

## **Transcending Boundaries of Religion** *[to redefine the church]*

It is a general accepted idea that societies require structure and boundaries; in harmony with this idea, societies need order and policies to avoid chaos and anarchy; according to this, we may hardly survive in a world without rules.

Following the same pathway, individuals require structure such as: beliefs, ideology, sense, intellect, principles, values, etc., for being active members in their communities and society. At last it means that individuals also have boundaries...

These boundaries can be self-imposed and in this case would be spiritual... As we all know, spirituality goes beyond the individual, however, most of the times boundaries are imposed by the society and in this case would be religion... And what is religion? I have tried to recap in one sentence all the definitions I've read about religion: religion is a system of beliefs and devotional practices, which often contain moral codes to rule the behaviour of human relationships.

As we all may know, the religion often becomes a political tool and an instrument to rule the society; powerful people think along certain codes, not exactly because they care about humanity, but because they care about interests. This influence is imposed to large numbers of people so far thinking along the same lines and they carry other members, resulting in a continual reproduction of similar thoughts. I would use Paul Freire words to affirm: "the oppressed have become accustomed to the structure of domination of the oppressors and have become resigned to it". Well then, religion has been becoming one of the most powerful boundaries for the humanity; occasionally religion is

self-imposed by individuals, **nevertheless** most of the times, religion has been imposed by powerful forces of the society.

In the near past some **Marxists** have defined religion, not the spirituality just the religion, as opium of the consciousness of the oppressed. Meanwhile some **idealists** have defined religion as guidance and alternative of hope... In Latin-America during the past eighties, a popular social movement bring back together elements from both, Marxism and idealism, to create one of the most humanist, pacifist, liberator, and committed to social justice movement of this whole continent known as the **Theology of the Liberation**. This theology became in time a real revolutionary ferment of hope to rebuild religion.

During the 90s beginning with the fall of the socialism we began losing virtues such as the solidarity and internationalism, instead the world initiated an exaltation of the supremacy of private property, and the supremacy of the economy and the market in **detriment** of democracy values and social rights. With the establishment of the capitalism as the only alternative, the world gradually became more conservative and imperialistic; at the same time the globalization became unlimited.

According to Lori Beaman and Anna Halafoff, Editors of the book "Boundaries of Religious Freedom", in the current process of globalization, religion is occupying a more prominent place in the public sphere of the 21st Century, despite prior predictions of religious decline. The book raises concerns about how religious identity is posing both, challenges and opportunities, pertaining to issues of governance in the world, creating tensions in how to design and apply policies in education, gender equality, sexuality, rights and freedoms.

In context our world is facing today powerful challenges such as the desperation of millions of people living in poverty without hope, millions of forced displaced and dispossessed people; 50 millions of refugees and thousands of them jumping and sadly dying in the sea trying to reach new lands and better future; the planet is also facing climate change and environmental disasters. Meanwhile we don't see a realistic commitment from governments to find solutions; instead, the humanity is facing a renovated wave of imperialism full of military interventions and the consequent destruction of whole countries and societies such as in Syria. The initial justification for this painful situation, mostly but not only from powerful western countries, is to deepen this human tragedy, by selling the idea that we were fighting the terrorism like in Iraq.

I would take the risk to say something: we have been creating the terrorism by imposing wrong policies and giving the control to those in charge of financial markets, and to crazy powerful leaders. Many in distress and not hope have responded turning their lives into very conservative religion tendencies and extremism. The most conservative leaders and religious sectors in all sides of the world have taken advantage of the situation to impose their ideas and boundaries. And then the religion has been becoming an instrument of domination and violence. Now we have a mix of market fundamentalism, extreme atheism, but also extreme conservative religion trends, which brings together obscurantism, racism, violence and fear.

One of the risks of the fundamentalism in religion, and at this point I would like to address some possible risks that we as Christians, Mennonites are not an exception, may also face when extreme conservative boundaries are dominant; the high risk is not having

anymore the God invoked by Moses; a God who was listening the cry and the affliction of the oppressed people; a God committed to release his people throughout hope and strong hand; this God full of mercy is our Lord, and he is not an imperialist, but a God of justice and liberation.

Unfortunately the current conservative fundamentalism religion pretends to show a God who answers mostly to the dominant classes; their idea of God is the one who answers to those who acts and impose imperial ideas, those are the same that seems to worship the market and the money as their real God; those are the same who seems to put the economy and the current system of inequalities as a church.

There is, in my opinion, a dilemma that posed questions like: Is this system of inequalities the one that Jesus preached when he was looking for his 12 apostles? I don't think so.

Another question: Is the current system of inequalities accepting our beautiful wise idea of God? I would say that this market system claims to be directly a god... Such a gross idea, and worst, sometimes acts like a god system. We must be careful.

I will say that due to the changing nature of the contemporary conflicts and the negative role played by the creeds around the world, we may have to redefine the boundaries of the religion. I am not saying that we do not need structure and boundaries connected or inspired by Christianity; on the contrary what I'm saying is that we need to redefine rules and structure of the religion in context with the reality. We should expand our limits to accept new individual and social freedoms including political affairs, to be able to accept the self-determination of

the peoples and their independence. It also means to accept secular states that respect individual rights, dignity and personal freedoms.

In line with this prior reflection, one of the readings today, Psalm 19 verse 7 says: The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

At this point I would like to formulate another question: is the church at the service of human ideals of happiness, peace and social justice? Are we enlighten to understand meanings for instance of emancipation? Emancipation is not only spiritual; emancipation also means liberation and social freedoms, but also means hope and meanings for life. Are we cultivating a church to welcome new generations anxious for answers to their questions about spirituality, peace, justice, family, sexuality, environment, etc.? Perhaps, Can be the current social, economic and environmental challenges, the instrument and the propitious environment to redefine the church to welcome new critical and skeptical generations? This is a question that emerges when I speak for instance with my son, a young person like many other kids here willing to contribute to preserve peaceful communities and a society aware of social justice and democratic values; this is a generation that needs a church committed not only with spirituality, but devoted to build a better world... As Luke 4:18 we may wish the spirit of God be upon us to bring good news, amen.

**Luis Alberto Mata**

*(Community settlement immigration worker at the Mennonite New Life Centre)*

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