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Syncretism: Why Latin American and Caribbean Theologians Want to Replace a "Fighting Word" in Theology

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SURINAME, A COUNTRY on the northeast Atlantic coast of South America bracketed between Guyana, Brazil, and French Guiana, boasts a well-established local Roman Catholic Church community. Since the 18th century, the church has been a continuous and major presence in that country.[1] Out of a total population of slightly more than half a million persons, Catholics form a quarter of Suriname's population. The Surinamese are overwhelmingly Creole, which they define as any person who is part of any long-established group in their country.[2] This broad understanding of the term is unsurprising because like their Caribbean and Latin neighbors, the Surinamese possess heterogeneous roots drawn from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the people indigenous to the Guianas region. There continue to be indigenous tribal communities scattered across the rain-forested interior of Suriname, descended from the people the British and Dutch explorers and settlers first encountered,[3] and the Maroons, descendants of African slaves who escaped

[1] Mission efforts in the Guianas region stretch back to the 1650s. See John Bridges, S.J., *The Good News on the Wild Coast: Highlights of the Early Efforts of the Catholic Church in Guiana 1650's to 1850's* (Arima, Trinidad: St. Dominic, n.d.), 9-11.

[2] See Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo,* 2nd ed. (New York: New York University, 2011), 5. Notice how the Surinamese definition of a Creole is a departure from its original definition: white Europeans born in the New World. It is one of a myriad of contemporary definitions of a Creole as an ethnic hybrid; and these definitions are a product of much debate in Suriname's Caribbean neighbors. See Anna L. Peterson and Manuel A. Vásquez, *Latin American Religions: Histories and Documents in Context* (New York: New York University, 2008), 15; and Percy Hintzen, "The Caribbean: Race and Creole Ethnicity," in *Cultural Identity and Creolization in National Unity: The Multiethnic Caribbean,* ed. Prem Misir (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 9-31.

[3] Duncan Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity as an Internal Dynamic for the Local Church: The Case of Suriname," *Exchange* 34:1 (2005): 2.

the plantations on the coast and organized themselves into clans clustered in riverine settlements also in the interior.[4]

These heterogeneous roots conspired to bring about a blending of Roman Catholic worship with other forms of religious worship unique to Latin America and the Caribbean. In Suriname, Catholic worship was melded with Winti, an Afro-Surinamese religion which itself is a product of the syncretism of western African religions brought over by slaves whose descendants incorporated Amerindian and European influences.[5] Catholic worship was blended in Suriname and Jamaica with Maroon religion too, another blend of African religious worldviews and practices.[6] Rejecting the European form of Roman Catholic faith, many Surinamese practice what the sociologist Harold Jap-A-Joe identifies as a "creolized" form of it.[7] This blending of religious traditions finds expression in popular religious practices, particularly those rituals marking the stages of human life where plainly Catholic liturgical elements freely commingle with Winti[8] or Maroon[9] cosmology. In both cases, much of the worship is

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[4] See Gad Heuman, *The Caribbean* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 63-4.

[5] Harold Jap-A-Joe, "Afro-Surinamese Renaissance and the Rise of Pentecostal-ism," *Exchange* 34:2 (2005): 137-8.

[6] Joop Vernooij, "Mapping Religious Suriname," *Exchange* 31:3 (2002): 232.

[7] Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity," 8.

[8] A prominent example of popular religion blending Catholic with Winti or Maroon elements is found with the rituals surrounding the burial and mourning of the dead. A Catholic funeral with Winti elements begins with the *dede oso* liturgy, a wake. Before the *dede oso* begins, food and drink are put aside for the deceased because the Winti religion treats the dead as family members whose status is not compromised by death. This is followed by the wake itself, the first part of which begins with prayers, Bible reading, ands songs of mourning, and concludes with another round of prayers. After a break where family members serve food and drink to guests, the second part of the wake begins following the same sequence of events as the first, with one difference: the songs are joyful. The belief here is that the soul of the deceased is about to go to heaven, and the songs are meant to accompany the person on the journey. Close to midnight the lights are turned off, and people sing the song *'t Is middernacht* (It is midnight) while the *kabra* (the ancestral spirits of the baptized dead) come to take the soul of the deceased to Heaven. Winti religion calls Heaven the *kowru kondre*: the cold country. This part is concluded with the praying of the Lord's Prayer, the singing of the final verses of "It is midnight," the turning on of the lights and more eating and drinking. The final part of the *dede oso* is marked by storytelling featuring anecdotes about the deceased and remembering other family members who had passed and the telling of jokes and riddles, some of which carry a moral lesson. The wake breaks up without any formal closing rite. The food and drink set aside for the deceased at the beginning of the *dede oso* gets buried in the yard of the family home. This funeral rite is followed by the *ayti dey* (celebrated the eighth day following the funeral) and the *siksi wiki* (celebrated six weeks following the funeral). See Wielzen, 6-7.

[9] Maroons venerate the dead with the *puru blaka,* but this honor is something the deceased person must earn while alive. Only a person who lived an exemplary moral life supporting the community may receive veneration. This is because the Maroons believe such persons become something akin to Catholic saints; they can intercede

led by a layperson, either male or female, and the participants are not all Catholic.[10]

In the past, the Roman Catholic Church officially condemned these practices as pagan, which forced these Winti and Maroon practices underground.[11] Today, the Catholic Church in Suriname takes no official stance at all, while the Catholic clergy and hierarchy in their day-to-day work allow these creole inculturations of the faith. So, on the one hand, these blended forms of worship do not have any official ecclesial status, but on the other hand, the lack of church approval "does not automatically imply that it lacks ecclesial justification."[12] It is common to find clergy or lay catechists taking a leadership role for part of these rituals,[13] which suggests that the leadership of the church in Suriname offers more than a simple toleration of the incorporation of Winti and Maroon religion into Catholic worship.

Other examples similar to Suriname's inculturated Catholic popular worship, which attract neither condemnation nor endorsement of the church but are often tolerated by the local bishop[14] and clergy, can be found throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.[15] These examples of Catholic popular worship are described by some theologians as the product of poorly catechized peoples ignorant of orthodoxy, and they are caricatured by some social scientists who

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on behalf of the community before God because a morally upright person would be close to God, making his or her prayer more efficacious. The *puru blaka* itself begins with the family of the deceased clad in black clothes and the assembly saying prayers and singing hymns. The mourning period is concluded with the family of the deceased taking a ritual bath in a local river, followed by a common meal. All of this is to celebrate the passing of the deceased into *Gado kondre* (God's kingdom). Like Winti funeral rites, food is set aside for the deceased person. See Wielzen, 10.

[10] Wielzen, *"Popular Religiosity,"* 7.

[11] Harold Jap-A-Joe, Peter Sjak Shie and Joop Vernooij, "The Quest for Respect: Religion and Emancipation in Twentieth-Century Suriname," in *Twentieth Century Suriname: Continuities and Discontinuities in a New World Society,* ed. Rosemarijn Hoefte and Peter Meel (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2001), 200.

[12] Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity," 8-9.

[13] Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity," 7.

[14] Having said that, the general tendency of the bishops has been to lean toward those popular practices they judge to be orthodox, which would correspond to what they view to be the Church's institutional interests in relation to the people. See, Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, "La Religiosidad Popular en La Identidad Cultural Latinoamericana y Caribeña," in *Religiosidad Popular México, Cuba,* editado por Noemi Quezada (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004): 43.

[15] Another prominent example is *candomblé,* the Afro-Brazilian religion practiced in Bahia, whose adherents insist they are good Catholics and practice its rituals side-by-side with Catholic liturgical practices. The only hint of resistance is found with local priests who carefully differentiate between Catholic and *candomblé* beliefs, differences which most Afro-Brazilian practitioners of both faiths see as non-existent. See Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Towards a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations,* trans. Helen Sebba (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), 260-1 and 271.

think that they are simply a product of racial and class resistance to organized religion.[16] On the contrary, the ambivalence of the church toward popular religion is due to its struggle with the difficult task of understanding the complex relationship between official Catholic faith and practice on the one hand and popular manifestations of the faith which can defy easy categorization on the other.[17]

In response to this ambivalence, Latin American and Caribbean theologians and persons active in ministry in those regions are working to redefine what constitutes appropriate forms of syncretism—how the Christian faith inculturates itself with popular religious practices in Latin America and the Caribbean. They are doing so through their critique of the use of the word "syncretism" and its definition, often to the point of replacing it with the inoffensive word "inculturation." These theologians think that the word "syncretism" has been used by people outside Latin America and the Caribbean to accuse their local churches of attempting to inculturate the celebration of worship and sacraments in ways detrimental to Christianity. Latin American and Caribbean Christians claim that their work of inculturating worship and sacraments on a popular level is theologically sound overall, but some Christians outside these regions criticize it as syncretism because the worship customs and practices look and sound odd. Latin American and Caribbean theologians tend to give local incarnations of worship the benefit of the doubt without going so far as to accept the naive generalization that inappropriate forms of syncretism do not exist. Latin and Caribbean theologians, clergy and lay ministers all agree that unacceptable forms of syncretism exist in their respective regions, and their writings show an abiding but not obsessive concern with the issue. These theologians instead seek to redefine how the church distinguishes between what is acceptable syncretism and what is unacceptable in order to better inculturate worship and sacraments in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the Caribbean, the overall goal behind this redefinition of acceptable syncretism is the acceptance and purposeful incorporation of African and Indian (as in Carib and Arawak) cultural elements into the worship life of the church. This "creolization" of religion is

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[16] Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, "The Contribution of Catholic Orthodoxy to Caribbean Syncretism: The Case of la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre in Cuba," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 47:117 (2002): 37.

[17] A representative example of how popular devotions in Latin American and the Caribbean defy easy categorization are the popular devotions of Cuba toward San Lázaro, la Virgin de la Caridad, la Virgen de Regla, la Virgen de la Merced, and Santa Bárbara. Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla describes these devotions as "not properly Catholic, nor Santeria, nor Spiritist." Those who practice these devotions "declare a dependency on their object of worship, but fail to explain, let alone situate it within a religious system." Calzadilla, 40 [Translation mine].

not solely to satisfy an ecclesiological concern to fully incorporate Caribbean people into church life, but basic to the project of Caribbean cultural liberation.[18] Given the ubiquity and influence of Christianity in the Caribbean, it is natural for theologians and ministers there to have Christian faith and practice play a decisive, animating role in forging a unique Caribbean identity. Caribbean people themselves would meld the disparate European, African, Indigenous, and sometimes Asian elements into a Caribbean identity they can call their own, liberating themselves from being culturally defined by former colonial and prevailing metropolitan or hegemonic powers in that region.[19]

In Latin America, the general motivation for moving the line distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable syncretism is tied with the efforts of theologians in that region to promote the integral liberation of their people.[20] Key to this liberation is the critical acceptance and incorporation of indigenous views of the spiritual and their practices of worshipping God alongside the Spanish, Portuguese and other European elements that shaped the church there for centuries. The church in Brazil shares concerns similar to the church in the Caribbean with the incorporation of African elements into church wor-

[18] See Joop Vernooij, "Religion in the Caribbean: Creation by Creolization," in *Global Christianity: Contested Claims,* ed. Frans Wijsen and Robert Schreiter (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 2007): 153-4.

[19] There is also a question faced by the Catholic Church in parts of the Caribbean concerning relations with non-Christian religions. In Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname there exists a significant Hindu population who use Christian worship practices and symbols for their own spiritual edification. A famous example is on the island of Trinidad, where Hindus honor Our Lady of the Good Shepherd as a manifestation of the goddess Kali. There follows a related question concerning Hindu converts to Christianity, and which Hindu religious practices the Church would deem acceptable for their new congregants to continue using as Christians. See Freek L. Bakker, "The Mirror Image: How Hindus Adapt to the Creole Christian World of the Caribbean," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 13:2 (2003): 180-1. Holy Thursday is a time of special devotion to Mary by both Christians and Hindus, who share the same veneration but do so with different motives and understandings of whom is being venerated. The pastor of the parish, Father Martin Sirju, has the image moved to the parish hall to accommodate the throngs of Hindu worshippers (and avoid accusations of syncretism by some Christians on the island) while Catholic Mass is celebrated next door in church. This is an event I had the privilege of witnessing firsthand three years ago. See also Gerald Boodoo, "The Faith of the People: The *Divina Pastora* Traditions of Trinidad," in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean,* ed. Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrel (New York: St. Martin's, 2000): 65-72.

[20] See Julio de Santa Ana, "Popular Religion and Liberation in Latin America: Between Common Sense and Good Sense," in, *Popular Religion, Liberation and Contextual Theology,* ed. Jacques Van Nieuwenhove and Berma Klein Goldewijk (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 106.

ship, a concern that has spilled over into neighboring Argentina and Uruguay.[21]

This ambiguous status of popular religious practices in the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean (practices not officially recognized as part of church worship or devotional traditions) is an important ecclesiastical and ethical question that requires a sustained, long-term commitment by theologians and people in ministry toward achieving a resolution. A lack of formal recognition of the legitimacy of a local church's worship and devotion can affect the self-image of the people within that church, casting doubt as to their status as fully constituent members of the universal church.[22] People and those who minister to them may think themselves marginalized because their worship of God may not be recognized as legitimate worship. It is a question of justice because the people of a Latin American or Caribbean local church are left doubting the legitimacy of their place in the universal church. Short of an official recognition of popular worship practices, the unofficial tolerance practiced by the church today concerning popular religious practice can be revoked at any time by church authority and by believers outside the region in general. Latin American and Caribbean theologians at their most blunt label this a form of neo-colonialism.

More importantly, the lack of official recognition of popular worship impacts the ability of Latin American and Caribbean peoples to commit to living the Christian life by incorporating it fully into how they lead their lives. This statement may seem puzzling, considering that Latin America and the Caribbean as we know it are cultures that have been defined by Christianity, especially by the Catholic Church, since the Age of Exploration and the Conquest of the Americas. At issue here is how the people themselves need to have a voice in how they understand and practice their faith instead of being defined exclusively by an outside authority that rejects popular religion out of hand and who alone defines how their Christianity ought to be lived out. Ben Knighton observes that Christian faith "becomes enfleshed in the lives, not so much of those who passively receive it, but of those who actively accept and, in doing so, remould it."[23] In other words, the people of Latin America and the Caribbean who are committed to practicing the Christian faith need to incarnate the faith themselves, in particular how the gospel is proclaimed, the prac-

[21] See Edward L. Cleary, O.P., *How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2009), 83-8.

[22] Here again, I am speaking of those who belong to the local Roman Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean whose practice of the faith is neither recognized nor condemned by Church authority.

[23] Knighton, "Christian Enculturation," 52.

tice of liturgy and worship, and the development of local theology,[24] and not simply to repeat what was given to them by generations of Latin American and Caribbean elites and missionaries. Robert Schreiter describes this as a process of incarnation whereby "the presentation of the gospel [by those who brought it in the first place] is gradually disengaged from its previous cultural embeddedness and is allowed to take on new forms consonant with the new cultural setting."[25] Of course, the people of the church in Latin America and the Caribbean are assumed to be the agents of this change.

The engagement of Latin American and Caribbean theologians with the question of determining the line between acceptable and unacceptable inculturation begins with the use of the word "syncretism." This word, for Latin American and Caribbean theologians and ministers, is a fighting word whose definition is far from settled. As a purely descriptive term, it means the intermingling of religions. The problem arises when the description includes "an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved" where "as a rule, the mixing of religions is condemned in this evaluation as violating the essence of the belief system."[26] Christianity throughout its history, in its doctrine, theology, and church polity more than in actual religious practice, has kept up its guard in its encounter with cultures whose converts sought to incarnate their newly received faith with practices other than those familiar to European and North American cultures. The fear is that attempts at inculturation involved compromising the essentials of Christian faith. This guardedness comes from the Jewish roots of Christianity, with its abiding concern to not adopt pagan beliefs or practices that would violate the first three commandments of the Decalogue.

Christianity's guardedness concerning syncretism is complex in theory as well as in actual practice. Peter Schineller identifies three basic approaches toward defining syncretism: an outright negative approach, a nuanced critical approach, and an outright positive approach. The outright negative approach understands syncretism as the loss of essential elements of the gospel message in the process of inculturation that are replaced by elements of the culture being evangelized. It assumes that there will always be elements in the gospel that are incompatible with the receiving culture and in such cases the

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[24] See Mariasusai Dhavamony, S.J., *Christian Theology of Inculturation,* Documenta Missionalia 24 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997): 91.

[25] Robert Schreiter, "Inculturation of Faith or Identification with Culture," in *Christianity and Cultures: A Mutual Enrichment,* ed. Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mette. *Concilium* 2 (1994): 16.

[26] André Droogers, "Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem," in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach,* ed. Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989): 7.

culture must change and conform by allowing those contradictory elements to die. Here, syncretism amounts to rejecting Christ.[27] Theologians who opt for the nuanced critical approach want to rescue the word syncretism so that it means "the necessary, ongoing process of the development of Christian life, practice, and doctrine."[28] For them, syncretism describes the critical practice of deciding on a case-by-case basis whether a particular attempt to inculturate the gospel is authentic to its message.[29] Then there are those theologians who do not see syncretism as a bad word at all but rather as a wholly positive concept in the theological nomenclature of Christianity. Leonardo Boff argues that considering how the incarnation of God is a central tenet of Christianity, it stands to reason that this faith, by necessity, must be among the most syncretistic of religions. If Christianity is to evangelize the cultures it encounters, it must be "exposed to different religious expressions and then assimilate them, interpret them, and recast them according to its own identity."[30] Boff admits that this process does often lead to "periods of crisis and uncertainty as to whether the religion's true identity is being preserved or diluted" and the process can generate error.[31] Despite these hazards, syncretism is necessary for Christianity to "preserve and enrich its universality" and for the Christian message of God's salvation to avoid being trapped as an abstraction.[32]

Despite attempts by many theologians to defend the word "syncretism," this article will use the word "inculturation" instead to proceed with its argument. The motive is a practical one: to keep the audience of this article together. The word "syncretism" is a distraction from the real issue: "the criteria for distinguishing adequate and inadequate inculturation."[33] Syncretism, precisely because it is seen by too many Latin American and Caribbean theologians as a fighting word, serves the negative function of a debate killer designed to block what one considers unacceptable forms of inculturation.[34] In other words, it is a habit among Christians to approve of how Christian faith incarnates itself in a culture as inculturation. When Christians don't approve, it is called syncretism.

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[27] Peter Schineller, S.J., "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?" in, *Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millenium: Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong, Teresa Okure, John E. Anyanwu, Godwin C. Okeke, and Anacletus N. Odoemene (Port Harcourt: Catholic Institute of West Africa, 1992), 52-3.
[28] Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 53.
[29] Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 53.
[30] Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power, Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church,* trans. John W. Diercksmeier (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 91.
[31] Boff, *Church*, 91.
[32] Boff, *Church*, 93.
[33] Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 56.
[34] Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 56.

Sacraments in particular and worship in general regularly serve as loci for controversies about inculturation. Sacraments, generally understood by Catholics and other Christians who incorporate them in their worship life, are the visible signs of the spiritual reality made manifest by the sign itself[35] and symbolic actions that mediate the presence of God.[36] Sacraments, by virtue of their being dispensed as concrete signs and actions, are among the things found in Christian life and practice most exposed to cultural influence in their presentation and dispensation. The inculturation of sacraments, liturgy, and other forms of worship has been a consistent historical challenge for the church, one that has brought about recurring problems that, at times, hampered its ability to carry out its evangelical mission.

One major example is the 17th century Chinese Rites controversy, the product of the first serious attempt by the church to use symbols, languages and indigenous customs in its worship and liturgy different from those found in cultures shaped by Christianity.[37] The Jesuits had no problem with Chinese converts participating in liturgy and receiving the sacraments alongside their continuing practice of rites honoring the deceased and celebrations honoring Confucius. The latter two events were judged by the Jesuits to be a secular practice, an observation that the reigning sovereign of the time, the Emperor Kangxi, confirmed as true. Pope Clement IX thought the emperor's intervention in church affairs akin to one done by a European monarch, and therefore offensive. Dominicans and Franciscans, along with much of the church authority of the time, thought that these Chinese Christian practices were idolatrous. None of them, however, possessed the command of Chinese culture, language and on-the-ground experience of the Jesuits. The controversy ended with a botched audience between the papal legate sent to adjudicate the problem and Emperor Kangxi. This encounter featured the poor choice of an interpreter who could not help the legate identify some of the Chinese characters the emperor presented, including Matteo Ricci's name in Chinese "Li Madou." The interpreter demonstrated an ignorance of the catechism Ricci wrote for Chinese people, *On Christian Doctrine*, which meant the papal delegation offended the emperor who knew all these facts. Emperor Kangxi banished the delegation from his presence. The event also ended official tolerance of the Christian religion which in turn spelled the end of the intense cultural exchange between China and the West launched by Matteo

[35] Augustine, *Letter 55 to Januarius on Baptism*.
[36] Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology,* trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville: The Liturgical, 1992), 72.
[37] Mario Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology,* Vol. 1 (London: SCM, 2007), 157.

Ricci and the Jesuit mission he founded.[38] This dramatic and unfortunate history underscores how inculturation is an old challenge for the church that reasserts its presence every time a culture is evangelized by it.

Two contemporary examples of the challenge of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of inculturation in Latin America and the Caribbean can be found with their reception of the instruction by the Congregation for Divine Worship, *Redemptionis Sacramentum.* When the instruction turns to the issue of where Eucharist can be celebrated, it begins by saying that it must be "carried out in a sacred place, unless in a particular case necessity requires otherwise. In this case the celebration must be in a decent place."[39] The local bishop is left to judge what places are to be considered sacred or decent, but only up to a point. The instruction proceeds to add, "It is never lawful for a Priest to celebrate in a temple or sacred place of any non-Christian religion."[40] This aspect of the instruction is an example of demarcating an unacceptable form of inculturation that Caribbean or Latin American Catholics would accept as a matter of course. On the other hand, that same document's instruction "that each one give the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner" and that "the Priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration" is potentially problematic. That instruction "completely overrules local customs and practices of some particular churches, particularly those in Africa and Latin America, where cultural expressions are normally spontaneous and far from sober."[41] This concern would be raised by a variety of cultures across the entire Caribbean region. The document only gives the priest latitude "for a just reason he wishes to extend the sign of peace to some few of the faithful" and the local bishops' conference latitude to pick the manner by which the sign of peace is to be exchanged.[42] By setting boundaries alien to the worshipping community at large, especially one whose laity are well-catechized, enjoy increasing levels of theological education beyond catechesis, and a strong charismatic sense of vocation, this could risk "a danger of estrangement from the peo-

[38] Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court,* trans. Paul Metcalfe (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 291-2.
[39] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Redemptionis Sacramentum: On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 108, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.
[40] *Redemptionis Sacramentum,* no. 109.
[41] Duncan Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity as an Internal Dynamic for the Local Church: The Case of Suriname," *Exchange* 34:1 (2005): 2.
[42] *Redemptionis Sacramentum,* no. 72.

ple, and the church will have a hard time localizing [itself]."[43] From the word "go," the culturally informed worship habits of the congregation would lead to *Redemptionis Sacramentum* being ignored in practice. The universal church and the church in Latin America and the Caribbean would be left speaking past each other instead of having a dialogue to resolve issues of inculturation.

Specific motives behind why Latin American and Caribbean theologians want to change how the church distinguishes between acceptable inculturation and unacceptable inculturation focus on the following realities. In Latin America, many national elites and others in the higher echelons of society and the academy think that "the people's religious culture must be purified, on the assumption that it is dehumanized by magic and myth."[44] In the Caribbean, accusations of syncretism have been used by what people in that region call missionary Christianity to tamp down emergent indigenous forms of Christian worship that are presented by Latin American and Caribbean theologians and ministers as authentically Christian. This is based on the historic attitude of missionary Christians towards the majority of Caribbean people as practicing evil, primitive, and demonic religious practices.[45] According to Monsignor Patrick Anthony, a Catholic priest and theologian from St. Lucia, taking the point of view of those who were evangelized by missionaries, the churches saw their mission to "baptize the pagans, exorcise their customs, and in the case of more sympathetic missionaries, if possible, Christianize some of the customs."[46] It is unsurprising that attempts by the Afro Caribbean population[47] to incorporate what Anthony identifies as folk culture into the practice of the Christian life historically speaking has been met with condescension or outright bans by church authorities.[48]

Now, it would be a mistake to caricature this conflict as a purely Manichean contest between enlightened Christian missionaries and the people they evangelized, the former exercising a Victorian *noblesse oblige* motoring up the Orinoco River or hiking the Blue Mountains of Jamaica to rescue their charges from a Latin or antipo-

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[43] Wielzen, "Popular Religiosity," 2.

[44] Diego Irarrázaval, *Inculturation: New Dawn of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 82.

[45] See Carlos F. Cardoza Orlandi, "Conspiracy Among Idols: A Critique of Deconstruction from the Afro-Caribbean Religions," *Koinonia* 4:1 (1992): 27.

[46] Patrick A.B. Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," in *Out of the Depths,* ed. Idris Hamid (Trinidad: Idris Hamid, 1977), 191.

[47] Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," 188. Anthony follows Edward Braithwaite's description of the fragmented nature of Caribbean society. There exists a Euro-centered elite, a Euro-oriented creole upper class, a small creole intellectual elite, and an Afro-Caribbean (black) population.

[48] Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," 191.

dean heart of darkness. Edward Cleary points out that missionary groups "deliberately sought out and lived with indigenous groups, mastered the peoples' language and their conceptions of God and Jesus' death and resurrection, developed sensitivity to local cultures, and influenced the church and theological movements – in particular Liberation Theology – to take seriously, though not uncritically, indigenous conceptions of the Christian faith as "expressing the face of God in imperfect but important ways."[49] Missionaries, who can and should be accused of viewing attempts by the people to inculturate Christian faith with mistrust if not hostility, can also be credited for encouraging and enabling effective inculturation of the faith.

With this caution in mind, the motivation to redefine the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of inculturation involves the church granting popular religion the space to serve Christianity. Theologians believe it can do so by recognizing popular religion as an original means by which the people practice and communicate the faith in the church both inside and outside official worship and sacramental celebrations. Of course, to do so would mean a degree of accepting "the indigenous populations' view of the world" and that, in turn, means accepting "new ways of being church while keeping the continuity of communion with centuries of history."[50] This is the flashpoint where Christianity, historically, puts up its guard.

Yet, inculturation must be done, lest one is ignored by the people and perhaps eventually loses them, or perhaps worse, does not gain their interest in the first place. In Latin America, Diego Irarrázaval points out that the church in Latin America too often either wholly excluded popular culture or reduced it to discrete novel elements that can be safely incorporated into existing liturgical celebrations.[51] Theological movements that consciously dedicated themselves to the popular classes were not immune to this thinking. Juan Luis Segundo wrote that Liberation Theology, in its opening stages of development, was well received among the middle class of Latin America, in particular among university students.[52] Unfortunately, the common people, the very group Liberation Theology wanted to serve, "neither understood nor welcomed anything from the first theology of liberation."[53] Segundo blamed his own theological movement for making a critical error when they "raised all over Latin America a wave of doubt and strong criticism of *popular religion* [otherwise and more

[49] Cleary, *How Latin America Saved the Soul*, 82.
[50] Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology,* 168.
[51] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 17.
[52] Juan Luis Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52 (Sept. 1985): 21.
[53] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 23.

aptly called 'popular Catholicism'] as being oppressive and, all-in-all, non-Christian."[54] Influenced by Marxism, popular religion was denounced by liberation theologians as an opiate numbing the poor to their own oppression. The consequence was that the common people "reacted against [Liberation Theology's] criticism of the supposed oppressive elements of popular religion"[55] by ignoring the movement, and instead, in many cases, turned to charismatic Catholic or Protestant Pentecostal movements.

The Caribbean, with the rise of national independence movements and identity movements like the Black Power movement which had the purpose of trying to forge a unique Caribbean identity in place of the identity imposed by colonial powers, found the church there increasingly out of touch with its members. The reason for this, according to Knolly Clark, was that "the European missionaries never really made any attempt to indigenize the theology of the church, even more so, its liturgical life."[56] Clark proceeded to ask, "Are the Church Services of today relevant? Do they meet the spiritual and emotional needs of our people? Is their language, the language spoken and understood by our people today? Do the hymns and music reflect the life and experience of the average West Indian or Jamaican?"[57] Theologians of the region would say, "In the past, no," and today inculturation is a promising work still in progress with a positive outcome far from guaranteed.

A good and successful inculturation, Knighton argues, is essential to "foster the confidence and morale of the Two-Thirds World churches to work out their own salvation." Otherwise, Latin American and Caribbean Christians would be "powerless to transform it, except superficially or destructively"[58] because the Christian faith, in its full Incarnational and Trinitarian integrity would be incorporated piecemeal and thwarted in its ability engage, transform, and redeem culture.[59] Another, more temporal reason why a successful inculturation of Christianity is important for the people is that recognition in the church historically has served as a necessary step toward achieving political recognition in society at large, particularly for the lower classes in the Caribbean[60] and Latin America.[61]

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[54] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 25.
[55] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 23.
[56] Knolly Clark, "Liturgy and Culture in the Caribbean: What is to be Done?" in *Troubling of the Waters,* ed. Idris Hamid (Trinidad: Idris Hamid, 1973), 142.
[57] Clark, "Liturgy and Culture in the Caribbean," 142.
[58] Ben Knighton, "Christian Enculturation in the Two-Thirds World," in *Global Christianity: Contested Claims,* ed. Frans Wijsen and Robert Schreiter (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 63.
[59] See Knighton, "Christian Enculturation in the Two-Thirds World," 63.
[60] This was the experience of Suriname, though observers of that country argue that political parties have supplanted the church as an agent of social change. See Jap-A-

Which specific proposals do Latin American and Caribbean theologians offer to redefine the church's distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of inculturation of the faith, and help give voice to the people in those regions to practice the faith? The church in Latin America has undergone a shift from concerns for military governments and ruling oligarchies (a concern which ended with the advent of durable democratic governments in the 1980s), to concerns for indigenous rights, the tribal possession of land, and the retention of indigenous and African cultures. The Latin American and Caribbean bishops in their regional meeting in Santo Domingo turned their attention to what indigenous and Afro-Latin cultures could offer to better inculturate Christianity in that region for purposes of evangelization.[62] Latin American theologians point to that meeting as a warrant to redefine how the church distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable inculturation, and add that it should do this for purposes of liberation, too. Liberation is where a people in Latin America, oppressed in the past by colonialism and, according to some theologians, oppressed by modernity today,[63] can understand and communicate the universal Christian faith in their own unique voice in the church and to the world. These same theologians would add further that the popular church redefined what is acceptable inculturation of the faith long ago, and the rest of the church needs to recognize that. "Popular groups are deeply spiritual," Irarrázaval insists, "even though they are continually repressed and

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Joe, Shie and Vernooij, "The Quest for Respect," 199. However, this remains the case in much of the Caribbean, where liberation begins with the recognition that God sees the people there as not inferior to their former colonial or post-colonial masters, but as human beings, and that carries socio-political import for liberation. Lewin L. Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 200, 211.

[61] For example, in Brazil, liberation theology has achieved a level of influence where during presidential elections, "the religious language which gives pride of place to the poor became important for the candidates. This means that religious symbols and images are very much present in the awareness of the Brazilian masses" (Santa Ana, "Popular Religion and Liberation in Latin America," 101). This use of language is not entirely cynical. Thanks to the policies of Brazil's governments over the past two decades, the poverty rate has been halved. See "Focus: Brazil," *The Economist* online (November 1, 2011), www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/-2011/11/focus.

[62] The Latin American bishops concluded at that conference, "The New Evangelization needs to inculturate itself more into our cultures' way of life and being, taking into account the particularities of diverse cultures, especially the Indigenous and Afroamericans. (We urge learning to speak according to the mentality and culture of those who listen according to the forms and mediums of communication that are in use.) Thus, the New Evangelization continues in line with the incarnation of the Word." Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, *Santo Domingo Concluciones: IV Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano* (Bogota: CELAM, 1993), no. 30 [Translation mine]. See also Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology,* 158.

[63] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 29.

discriminated against by the powerful and well educated."[64] What is needed, instead, is a critical engagement by the entire church in Latin America with the already-inculturated spiritual practices of the majority of their people, including how they approach worship and the sacraments.

Irarrázaval identified at least three types of inculturated spirituality to be engaged by theologians and those who minister to the people for a critical inclusion in the sacramental and worship life of the church. The first type is the devotional alliance: the practice of direct and ongoing contact through prayer and celebration between a person and a male or female saint. "It may be the patron saint of a town, the object of an association of devotees, or a mass shrine."[65] It can also be direct and ongoing contact with a popular devotion such as *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (Mexico), Divina Pastora-Our Lady of the Good Shepherd (Trinidad), El Cobre (Cuba), the Sacred Heart, a devotion promoted by a religious congregation, etc. All share an understanding that the relationship is between believers and a protector. "It is a mystical interaction with concrete implications in health, solving family and economic problems, and many more things."[66] The second type is the militant spirituality of groups that choose their particular modes of religious expression that are carried out through particular customs. Social action, Bible reading for the purpose of spiritual edification and catechesis, and groups focused on worship and sacraments are its most common manifestations.[67] The third type is occasional spirituality, where Catholics "participate sporadically and selectively in church activity and in modalities of popular worship, for example, prayer at grave sites and memorials to the dead, attachment to amulets, rituals for protecting oneself against evil and bad luck, ceremonies in emergency situations."[68] Such persons freely blend Christianity with other religions and use these spiritual practices as a tool to try to conjure into reality personal success and fortune, as a divine fire extinguisher to squelch instances of misfortune, or divine armor against evil. Not all of these beliefs and practices would receive acceptance, nor should they, but the people engaging in these beliefs and practices would be dialogued with and have a voice in what theologians and the church would decide to accept officially.

In the Caribbean, Carlos Guillermo Wilson aptly described the development of religion in that region as "a marvelous cradle-

[64] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 82.
[65] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 83.
[66] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 83.
[67] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 83.
[68] Irarrázaval, *Inculturation*, 83.

hammock and painful cornucopia."[69] On the one hand, the region is rich with culture, including religious traditions that embrace popular and official church celebrations. On the other hand, the incorporation of the former into the latter has been a fraught process, bound up in the project of Caribbean liberation. This cultural liberation has been described by Joop Vernooij as a "creolization" of the Christian faith. Avoiding the traditional hegemony of European (and one could add North American) Christianity, Christianity gains an understanding of the Caribbean people[70] who wish to define themselves and their faith from within, instead of being exclusively defined by colonial and neo-colonial ideas from without. Idris Hamid, the father of Caribbean theology, argues, "If we examine carefully the folk-wisdom that has arisen among the people we shall find in those practical wisdom-saying elements of a theology or philosophy of life that reflects our historical experience. Thus any attempt at theology must examine many of the ways in which the reality of God was communicated, experienced and expressed among the people."[71] Caribbean theologians do not seek to eliminate the Christianity brought by the missionaries. European liturgical traditions, as Pedrito Maynard-Reid points out, "are also part and parcel of the Caribbean culture" but "in many cases [that] worship scratches where people are not itching."[72] This is why Caribbean theologians want to move the wisdom and expressions of faith of their people to the fore by moving the line between correct and incorrect inculturation to include "our wisdom sayings, our songs and literature, and the oral tradition" as well as the region's song and dance.[73] Recognized by the church both on an official and popular level as an original and authentic means of God's revelation,[74] it would incorporate all that to achieve a "liturgical revolution... that the whole theology of worship in relation to culture... be re-examined and therefore redefined in a radical way."[75] Monsignor Anthony offers several examples of this from his home island of St. Lucia, where each official practice of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church is paired with popular Catholic rituals.[76]

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[69] Carlos Guillermo Wilson, "The Caribbean: Marvelous Cradle-Hammock and Painful Cornucopia," trans. Elba D. Birmingham-Pokorny and Luis A. Jiménez, in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader,* ed. Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2004), 185.

[70] Vernooij, *Mapping Religious Suriname*, 153-4.

[71] Idris Hamid, "Theology and Caribbean Development," *With Eyes Wide Open* (Barbados: CADEC, 1973), 123; Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," 192.

[72] Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean and Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 148.

[73] Clark, "Liturgy and Culture in the Caribbean," 146.

[74] Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," 192.

[75] Clark, "Liturgy and Culture in the Caribbean," 146.

[76] One example Anthony introduces is the use of Holy Water. Aside from its use in baptism, it is used to bless homes and businesses for protection against evil; it is

Again, what these theologians propose is not an uncritical appropriation of indigenous, popular understandings of Christianity. These same people who advocate for the incorporation of indigenous practices in worship and sacraments understand that these sources "have to be subjected to theological inquiry and scrutiny."[77] This task must be done because the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of inculturation is already being moved in the Caribbean by the people themselves both for good and for ill. Theologians, clergy, and lay ministers who acknowledge and work with this reality will be in a position to help the church constructively engage and keep in the church those who practice these forms of belief and worship.

Juan Luis Segundo would argue that all Christian theologians, and not just those who reside in Latin America and the Caribbean, adopt a stance of critical trust. He describes this trust as allowing the people to "evangelize the theologian," in other words, to study and experience how these faithful in their practice of faith (often in the face of suffering) introduce God to the world.[78] Theologians by no means would set aside their formal education. (It is safe to assume those in pastoral ministry are extended the same compliment.) Segundo continues, "As intense as the theologian's conversion to ordinary people might be, this intellectual cannot totally renounce the exercise of a certain criticism."[79] The theologian will recognize in the culture of common people "negative elements" and "magnificent liberating aspects" at the same time. "It is a question, then, of distinguishing one from the other and, to the extent possible, of promoting some while restraining or repressing others."[80] Julio de Santa Ana steps in to argue that theologians then should help people move from what the Marxist Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci identified as their common sense, into developing what he called a "good sense" with their practice of the faith. (The presence of Gramsci should not surprise, since he is among the more influential Marxists amongst Latin American Theologians.[81]) Common sense is a people's uncritical conception of

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drunk or poured on the body for protection against or healing from illness. He observes too that "bathing with water containing 'holy water' is a common remedy for *lanmaway* (the belief that someone's life has been malignantly 'tied up,' so that the person can make no progress or see any light [and/or] clear direction in their life)." Patrick A.B. Anthony, "St. Lucia, West Indies: Garden of Eden?" in *Popular Catholicism in a World Church,* ed. Thomas Bamat and Jean-Paul Wiest (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 99.

[77] Anthony, "A Case Study in Indigenization," 193.

[78] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 24.

[79] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 27.

[80] Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," 27.

[81] See Enrique D. Dussel, "Theology of Liberation and Marxism," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology,* ed. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 87-8.

the world as they receive it.[82] For example, the fatalism that accompanied many popular expressions of faith in Latin America and the Caribbean was one major reason why theologians made the initial, erroneous, undifferentiated rejection of its practice. The "good sense" Santa Ana speaks of requires theologians, pastoral ministers, and the people they work with to transform their incultrated understandings and expressions of faith into aspirations for integral liberation of the human person and their communities, confrontation with those who deny them the achievement of these aspirations, and action for liberation as they see fit.[83]

One example from personal experience: I have described how Caribbean theology sees itself as a project of liberation through culture. When I taught my first course for Trinidadians and introduced the people there to theology done by Caribbean theologians using an extensive range of articles covering all topics, I did so out of a sense of giving the course intellectual credibility in the eyes of my students. But one student, a long-serving, high-ranking lay minister in the Archdiocese of Port-of-Spain told me how learning about an intellectual tradition found on his very doorstep affirmed his identity as a Caribbean man. He can inherit and build upon an indigenous Caribbean intellectual tradition that is part of the Catholic theological tradition that helps eliminate the stereotype of that region, held by too many outsiders, as a collection of vacation resorts. More importantly, it is a concrete demonstration that the church sees his practice of the faith as truthful and therefore a source for its theological work.

What concrete steps can theologians employ with Latin American and Caribbean people and the rest of the church, in redefining or, at times, keeping in place, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable inculturation? Schineller argues that this effort begins with the right disposition toward inculturation. This includes a willingness to risk error, without which one cannot find success, an attitude of freedom in allowing the cultural practices of a group of people to be incorporated into worship and sacraments, a trust that allowing inculturation grants the church a better sense of what the reign of God is, patience with the whole process to the point of it being taxed, a charismatic dimension shown in a confidence that God is at work among the people, including their *sensus fidelium*, and yet this spirit of openness remains a critical one.[84] Beyond the right disposition, the concrete steps for acceptable inculturation include asking the following.[85]

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[82] Santa Ana, "Popular Religion and Liberation in Latin America," 102.
[83] Santa Ana, "Popular Religion and Liberation in Latin America," 105-7.
[84] Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 57-8.
[85] See Schineller, "Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism," 56-7.

First, is it faithful to the Christian message? Is the incorporation of cultural customs into the worship and sacramental life of the church able to better communicate the message of the gospel without contradicting its content? Can it do the same with tradition, such as the creeds and councils of the church, the work of theologians, and devotional practices shared by most Christians elsewhere such as Mary and the saints? A small example: Both Yoruba[86] (an African religion which is a major influence on religion in the Caribbean and Brazil) and Judeo-Christian religions share an affinity for hilltops as places to encounter the divine. Affinities like this between Christianity and the customs and religious practices it encounters can be fruitful for inculturation.

Second, does the inculturation of church worship and liturgy build upon the culture of the people? For example, a belief in the all-pervasive presence of God—in which sacraments and sacramentals may enjoy a preeminent unique place, but nonetheless are accompanied by other customs or points of contact with the divine understood along Christian lines—may be acceptable. An unacceptable practice would be the belief that the practice of the sacraments and sacramentals can be employed to harm human beings. During a visit to Barbados, I encountered the belief that the sacraments can be viewed as magic tricks to manipulate the divine to do one's bidding, including casting bad spells on one's neighbor. I brought this up with my Caribbean students on Trinidad, who told me to a person how this belief was common to the region, and well-catechized Christians who embrace the popular worship practices of their region generally would nonetheless judge that specific popular belief as unacceptable.

Third, is the guidance and leadership in official church structures, working in tandem with clergy and lay leaders who minister among the people, tapping into their practice of the faith as a good source for theology? A powerful example of what Schineller speaks of here can be had on Trinidad with the excellent working relationships I found between the clergy and laity on that island. The charismatic nature of the practice of the faith there gives all a powerful sense of vocation. No one was left asking why one lacked a vocation, while the other had one. Energy was devoted to a trusting, yet critical culture of mutual support, with light church oversight, to develop and see through one's vocation in service to the church and people of Trinidad.[87]

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[86] Peter Clarke, "The Dilemmas of a Popular Religion: The Case of Candomblé," in *The Popular Use of Popular Religion in Latin America,* ed. Susanna Rostas and André Droogers (Amsterdam: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns Amerika, 1993), 101.

[87] The Archbishop of Port-of-Spain, Joseph Harris, has written how the Church in the Caribbean, if it is to be truly the people of God, responsible for each other and for the Church's evangelical mission and social ministry, must understand ecclesiol-

The redefintion of inculturation, distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable inculturation, is happening now in Latin America and the Caribbean. Theologians from those regions are working alongside pastoral ministers to bring about a just resolution that dispels the stereotype that the people whom they serve engage in peculiar worship practices of dubious pedigree.[88] Instead, the hope is the people of the local church in Latin America and the Caribbean are left with little doubt as to their inclusion and acceptance in the universal church. It is an issue where the resolution will be developed through practice, followed by the theology that will arise and respond to articulate it. Meanwhile, perhaps one can hope that popular religious practitioners, theologians, those in ministry, and church authority continue to relate to each other as friendly though occasionally argumentative and bickering members of the same Catholic family.

ogy as a situation where "Christ's power resides not only in certain members but in the totality of the people of God." Therefore all share in the responsibility of Church ministry. Harris, a Trinidadian who spent years serving as a priest in Paraguay, is representative of theologians and ministers in the Caribbean and Latin America who seek to redefine Church hierarchy as leadership of a people who minister and are ministered to collaboratively. See Joseph E. Harris, "From Dominance to Partnership: The Christian Community as Locus and Agent of Ministerial Formation," *Theology in the Caribbean Today 1: Perspectives,* Patrick A.B. Anthony, ed. (Castries: Archdiocesan Pastoral Center, 1995), 48.

[88] Catholic theologians of the Caribbean region, for example, meet every other year to discuss, among other things, issues brought up in this article. This author, a sympathetic American outsider, is honored to be included in their number. See http://caribbeantheologytoday.net/