

## **The Catholic Church and the Indigenous Movement in the Peruvian Amazon Region**

In December 2009, the front page of *El Comercio* (an important newspaper), accused Catholic missionaries in the Amazon region of promoting violent acts among the indigenous population and against the State. The headlines referred to a draft of the final report made by the official committee investigating the violent events which took place near the city of Bagua in June 2009. Curiously, two of the members of the Committee are Catholic missionaries: Father Ricardo Alvarez-Lobo and Sister Carmen Gómez. However, sister Gomez as well as Jesús Manacés, the Committee Chair seriously objected the final report and decided not to sign it, while Father Alvarez-Lobo did. The following day, the president of the Peruvian Bishops Conference, Bishop Cabrejos as well as Bishop García de la Rasilla, who is in charge of the jurisdiction where the violent events took place, publicly denied such acts. On the contrary, during and after the events of June 2009,

the city of Quito) and the Franciscan missions in the central area (linked to the city of Lima). After political independence from Spain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of missionaries in the Amazon region was radically reduced. Nonetheless, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church continued its role as main social institution and as representative of the Peruvian State in the region. This role was assumed in practice, even during colonial times, due to the absence of any official State representatives. Thus, most of the social services that the State usually provides, such as health and education, road building, river and air transportation, radio communication, etc. were provided by the Catholic Church in the Amazon region.

By the 1920s, however, the increasing arrival of an already christianized mestizo population in the region led to a crucial shift in the Catholic Church's activities in the Amazonía. The conversion and the establishment of mission posts among the indigenous population was no longer its main concern, although, of course, it did not entirely disappear. In this context, other churches also arrived in the Amazon rainforests and replaced the Catholic Church in many places as intermediary between the State and the indigenous peoples.

In the 1960s a new period began in the history of this relationship. In these years, the Catholic Church experienced an important transformation, especially in Latin America. A group of Catholic missionaries working with native peoples became more critical of

missionaries supported the indigenous initiatives. This support was not limited to priests and nuns living in indigenous communities, but it also included the bishops of the region. Between 1971 and 1980 the nine bishops of the Peruvian Amazonia organized five regional assemblies and published several public statements regarding indigenous rights and demanding adequate state policies for the indigenous peoples.

Between the mid 1980s and the beginning of this decade, the number of public statements made by the Amazonian bishops has been very small. In these years, the 1960 and 1970 committed missionaries have grown old, while most of their younger replacements lack the commitment to a life-time of living in indigenous communities, learning their languages and their culture. Thus, for the last couple of decades, although the presence of the Catholic church has not disappeared in indigenous areas, in many places the link with the indigenous movement has weakened.

Nowadays, however, we are perceiving signs of a possible change and a closer relationship again between the Catholic Church and the indigenous movement. After support for their struggles, in the last couple of years there have been half a dozen published in major national newspapers. These public statements explicitly express their solidarity with the indigenous claims for their lands and rights.

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jurisdictions, especially because sometimes church institutions mistrust certain research projects.

In terms of academic contribution, I hope that this research project will contribute to different academic fields: anthropology, political science, history, and religious studies. In the Peruvian case, there are some studies dealing with the relationship between the theology of Liberation movement and grass-root politics, and even some regarding the relationship between the Catholic church and Andean communities in Highland Peru, Ecuador or Bolivia. There are some testimonies of the Salesian congregation and their experience with the Shuar and Achuar in Ecuador, and there are also some studies dealing with the influence of different churches, including the Catholic Church, in local communities in Brazil, some of them located in the Amazon region, but there is not a more detailed study of the relationship between the Catholic church and the indigenous movement.

As to possible publication outlets, there are two academic journals that usually publish articles about the Amazon region in Peru: *Amazonia Peruana*, published by CAAAP since 1976, and *Anthropologica* published by the Catholic University of Peru. However, the subject matter of this research project may also be attractive to other journals published in other countries, such as: *Mana* (Brazil), *Mundo Amazónico* (Colombia), *Latin American Research Review* (USA), *The Americas* (USA), *The Journal of Latin American Studies* (Great Britain), *Journal de la Société des Americanistes* (France), \_\_\_\_\_ (France), *The journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Great Britain), etc.