part of Latin American culture

This is due, according to Morandé, to the fact that Latin American identity was formed between the 16th and the 17th centuries, well before the Enlightenment. This is the reason why the attempts to repeat Weber’s process of rationalization in Latin America had to fail. Contrary to the Protestant ethic and the need to save and invest as a proof of salvation, the symbolic dramatic pattern puts an emphasis on work as sacrifice and on religious festivities as ritual squandering. Basically, Latin Americans are not supposed to be motivated by technical progress and the subordination of their ethos to instrumental rationality was a form of alienation, a mistake punished by chronic failure.

In spite of this, Bernardino Bravo accepts that enlightened modernity or “second modernity” arrives to America and becomes established as a distinguishable stage between 1760 and 1920 thus determining that the impact of instrumental reason is not to be underrated. However, its effects are temporary and not comparable to the strength of Baroque mentality. This is the reason why Latin America is much better prepared for the arrival of post-modernity: “in as much as in Iberoamerica the first modernity –Baroque- has resisted in a much better way the corrosive criticism of second modernity –enlightened-, the New World is in a better condition than the Old one to face up to the challenges of Post-modernity... to us, who had not lost the theocentric vision, the lights of reason which bedazzled the Europeans, always seemed dimmed”.⁷

Parker, in his turn, finds in Latin America a popular culture with reli-

5 C. Parker, *Otra Lógica en América Latina*, p. 391.

6 *Ibid.*, 400-405.

7 Bernardino Bravo Lira, “América y la Modernidad: de la Modernidad barroca e ilustrada a la Postmodernidad”, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte, von Staat, Wirtschaft un Gesellschaft, Lateinamerikas*, Band 30, (1993), p. 425.

gious content, which constitutes a veritable counter-culture to modernity. Although it does not reject all that comes from modernity, this culture constitutes “another way of feeling, thinking and acting which is alternative to enlightened rationality”, “a new emergent paradigm” “which is at the other extreme of the Western philosophy and science’s paradigms”, “another logic”.⁸ Instrumental reason would belong to a paradigm in which a Promethean, pantocratic, dualist and patriarchal anthropology would throb, whereas in the Latin American counter-culture a vitalist, chthonic, maternal, ecological and holistic anthropology would throb. Ultimately, these two opposite forms of reason have, according to Parker, a different neuro-physiological basis. Whereas the Latin American syncretic reason is rooted in the brain’s right hemisphere, the rational and analytic mode of thinking is rooted in the brain’s left hemisphere.⁹

3. Latin American identity is not anti-modern but it was constituted within and upholds Baroque modernity

Notwithstanding the fact that instrumental reason is not a part of Latin American identity, the latter is not supposed to be anti-modern or pre-modern. It is part of a prior modernity which was constituted in the 16th century: Baroque modernity. Hence an opposition appears between enlightened modernity and Baroque modernity while the modern status of both models is highlighted. Yet, as Methol Ferré maintains, Baroque modernity goes further because “it puts in question, it makes problematic the very idea of ‘modernity’ prevalent hitherto. From a superficial modernity we pass onto a profound modernity”.¹⁰ Whereas traditionally it was thought that the Catholic church and modern culture were incompatible, that the church had been left outside modernity, the rediscovery of Baroque modernity allows “for the potency of Trento and the Catholic reform, that is to say of the Baroque, to be recuperated. To recover the Baroque is to recover Catholic modernity...”.¹¹

What is Baroque modernity about? Cousiño argues that modernity

8 C. Parker, *Otra Lógica en América Latina*, pp. 192, 354 & 370.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 380.

10 Alberto Methol Ferré, “El resurgimiento católico latinoamericano”, en Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (ed), *Religión y Cultura* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1981), p. 64.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

includes every project that seeks to resolve the crisis of medieval Christendom and seeks to reconstitute an ecumenical principle which could account for diversity.¹² That is to say, Cousiño understand modernity in terms which are rather formal and in strict connection with a religious problem. Hence the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent can appear as an earlier form of modernity than the enlightened modernity. However, Baroque modernity also has a cultural content. Bernardino Bravo describes it in the following way:

The exuberance of forms in literature, the ornamentation, the dressing up and the religious or profane public ceremonies, obey to a vision of the world as a huge stage and of human life as a great, universal, multifaceted, changing and ephemeral spectacle. It appeals therefore to the senses to dazzle, captivate and subdue the attention and to transport it to the most elevated regions of the spirit.

All this deployment of baroque sumptuousness is animated by a new conception of time and space that frame up the spectacle of human life.

Opposite to the Renaissance's *carpe diem*, the Baroque's *memento mori* arises, with its preference for themes such as death, twilight and fall. Here the comparison of the world with a theatre and of life with a dream, so frequent in Baroque authors, acquires all its meaning. Ultimately, behind this conception of time, an eminently religious vision of life throbs, opposite to the Renaissance's naturalist conception, under the form of a drama in which each man plays with his eternal fate.¹³

4. *Baroque culture has an oral, not a written character*

In Morandé's view, the first Latin American cultural synthesis did not emerge as a form of written culture, because the Indians did not know writing, but as a more vital founding experience, which occurs in orality: as an ethos. An ethos is a common experience, a common understanding born out of the meeting among human beings; it is not a form of coherent argument or ideology, but a shared experience that lives off its constant memory.¹⁴ Cousiño, in his turn, reiterates that while the logic of the enlightened model rests upon the mercantile exchange and is marked by the importance of the written text, Baroque modernity is founded upon

12 C. Cousiño, *Razón y Ofrenda, Ensayo en torno a los límites y perspectivas de la sociología en América Latina* (Santiago: Cuadernos del Instituto de Sociología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1990), p. 109.

13 Bernardino Bravo Lira, "El Barroco hispanoamericano" in *El Barroco en Hispanoamérica, manifestaciones y significación* (Santiago: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico José Toribio Medina, 1981), pp. 7-8.

ritual dramatic representation and is marked by the importance of oral transmission:

Baroque society does not aspire to constitute a reading public capable of begetting a rationalized public opinion. The places of the Baroque public are not cafes or clubs, but mainly theatre and fiestas, many of which take place on account of religious celebrations.

Nature and man appear as Baroque themes, as the occasion for infinity and transcendence. In marked opposition to enlightened rationalism that seeks to find the laws that rule over human and natural behaviour, the Baroque is not so much interested in the natural as in the marvellous which is expressed in nature.¹⁵

The negative vision of the written text as something which does not genuinely belong to the Baroque Latin American culture is taken by Bravo Lira to the field of law with some dramatic consequences for democracy. The thesis that Latin American identity is Baroque becomes useful to explain why constitutions do not last in Latin America: "... despite the ruling minority's enthusiasm for this type of document, Hispanic countries have become the place where constitutions die".¹⁶ Notwithstanding the prevalence of written constitutions all over Latin America, Baroque culture privileges "non-written constitutions" or "historical constitutions" and, according to Bravo Lira, "in the conflict between the two constitutions, the written and the non-written, the former is bound to lose out".¹⁷ This is due to the fact that written constitutions are an expression of the enlightened logic:

Constitutionalism is animated by the critical revisionism of the Enlightenment, bound to remake the world according to the dictates of human reason.

To the enlightened men's ambition to remake the world in conformity with the dictates of human reason, the Hispanics from one or the other side of the Atlantic opposed demands that constitutionalism could not satisfy.¹⁸

14 P. Morandé, "Latinoamericanos: Hijos de un Diálogo Ritual", *Creces*, No. 11/12 (1990), p. 10.

15 See Carlos Cousiño, *Razón y Ofrenda, Ensayo en torno a los límites y perspectivas de la sociología en América Latina* (Santiago: Cuadernos del Instituto de Sociología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1990), p. 115.

16 Bernardino Bravo Lira, *El estado de derecho en la historia de Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 1996), p. 262.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 259.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Bravo Lira should think that in Latin America the rule of law based on historical institutions from the Hispanic and medieval tradition is prior to the constitutionalist “legalism” and that it could therefore co-exist with a dictatorship without any problem. In this way he justifies the abolition of the Chilean constitution by the 1973 military coup:

The Armed Forces become, de facto and by right, defenders of the historical constitution which, because of being embodied in live institutions and not in a text, as the written one, is not at the mercy of parties and party politicians which could modify it and apply it at their will. By its nature, this mission of the Armed Forces is prior and superior to legality.¹⁹

5. Latin American culture privileges sapiential knowledge or rationality

According to Morandé, the Latin American ethos privileges the heart (sentiments) and its intuition, thus preferring sapiential to scientific knowledge.²⁰ Scannone makes of this the centre of his thesis. Even though he does not use the image of the Catholic substratum, he strongly puts forward the idea that in the Latin American culture there exists a special kind of rationality, different from modern instrumental rationality, which he calls “sapiential” rationality and which coincides with the evangelical teachings. This rationality is not anti-modern,

but, because it is more radically and originally human, because it is the rationality most akin to the life-world, because it is at the same time essentially respectful of differences and of the plural unity, it can assume the challenge of modernity, thus sapientially re-locating the other forms of rationality without compromising their autonomy, their critical character and their differentiation which are inherent parts of the modern inheritance.²¹

Sapiential rationality is characterised by a logic of gratuity and donation, by its promoting a community more human and respectful of plurality and alterity. In the face of modern advances and especially of some alienating features of the Latin American modernising processes, the people resort to its own sapiential culture. This culture is revealed

19 Ibid., p. 237.

20 P. Morandé, *Cultura y Modernización en América Latina*, pp. 144-145.

21 Juan Carlos Scannone, “Nueva modernidad adveniente y cultura emergente en América Latina”, *Stromata* XLVII, No. 1-2, (1991), p. 160. See also

in impulses towards a base communal solidarity at the economic level (co-operatives, popular kitchens, labour exchange associations) as much as towards multi-sector movements of civil society in defence of human rights, green spaces, justice, etc.²²

It is here that Scannone sees a coincidence between the Latin American cultural inheritance and the evangelical teachings. In contrast to Methol Ferré and Morandé, Scannone emphasises the fact that sapiential rationality is neither an exclusive feature of Latin America nor does it necessarily renounce to the autonomy of reason. Yet, this sapiential rationality is presented as Latin America's own logic, a logic that not only differs from that of enlightened rationality, but also opposes resistance to it: "modern rationality never managed –at least not yet- radically to penetrate the logos and ethos belonging to our Latin American cultural idiosyncrasy".²³

6. Catholic Latin American identity has not been recognized by the Latin American intellectual elites and this is the reason for their cultural alienation

This is one of the fundamental points of this discourse which is shared with other types of Latin American essentialisms, be them indigenist or Hispanist. Morandé expresses it well by saying that the first cultural synthesis "was not valued by the process of formation of the national states as its own patrimony".²⁴ The elite which conducted the Latin American process of independence from Spain, very much influenced by a culture based on the written text brought from Europe, tended to assimilate the oral tradition, in which the new cultural synthesis was produced, to barbarism and Spanish domination. Hence, the Latin American ruling classes and intellectuals never assumed their true identity and rejected their own mestizo origins. They found refuge in the European rational enlightened pattern, especially through the University system. But in doing so they became alienated from their own roots and embarked their

"Modernidad, Posmodernidad y formas de racionalidad en América Latina" in D. Michelini *et al.*, (eds) *Modernidad y Posmodernidad en América Latina* (Río Cuarto: Ediciones del ICALA, 1991), pp. 27-28.

22 Juan Carlos Scannone, "Nueva modernidad adveniente...", pp. 166-170.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

24 P. Morandé, "La Síntesis Cultural Hispánica Indígena", *Teología y Vida*, XXXII, No. 1-2 (1991), p. 51.

countries on modernising programmes which could not succeed.

In a similar manner, Bravo Lira argues that

A truly spiritual division [has developed] between the ruling minority, more or less identified with the ideals of the Enlightenment and the thick of the population which remain attached to their own modes of life, to a great extent coming from the Baroque. The Hispanic world seems to live, therefore, with a foot in the Baroque modernity and the other in the enlightened modernity. It oscillates between foreign imitation and the affirmation of its own identity. Hence the persistent gap between the legal country of constitutions and the real country of institutions...²⁵

Of course “the legal country of constitutions” is the country of the alienated ruling minority that has artificially superimposed itself over the real country and its true Baroque identity, which does not contemplate parliaments or parties. Bravo Lira even speaks of a geological fault

between two distinct institutional strata: an old and well rooted plate, formed by the basic state institutions –as they are in Hispanoamérica, the president, the judiciary, the Armed Forces and the Administration- and another more recent plate superimposed over the former one, formed by complementary governmental institutions of foreign origin, such as the parliament and political parties.²⁶

7. Latin American identity finds its best expression in popular religiosity

Latin America has suffered since its independence from a cultural break: its true cultural identity is not recognised by its own elites, and the rational enlightened cultural pattern adopted by the Latin American elites is not only entirely different from but also inherently opposed to the true identity. If the cultural pattern adopted by the elites is alienation, where then can the true cultural synthesis be found? In popular religiosity, Morandé believes. While the enlightened European reason praises the modernising and rationalistic efforts of the elites and regards with contempt the supposedly backward religious beliefs of the alienated masses, he praises the authenticity of the popular religious traditions and scorns the failed modernising attempts of an elite culturally alienated. According to Morandé popular religiosity

is one of the few expressions -although not the only one- of the Latin American cultural synthesis which goes across all its epochs and covers simultaneously all its dimensions: work and production, human settlements and life styles, language

25 Bernardino Bravo Lira, *El estado de derecho en la historia de Chile*, p. 247.

26 Ibid., p. 244.

and artistic expression, political organisation, everyday life. And precisely in its role as the reservoir of cultural identity it has had to undergo, perhaps more than any other institution, the attempts by modernity to subordinate particular cultures to the dictates of instrumental reason.²⁷

In fact, the Enlightenment managed to convert the Latin American elites to instrumental reason, but it did not succeed against the popular religiosity of mestizos, which has resisted all the attacks to remain until today as the most genuine and spontaneous expression of the cultural ethos.

A variant of this conception can be found in Cristián Parker, for whom popular religion is the nucleus of the cultural pathos of the Latin American people and constitutes an alternative logic to the Western rationalist canon. Parker finds in Latin America a popular culture with religious content, which constitutes a veritable counter-culture to modernity: it is “another way of feeling, thinking and acting which is alternative to enlightened rationality and to the type of rationalized faith which is its by-product”.²⁸ Popular religion is characterized by affirming life in a socio-political context of death, by supporting women and the feminine through the centrality of the Virgin Mary, by privileging sentiments and vitalism in the face of the dominant intellectualism, by asserting the expressive, the festive, the carnivalesque in the face of the dominant culture’s formalism and rationalism, and finally, by upholding transcendence in the context of a culture imbued with a Cartesian-positivist scientificism.

8. Enlightened modernity and its rationalistic logic is exhausted and has begun to crumble

According to Parker, instrumental rationality is suffering from “definitive fatigue” and “the universe of values and categories which sustained an epoch of Promethean dreams” has crumbled, to give way to popular Christianity, to an alternative vitalist anthropology, whose project is the “integral man” based upon a praxis of “love-solidarity”.²⁹ Bravo Lira in his turn speaks of the “sinking of enlightened modernity” which tears apart North Americans and Europeans because now they have to liberate themselves from the rationalist mentality that has surrounded them since they were born. Latin Americans instead do not mind the collapse

27 P. Morandé, *Cultura y Modernización en América Latina*, p. 129.

28 C. Parker, *Otra Lógica en América Latina*, p. 192.

of modernity. Whereas Europeans and North Americans “carry their own candles in the funeral of rationalism, we have to borrow them. For them to get rid of enlightened modernity is equivalent to abandoning everything or almost everything, whereas for us it is only to get rid of an uncomfortable ornament”:³⁰

Iberoamerica... is greatly favoured by the twilight of the Enlightenment. Because of the crumbling of enlightened Modernity, Baroque modernity reappears, concealed under a more or less thick rationalist varnish, but still alive, above all in popular sectors.³¹

Scannone also refers to the crisis of “a certain type of systematic, totalizing, self-sufficient, omni-encompassing reason” or to the “failure of a uniforming and totalizing reason” which has clear symptoms in the “science’s and philosophy of science’s crisis of foundations, with the corresponding reason’s break of unity according to the diverse language games”.³²

V. Towards an appraisal of the fundamentalist discourse

I shall enumerate the most important points.

1. A first problem arises in relation to the concept of identity which is implicit in this account: it is a version which considers identity as a fixed essence which is established once and for all and cannot be changed. Why is it that the Latin American identity was constituted in between the 16th and 17th centuries to the exclusion of other historical periods? True, the original synthesis is important, but it is difficult to accept that it has not changed over the years. In this way the contributions to identity made by the 19th and 20th centuries are minimized or treated as deviations from the original synthesis.

2. The idea of an alternative modernity, namely, Baroque modernity, is not without difficulties. According to most authors, modernity has to do with liberty, reason, progress, political democracy, science and pluralism. It is odd, to say the least, to propose another kind of modernity which regards democracy, science, pluralism and reason with contempt. Surely the concept of modernity must have its own contents which cannot

29 Ibid., pp. 194-198.

30 Bernardino Bravo Lira, *América y la Modernidad: de la Modernidad barroca e ilustrada a la Postmodernidad*, p. 425.

31 Ibid., p. 427.

32 Juan Carlos Scannone, “Nueva modernidad adveniente...”, pp. 165-166.

accommodate just anything even if it is contemporary. The Baroque in itself seems not be a modern project.

3. The thesis about the “Catholic substratum”, that is to say, that the Latin American true identity is to be found in popular religiosity, may have been close to reality during the colonial period, but today it has become much less credible. True, Latin America is still fairly religious, and there are still strong elements of popular religiosity present in the masses of the people. But one cannot reduce cultural identity to these elements. They have lost the centrality they used to have. Besides, the strong presence of Pentecostalism among the masses shows that Catholicism is one element more in Latin American identity, but not the only or decisive one.

4. The equation Catholicism-identity in Latin America is dangerous because it seems to exclude from the genuinely Latin American all that is not Catholic. To maintain that secularism is a threat not just to the church but also to Latin American culture means that all that is not Catholic or at least religious is outside the authentic Latin American culture.

5. The overrating of orality is also questionable and may lead to aberrations. Orality appears connected with goodness, innocence and the authenticity of the social bond. The written text appears linked to rationalist elites unable to ascertain their identity, and therefore not authentic. Ironically this seems to be a myth propounded by the Enlightenment itself, by Rousseau in his idea of the good savage. But beyond this, there is the added problem that the opposition between the oral and the written is extrapolated in order to attack constitutional democracies and justify military takeovers, like Pinochet’s 1973 coup, with the singular argument that they were upholding the historical constitution based on live institutions as against the written constitution supported by ideological parties.

6. The assessment of reason is biased and lacking balance. Instrumental reason appears to be crumbling or suffering from terminal fatigue. But one wonders how could it be that a moribund rationality could have such modernizing energy in Latin America as it seems to have had in recent times.

VI. Impact of Catholic fundamentalist ideas

During the 80s the Catholic fundamentalist ideas enjoyed a temporary resurgence, but within limited circles. The anti-democratic ideas underpinned by religious justifications have never enjoyed widespread

support in Latin America after independence. But their cultural impact is wider than it is supposed, especially within the Catholic Church and among many bishops. Moreover, their ability to influence some state policies is not to be underrated. It is not by chance that Chile did not have a divorce law until 2005. Catholic traditionalist sectors have been sometimes successful in mobilizing wider sectors in opposition to contraception, divorce, etc. Their influence on politicians goes beyond their real power and popular support. But on the whole, they have lost their ability to convince the majority and their impact is rapidly diminishing. To be sure, very few believe these days that Latin American identity has a Catholic substratum anymore, at least in the sense of Catholicism being the central element of that identity. Yet it is true to say that Catholicism is still an important component in an increasingly diverse and variegated Latin American identity.

