

The use of the Bible in MBM mission strategy in the Argentine Chaco

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"Aproximarse a la cuestión indígena es en primer lugar atreverse a saber. Saber que tenemos un problema indígena, que él existe. Que pertenece a este mundo social en que vivimos y en el que ellos agonizan. La cuestión aborigen es un enorme y silencioso espejo que nos refleja imágenes de nuestro mundo externo que escotomizamos y negamos".

"To approach the indigenous issue in the first place is to claim to know. To know that we have an indigenous problem, that he exists, that he belongs to this social world in which we live and in which they agonize. The aborigene issue is a huge and silent mirror which reflects back to us images of our external world which we minimize and deny"

--Jorge Pellegrini, in "Mapuches, vida, locura y muerte"; Temas de Psicología Social, Revista 1963 No. 5, pp.86-87. (my translation)

In order to understand present day relationships of the Toba to Mennonite missionaries and other persons from 'outside', we must look at several factors: the concepts of power which traditionally and currently still govern economics within the Toba culture, the history of colonization of the Chaco and relationships of the Toba with non-Indians, and the function of questions within the context of Toba/non-Toba interaction. Finally, we will look at how Bible study might fit into this scheme for understanding our missionary presence.

1. CONCEPT OF POWER

The concept of power and its relationship to economics in several indigenous *chaqueño* cultures has been noted by several authors. Among others, are the following:

- Loewen, Kratz, and Buckwalter, "Shamanism, Illness, and Power in Toba Church Life", Practical Anthropology, Nov/Dec 1965
- Walter Regehr in an unpublished paper, "Movimientos de revitalización y rituales nuevos..."
- Pablo Wright, "Dream, Shamanism, and Power among the Toba of Formosa Province", 1992; and "Los conceptos de 'Marisca' y 'Trabajo' como etnocategorías de los Toba de la provincia de Formosa, 1985
- Stephen Kidd, "Land, Politics and Benevolent Shamanism: The Enxet Indians in a Democratic Paraguay, 1995
- Volker von Bremen, "Fuentes de caza y recolección modernas: proyectos de ayuda al desarrollo destinados a los indígenas del Gran Chaco, 1987

At the risk of overgeneralization I am making use of writings about other Gran Chaco groups as well as about the Toba/Qom of Argentina.

Since much of what Kidd says in his writing about the Enxet of the Paraguayan Chaco would also apply to the Toba, I will quote and summarize from his paper.

"They understand [power] to be derived from both outside knowledge and relationships with outside beings. The paradigmatic power relationship is that of the shaman with his auxiliary spirits. The Enxet conceive of a

personalised universe in which each object is associated with some spiritual being." (Kidd, p.62)

"For power to be legitimate it needs to be used for the benefit of the local community. However, the potential exists for the shaman to use his power illegitimately to establish asymmetrical relations." (Kidd, p.62)

"This same concept of power is relevant when the Enxet are in contact with non-Indians. The best example is that of the Indians' relations with missionaries." p.62

While traditional leaders were dependent on their shamanic abilities, the new leaders were put in positions of authority by the missionaries. Thus there was a new source of power, and a different set of outside beings with whom the proper relationships must be established and cared for. (p.62)

Regehr discusses the cultural concepts of the Nivaclé of the Paraguayan Chaco which also are quite similar to the Argentine Toba. He says,

"The traditional concept of the Nivaclé considers the world - his environment - as a single unity of mythical origin....Within this mythical interpretation the material goods of western civilization also have their religious origin, and the gospel of the missionaries logically ought to share the key for acquiring those goods." (p. 14)

"Traditionally the Nivaclé had to comply with a ritual related to the owner of the animals for "good luck" in the hunt....Fulfilling the ritual assured success....Today these ritualized concepts are transferred towards the new owners, such as the bosses, the missionaries and the experts of the development projects. The new imposed rituals 'must be fulfilled', the new rules and tabus 'must be respected', in order to assure access to the new resources for subsistence". (p. 19, my translation from Spanish)

Pablo Wright (1992) describes Toba cosmology in similar terms:

"Toba cosmic geography is structured in such a way that each part with its subdivisions possesses a nonhuman entity that governs it....This principle of domains and hierarchies is reproduced in all part of the Toba universe, including the community, where the headman acts as 'owner' of that space."

"We might say that, in the Toba cosmos, *no'wet* assumes the role of receptacle and measure of the numinous, including the generality of what is powerful,...The relationship between man and *no'wet* is vital for humans' physical and social well-being, and the shamans are primarily, but not exclusively, in charge of these connections." (p.154,155)

"To be a hunter and a shaman ultimately requires the revelation of a *no'wet*'s will, who gives that person his power and the knowledge to carry out his tasks efficiently. This power expresses itself concretely in the *no'wet*'s cession of auxiliary spirits,...who facilitate the performance of specific tasks."

"The benefit of the *no'wet* for humans expresses itself in power and knowledge....Among the Toba the term "power" refers not only to political processes that imply decision making and exercising authority, but also to a control of the forces in the universe that permit good health and well-being (Miller 1977, 306). The usual ways in which humans gain this power and knowledge are through dreams, visions, and through "meetings' or 'apparitions' in person." (p.155,156)

Kidd points out in his discussion of the Enxet in Paraguay that "When using their power legitimately, [Enxet] Mission leaders are expected to act as intermediaries between their people and the missionaries." "...indeed the Enxet have treated missionaries as almost synonymous with other material resources which are there to be hunted, gathered and fished. Techniques have been developed by the Enxet to enable the successful harvesting of the Mission's resources. Key amongst these has been 'conversion' to the Mission's cult." (p. 63)

Elmer Miller has also made the observation about the Toba of Argentina, that they had "learned how to get maximum benefit from whites". (Miller, 1995, p.96)

Regarding the current relationship of Enxet leaders to politicians within the present day democratic process, Kidd points out that contrary to the frequently expressed lamenting (on the part of non-Indians) over the supposed manipulation of naive Indians by unscrupulous politicians, what is in fact happening is that

"it is not so much that the politicians manipulate the Indians but that the Indians themselves are quite capable of transforming the electoral process so that they are the ones who benefit." (p. 64)

"The Indians clearly perceive the politicians as resources to be harvested and have various techniques to achieve this, the key one being to convince the politicians that they support them." (p.67)

The danger in all this is that the relationships with politicians, as with any outside sources of power,

"could cause or exacerbate divisions in the Indian communities." "There are indications that this is beginning to happen amongst the Enxet and is related to the fact that power in Enxet communities is derived from outside. Consequently, politicians are regarded as potential sources of power and, as they look for influential supporters in the communities, some Indians are beginning to take advantage of this to achieve or strengthen positions of leadership."

And, although "it would not be true to say that the politicians caused the divisions,..." they have been guilty of exacerbating existing tensions in the community and are used by the Indians as alternative sources of power." (p. 67).

This situation is very similar to that which is observed in the Argentine Chaco except that in Argentina there has been a longer process of democratization. Thus the divisive effects on the Indian communities are further advanced--especially in those settlements closest to the cities which are most susceptible to the politicians' interventions. Here they have reached an advanced level of desintegration and conflict. This has resulted in an extremely low level of interpersonal trust and a resurgence of shaman activity in what appears to be a search to reestablish harmony within the community but which seems to only lend itself to the further desintegration of the communities.

Regehr points out in his paper that:

"As long as the new rituals function, the relationships with the new owners are maintained. But if the expected results are not forthcoming, the cause [the guilty one] is soon sought in order to reestablish the balance.... If the new ritual is no longer productive, the new owner and hunting grounds are changed. All at once a whole community may be ready

to approach another mission, or another organization, or another boss and at once ready to learn and fulfill a new ritual. If the new rituals repeatedly fail to bring the expected results, today even more frequently than before the traditional rituals will be turned to, e.g. shamanism." (p.20, my translation)

Carlos Duarte has pointed out ("Pentecostalismo y Cultura Aborigen", Sept, 1990) that, in the case of the Toba of Argentina, pentecostalism was chosen as a new symbolic system which offered them the possibilities for survival in the new context which was, for them, "threatening, oppressive, and even absurd" (p.25). Pentecostalism allowed them to recreate mechanisms of interpretation and control over the new reality. However, in the process they thoroughly reinterpreted and adapted the message of pentecostalism to fit their own worldview.

"This has generated a new and original religious expression which reestablishes in its own way the internal ties between the different aborigin communities and the links with the surrounding society. Clearly not all is roses in this process which has only recently begun, which means that the process of incorporating, interpreting and reworking of pentecostalism on the part of the different aborigin ethnic group has not yet finished". (C.Duarte, p.25, translation mine)

2. HISTORY

It is instructive to look at the history of the IEU within this context.

The Mennonite missionaries who came to the Chaco in 1943, first established a Mission compound. However, after an initial ten-year period of trying to meet Toba expectations of harvesting, there was a deliberate effort to reestablish their missionary role in terms which minimized those possibilities. This was accomplished through a process of discontinuing the Mission and of subsequently helping the Toba leaders to establish and organize their own autochthonous church, the IEU.

Ever since they unburdened the Mennonite Mission of the Nam Cum [sic] compound in 1955, Mennonite missionaries have deliberately and persistently sought to follow a policy of not becoming resources to be harvested. In fact, they have often refused to share of their wealth even at the risk of being labelled as 'unchristian', or accused of stinginess (one of the worst of all social transgressions in toba culture), or of outright rejection by the Tobas as simply not worth the effort of pursuing. All for the sake of maintaining their relationship with the Toba as free as possible of the implications which becoming a source of resources would mean.

In a recent reflection, A.Buckwalter writes, "The directive style of relationship we maintained with the Native Americans in those beginning years insured that real feelings and beliefs went underground! It was costly to admit to ourselves that we were encouraging hypocrisy of the worst kind, based on the fear of jeopardizing the economic benefits of the mission-compound setup, were they to disclose their true thoughts. It was a realization of the enormous difficulty of our maintaining a healthy personal relationship with the Indians." (correspondance, 1994)

When the IEU was first formed, expectation of economic benefits was quite certainly one of the driving motivations on the part of the Indians. The

debates were at times bitter and long lasting, over who would be the Indian leader authorized to sign official papers, and over which of the Indian settlements would be the official location of the new organization.

A leading church leader remembers that when the IEU was formed, Albert said, "We do not come to make any promises nor to offer anything. We are working to get the legal document for you so that you might be independent, and both you and we will live by faith in God."

This policy has gone hand-in-hand with a strategy also followed consistently by Mennonite missionaries since 1955, of encouraging Toba self-determination (*autogestión*) in all of life, including economics and the church. Refusing to become a source of material resources, along with other elements of the policies followed by Mennonite missionaries, has encouraged self-reliance, self-confidence, and ethnic pride.

In recent years, ever diminishing resources in the Argentine Chaco has increased even more the need for Toba leaders to replace traditional power sources with those from non-Indian society. Missionaries or non-Indian churches, and politicians have been especially fruitful. Most recently, municipalities and the fast growing number of NGOs are replacing the national government's programs of assistance.

Already in 1984 Orlando Sánchez, then president of the IEU, characterized the situation of the IEU as being surrounded by all the organizations who for one reason or another want to maintain a relationship with them. He compared it to that of a flock of chickens enclosed in a coop surrounded by persons on the outside making them fight.

From time to time there have been 'threats' on the part of Toba leaders to drop their relationship with the Mennonites or leave the IEU since it doesn't bring any material 'results'. More than once Aurelio López pressured the Mennonites to finance a Bible school, expressing regret that he had not accepted the offer of the Baptists years before.

In 1984 Orlando Sánchez pressured the Mennonite missionaries with the threat that he would "send them away" if they didn't come through with their part of the material aid he was asking for.

In 1990? an older Toba from Bartolomé de las Casas, who was one of the original leaders of the IEU in Formosa province, joined the Mormons because in his own words, "I wanted to go where the grass was greener [for grazing]."

In 1991 the Pilagá church leaders began a movement which led to their separation from the IEU on the Chaco Province. They were joined by a handful of Tobas from Bartolomé de las Casas and by the majority of the Wichí IEU people. This segment eventually organized as a legal entity under the name "IEU de Formosa" and solicited their own fichero from the national Ministerio de Cultos. A major reason for this division was the continual failure of the material goods harvested on a regular basis from the Swedish Mission in Chaco province to reach the Indigenous believers of Formosa province.

Then, in 1994, a longstanding conflict in the Chaco province came to a head when IEU president Marcelo González's term was ending and he was unable to continue because of poor health. The López family made the IDACH (the governmental institute of Indigenous affairs for Chaco province) their principal supplier of resources, along with a white evangelist out of Bs. As.

who served as a main source of mobility and power for their chosen president, Dionisio Moreno.

Meanwhile Orlando Sánchez formed an unlikely alliance with the Swedish Foundation "El Buen Pastor", and together with economic support from the JUM of Castelli and the FAIE in Bs.As. was able to legally install a commission composed of persons whom he can manage. Crucial to this action was power conferred on Sánchez by the FAIE in the form of a legal power-of-attorney issued to him years earlier when he was the acting president of the IEU. Even though this authorization no longer has legal recognition, Sánchez as well as most of the Toba act as if it were still valid.

Even though dubious methods were used by Sánchez to achieve the legal designation of his commission, it was tolerated by a number of leaders, most of whom are directly benefitting economically from their relationships with the three organizations mentioned. Since support for this political move was not a majority among the Toba of the Chaco province, Sánchez also formed an alliance with the Toba of the eastern part of Formosa. At least half of the commission is from Formosa province.

All three of these current organizational expressions of the IEU claim legitimacy for their efforts as representing the more authentic continuation of the original IEU. It is common to hear public expressions by leaders of all three which claim identification with the historic principle upon which the IEU was founded. Some examples: "Our leaders should stick to the spiritual things and not get involved in politics," "The IEU is a poor church. We don't have resources of our own." "We live by faith in God, who helps us through our own efforts."

Simultaneous with this discourse, leaders of all three organizations are involved in developing and maintaining their harvesting relationships with whatever agency lends itself and its resources most readily to that possibility.

3. QUESTIONS

Finally, the Toba share with many other indigenous people the widespread cultural traits of taking more time in coming to the point in any conversation with strangers, and of honoring an inner need to be in the right psychological state before opening up the desired topic. In addition, perhaps due to the cultural and historical reasons discussed above, the Toba have developed within their oral communication a style of conversation with outsiders which is almost completely non-directive, indirect, circular, and evasive. They have become experts in conversing without direct confrontation, in avoiding direct questions, in using double-talk.

To understand, within the context of present day crosscultural communication, what it means for any outsider to come to the Toba asking questions, it is important to consider that for the Toba there seems to be no hypothetical question (What if...?, Supposing that...?, etc.). The simple act of asking the question means a desire, an interest, an offer on the part of the one who asked the question. It already indicates either an offer to help with the solution or an interest in the outcome. Subsequent failure to follow through on what was understood as an 'offer' is almost certain to be perceived by the Indians as insincerity.

Elmer Miller, in his article, "Why do *dogshi* always tell lies?", 1989, points out this communications difficulty:

"Part of the difficulty in mutual understanding is a presumption on the part of the dominant society that effective communication is taking place when, in fact, it is not. What we 'whitefolk' sometimes express as intentions or desires are likely to be interpreted by the Toba as commitments. When such intentions/commitments fail to be realized, most of us are inclined to accept the failure as fate, or the system at work, thinking little more about it. Most Toba, however, particularly those raised in traditional families, perceive this as failed promise." (p.7)

This may be illustrated by several anecdotes.

In Ibarreta the local priest has been working with the Toba in a small reservation outside town for perhaps 10 years. He now wants to start a RC church among them and called a meeting inviting the leaders of the other churches to come and answer questions regarding their faith and the history of those churches. The Toba are quite distrustful of his motives especially since they see he has already built a small chapel near the school on reservation land. One pastor informed me of their doubts and concluded with these words: "If he is asking questions it's got to be that he has something which is bothering him."

Following a visit to the Toba settlement on the outskirts of Formosa City by the Mission Tour Group from the US in 1991, a leading Toba pastor from the interior who had been visiting, was lamenting that he hadn't been included in the conversations. He reprimanded me, saying, "We don't know what kind of deal was worked out with pastor X (whom they had visited at his house). It's not for nothing they have come, there has to be something."

4. MISSION STRATEGY

Mennonite missionaries have responded to all the above realities by developing a particular and perhaps peculiar mission strategy in their relationship with the Indigenous people of the Argentine Chaco. It is a strategy which deliberately seeks to avoid raising expectations which can never be fulfilled to the satisfaction of the Indians. It is a non-directive, non-confrontational relationship expressed through visitation in the role of 'guest', through offering only the 'Word of God', through dialogue with Indians as between equals seeking to know God together. The benefits of this strategy were confirmed recently by a prominent Toba church leader who said, "The Mennonites can go into any church without fear because they bring no promises."

This strategy implies actions such as the following:

- avoid becoming connecting links for relationships with harvesting possibilities; e.g., broader inter-church gatherings,
- planning only events which need no outside funding,
- providing no resources for social action programs, which tend to exacerbate internal divisions,
- not intervening in conflicts which arise due to harvesting possibilities,
- avoid all denominational promotion or links which could appear to be a vested interest which missionaries are bringing.

Thus the shape of Mennonite missionary presence in the Chaco may look quite unlike that of Mennonites in other parts of the world. In the interest of a presence which results in a more authentic relationship with the Indians, Mennonites as 'fraternal workers' have run the risk of appearing to be interested only in the 'spiritual' aspects of Toba reality, thus less than 'holistic', in their missionary action.

5. MISSIONARIES and the BIBLE

Of all the possible activities for fraternal workers among the Toba, Mennonite presence has emphasized two above all others:

- 1) promotion of the genuinely autochthonous church, and
- 2) making the Bible understandable.

The latter, the centrality of the Bible, has expressed itself in translation into the native languages, literacy activities focused on the Bible, colportage work of Bible selling, and perhaps above all, Bible teaching in various settings and styles.

As messengers sent to make Christ known, missionaries are intensely interested in the use of the Bible. Similar to Mennonite missionary practice throughout the world, an anabaptist interest in a spirituality which demonstrates faith in life/action has led Mennonite missionaries in the Chaco to emphasize a view of the Bible which would result in a transformation of life. They recognize that the way one understands the Bible has a direct relationship to the way one understands the Christian life.

This was confirmed for me recently in a book by Marcus J. Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time (Harper Collins Publications, New York, 1994). Borg underlines "the important and often unconscious connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life" (p. 119). Since our image of Jesus shapes our image of the Christian life, and since the way we understand the Scriptures shapes our image of Jesus, therefore the way we view the Bible directly affects our spirituality.

Actually, our understanding of Jesus is informed by two major sources: both by our understanding of Scripture and by the sacred traditions of our culture. Even as "the sacred traditions of Israel--the Old Testament--shaped their ways of seeing, thinking, and speaking" (Borg, p.120), so the sacred traditions of the Indigenous *chaqueño* believers shape their ways of seeing, thinking, and speaking. That is, their image of Jesus and consequently their spirituality is shaped by their own sacred traditions.

For any missionary among the Toba it is important to locate Bible study within the Toba cultural perception. Missionaries have their own culturally influenced concepts of the Bible, as Word of God, spiritual authority, guide for faith and life, etc.

However, some questions which constantly surface are: What is the Bible for the Toba? What meaning(s) does the Bible have within their worldview? What does it mean to own a Bible, to study the Bible? What would be a correct use of the Bible within the context of the Gospel inculturated in the Toba world? And finally, what might be the place of a missionary or fraternal worker in Bible study with the Toba? What kind of missionary/Indian relationship can provide the best context for an appropriate use of the Bible?

6. IMAGES and USE of the BIBLE

In the following discussion we will look at some of the ways in which the Bible has been understood and used within the indigenous church context. Bible as fetish, power symbol, healing power.

The use of the Bible in these ways has been well documented. "The Bible is used as a sacred object with curing power in therapeutic rites during religious services, and it is also conceived as an impersonal authority for leadership purposes." (Reyburn 1954). Testimonies to the use of Bible in ways which are understood by missionaries as magic or fetish are numerous.

In armed conflicts with whites shamans have used the Bible as a shield against enemy bullets with varying results.

Locating the Bible in a bag attached to the body as part of the special uniform of the dancers is common in present day religious services.

Toba church leaders themselves have not opposed these uses of the Bible, but rather in addition to them, they have encouraged reading and studying it. Luciano, of the Corona movement (in Formosa Province c.1940-1958) was illiterate but apparently brought Bibles back from San Martin (Chaco province) for his people, had a Bible himself, and prophesied that younger leaders would follow him who would teach the Bible to his people.

Menonite fraternal workers have tolerated these uses of the Bible, not opposing them directly, while encouraging by both teaching and by example that the Bible contains a message which is best understood intellectually, through hearing it read.

Reyburn had encouraged this attitude, pointing out that use of the Bible even as a charm is desirable to no Bible at all since it is part of "the creation of a new atmosphere" which can be exploited to "bring about a genuine reorientation to the Bible" which will lead to what he calls "responsible Christianity". (p.66)

Although there are still (especially among older believers) those who prefer the older (Reina Valera, 1960) version of the Bible, there is a decided preference among the IEU believers for the Versión Popular (comparable to the Today's English Version). This is probably a direct result of the Menonite missionaries' sustained promotion of this version in the interest of increasing comprehension.

Bible as door to criollo (Christian) culture.

The often expressed desire to become 'acculturated' to the surrounding criollo society, especially of younger persons, is seen clearly in a preference by many for using a Spanish language edition of the Bible. Practicing Spanish (both literacy and aural-oral skills) are commonly desired features of some Bible studies. Using the classroom format gives Bible studies the sense of moving towards criollo society.

Many if not most of the more active and successful young Indian politicians have acquired their formation through participation in the church organizational structures and through participation in Bible studies.

The common practice of awarding certificates as recognition for course work is also seen as a step towards acceptance by non-Indian society. Here Indian young people are copying a common feature of Argentine society in which possession of a certificate seems to be of more importance than the learning which might or might not have taken place in the process of acquisition.

Bible as outside source of wisdom (ritual knowledge) in relating to the 'owners' of resources.

The fact that Mennonite missionaries have been relatively successful in avoiding being transformed into resources to be harvested, by no means assures that they do not fit into traditional Toba cosmology. If they are not seen as the new 'owners' of the spaces and/or material things desired by the Toba, as many non-Toba organizations have become, they are definitely seen as sources of the 'knowledge' necessary for unlocking the 'secret' access to those resources. If obedience to the Bible is seen as one of the new rituals which assures the desired results in harvesting in the non-Indian world, then as 'experts' in interpreting the Bible, missionaries are needed and welcomed even without becoming direct harvesting sources.

Thus the Bible is seen as a kind of handbook for the new ritual knowledge which will assure effective access to the wealth of the non-Indian world.

The keen interest in receiving certificates for participation in Bible studies must be understood in this light. In addition to being a further step towards becoming like the non-Indians, the acquisition and possession of certificates may be understood by the Indians as additional steps in the new rituals necessary to assure successful harvesting.

Of course, along with the certificates come the expectations of some kind of financial remuneration for its holder. Thus, the same certificate which may be seen by the institution or expert who grants it as a symbol of a certain level of proficiency or achievement in a skill or knowledge field may be understood by its Indian recipient as the fulfilment of a ritual element required by the 'owner' of certain resources. The 'owner' is then obligated to share the resources with the subject who fulfilled the ritual.

If then, the missionaries by not giving material resources, can keep their relationships relatively free from the owner-who-controls-the-resources role, how can they stay as clear as possible from that other troubling role--that of source-of-secret-ritual-knowledge, that ever illusive key to the riches of the whites? Perhaps only by not meeting expectations of being the 'expert' on bible interpretation, by refusing to serve as the professor, by refusing to use the Bible as a sacred book or as a how-to-do-it guide to ritual. In any case, it is a role which can never be lived up to since the Bible does not contain that sort of message. That magic key is not the power which Bible study offers.

Bible as sacred message from outside source.

For a people of an oral culture, the printed page itself is already somewhat of a mystery. With the high value placed on literacy by the non-Indian society, together with the obvious connection between literacy and employment, it is understandable that Indians might regard the Bible as the key to all the wealth which 'christian' society keeps from them.

In addition, the Argentine Chaco has been saturated by evangelical and pentecostal preaching, much of which treats the Bible as a holy book with a divinely inspired message about how to get a free passport to heaven along with the correct formula for divine healing. This is often heard by the Indians through their cultural grid as a book of ritual knowledge which must be obeyed scrupulously. Explanations of illness, misfortune, or poverty as the result of disobedience to the Bible are frequent. Thus the Bible becomes a key element in a new myth explaining the apparently inescapable poverty of Indian people.

We must turn Bible study into something we do together, where they/we meet God around the Bible together, where together we become more conscious of God's presence in our lives, where the Word from God confronts each of us in our own history. In order to see Bible study in this light we need a relationship as free as possible from the 'harvesting' overtones, as well as all denominational impositions, whether those be statistics added to a denominational structure or the promotion of doctrinal distinctives.

Bible as written testimony of the life-transforming power God.

God has a plan for living in the Light. However, it is not a plan of production vs. foraging (hunting and gathering). It does not depend on how one defines work within a particular cultural framework. Rather, it is a plan of love, peace, and joy--of blessing and being a blessing--worked out within all particular cultures.

Jesus saw his own mission in terms of helping persons (within a peoplehood) become more fully conscious of God's presence and action in their lives. (John 17) He sent his disciples, and us by extension, to do the same. When persons heard the Good News (the story of Jesus) they sensed God's blessing--forgiveness, freedom, an open future. Thus their lives were re-oriented around a new reality--Christ within--which enabled them to move towards a life of joy, love, and peace (just actions, loving care, freedom from fear) as defined within their particular culture. In addition, this new orientation gave them a loyalty to an authority from outside which opened up the possibilities of transforming cultural values in the direction of the newly perceived authority.

Missionaries are 'sent ones' with a message from an outside authority. However, the message is not of a sacred book, nor of a special ritual or key which will open the heart of the 'owners' of abundance. The message is of the Creator of Life who is already at work in all peoples, who invites all nations to follow the Way of Life. That Way is made most visible in the Word, Jesus. God is among us humans as a Guest. God is present in the Creation as a Guest. God's messengers must be present in the world as guests, sent to all cultures as guests, sharing with others the search for Truth. The Bible is a written record of just such a search by a particular people. The Bible confronts all of us and all cultures with that Authority from outside.

However one conceives of this authority--Creator, Cosmic Christ, indwelling Holy Spirit--it should not be equated with the Bible. The Bible will always remain as humanity's most authoritative word because of its proximity to Jesus, God's definitive Word. But simultaneously, it still remains an expression of a culturally influenced perception of that Word, a collective memory of the presence of that Word in the life of a people. As such, the

Bible cannot be simply equated with the Word of God. It is not a sacred book such as the Kor'an claims to be.

Nor is the Bible a manual for learning the correct ritual which assures successful harvesting of resources. It cannot be such an infallible guide to understanding how to relate to the 'owners' of this world's abundance, including health and well-being, land, life and food, in such a way that they are willing or 'obligated' to share what they control. Even though we may consider that the Creator God is the final 'owner' of all abundance and that Jesus came "that they might have life and live in abundance" (a common misreading of John 10), if we teach the Toba obedience to the Bible as the way which assures that abundant living, we are surely heading for frustration and defeat.

That is, the Bible does not provide the 'key' which controls access to the resources of the non-Indian world. The Toba may or may not find that key. In fact, that key probably finally has to do with becoming non-Toba. There is something very non-Toba, perceived as quite 'wrong' by the more traditional Toba, with any Toba who begins to accumulate and enjoy the material wealth of the white world.

The Bible holds a secret of a different kind for the Toba--the way to a truly 'blessed' life within their own Toba culture. In the encounter with the God of the Bible, there is for the Toba a very real power which goes beyond the perception of the anthropological analysis. The power to overcome evil in many forms, the power to love, the power which is sensed when persons understand that they are loved as they are has renewed many lives.

Indians who have left denominational churches with their imported 'christian' forms to become part of the more autochthonous church movement have often expressed their motives for changing churches as a desire "to be converted", ("We wanted to be changed", "We wanted to be able to leave our bad habits") indicating a deep need for power to help overcome personal or group failure. Often, testimonies will include the expression, "Our church may be poor materially, but we are rich in the Lord" which seems to reveal something deeper than or in addition to the manipulative motivations often pointed to by social analysts.

The true Gospel transforms present reality for anyone who believes, regardless of the degree to which they are acculturated to a surrounding foreign culture, regardless of their own culturally acceptable system of resource acquisition, and regardless of their culturally determined manner of relating to their environment, whether that be adaptation to the environment or transformation of the environment. Changes in any of these areas must be self-determined if they are to be genuine. And while the Gospel, or one's perception of the Gospel, certainly influences the choices made, we should impose no cultural universals in any of these areas.

The following comments made by Toba pastors who were participating in a recent workshop on Indigenous spirituality demonstrate this insight.

Toba pastor Rafael Mansilla is also administrator of his rural reservation, one of the few which still has forest with large trees. He told us about the experimental plan being initiated there to use the cover of tall trees to shade small-scale agriculture on the forest floor. Rafael said, "We are seeing more and more that the Gospel must be a force which enables us to

survive. It must help us transform our churches into life-giving communities. For this we need training."

Joel Jara said, "So much in the teachings of the Bible is similar to the teachings of the older Tobas. Remembering their faith makes me contented to be Toba. Rediscovering their theology is like a perfume to me. This is like a huge tree giving off a fragrance which we are inhaling."

Domingo Chazcoso said, "We don't want our culture to be destroyed, but neither do we want to revive all the beliefs and practices of our ancestors. What we are about is the "purification" of our culture--a selective process which makes survival possible. In that process the Bible is our guide."

Contemporary Toba church leaders are evaluating their Christian experience and its relevance for life today. Their view of the Bible is crucial in that process. The above comments reveal understandings of the Christian life based on an image of Jesus which moves beyond the culturally bound images of him as perhaps a most powerful shaman, or the *no'uet* Spirit Wisdom which gives certain persons the access to material goods.

If one's image of Jesus is only informed by one's own sacred traditions which are culturally determined, Jesus will not transform culture. The Scriptures must also help define who Jesus was, why he came, and what his message was. That is why one's understanding of Scripture is crucial.

7. The BIBLE as MEMORY

Bible as written memory of a people conscious of God who acts within history.

If the Bible can be freed to stand as story, then persons from within any culture can meet the Christ through their exposure to the Bible. Even as Jesus sought to free the Pharisees from their misguided expectations in their own study of the Scriptures in order that they might find Him there (John 8:5.39), so Mennonite missionaries as fraternal guests have sought to approach Bible study with the Indigenous peoples within a framework as free as possible from misguided expectations in order that they might encounter the living Word. The quest has been, How can we create a context where that encounter with Christ can best happen? How can we be present with the Bible in such a way which will best facilitate that encounter?

The Bible is the recorded memory of a people on a journey. They are a people who through an historical process by self-actualization or self-determination are protagonists moving toward an idealized end, however they conceive that end. In this, the Israelites are like all peoples. However, in this process Israel has become conscious of God's actions in their history. The Creator God has been revealed, has broken through. God has spoken, God has acted in their story. And in the New Testament story, God has finally been born among them in Jesus, a definitive Word for all time. The Bible is the recorded memory of a people's struggle to walk with that God, in varying degrees of faithfulness.

In my own interacting with Indigenous believers around the Bible I have come to think of the biblical texts as the believing community's memories transformed by their own reflection on, and rereading of, previous experiences in the light of newer experiences and events. This is true for both the Old

and New Testament writings. This does not mean that these writings were not guided in their original expression and in their transmission by the Holy Spirit. But it is to recognize God's Spirit acting within the time and space of historical processes.

This understanding of the Scriptures has a direct influence upon one's view of the Christian life. It opens up the possibility and reality of God's Spirit acting in the transformation of our own history.

As Borg puts it: "That [Christian] life is not about believing nor about being good. Rather...it is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation." (p.2-3) "The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit." This is a relationship "that involves one in a journey of transformation." (p.17)

Jesus himself made use of, and taught, the re-reading of his people's past. Throughout his ministry, his passion, and especially after the resurrection, he found it urgent to re-read the memory of his people through the eyes of a new experience of God's presence and grace. On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.27), and again in the Lucan version of the last commissioning (Lk 24.36-53), it is this remembering and re-reading of the past which opens the eyes of the disciples to the Word present, and prepares them to receive the empowering Spirit.

Bible study ought to be such a meeting with God. It ought to be as free as possible from misguided expectations so that its true secret, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col.1.27) can be discovered. If Bible study for the Chaco Indians can be an encounter with that God who has always been acting within their history, and who has in these last times spoken in Jesus (Heb 1.1-4), within a context where they are able to respond freely to that reality, then they can allow that word to be for them Eternal Life.

8. MISSIONARY as GUEST MESSENGER

That Eternal Life of which Jesus taught will be Light, Life, and Love for the Chaco Indians within their own journey regardless of the degree to which they by their own self-determining choices become acculturated criollos. Perhaps the guest missionary who facilitates that kind of an encounter with God among the Chaco Indigenous will be seen as weak, powerless, and less than 'holistic' because of not being involved directly in either alleviating human suffering or moving the Indians towards greater participation in the 'global village'. But he/she will have the satisfaction of knowing that where the encounter with Christ has happened, it has been a free response.

In participatory conversations around the Bible within the Indian context, Indians discover their own potential to bless others. Here is power for transforming lives, communities, and a whole people! The guest messenger must be free to bring that kind of a message. Therefore, the messenger who wants to create the context for such a message to be heard, must minimize the misguided expectations which are so commonly held by both missionaries and Indians. The missionary must give up all denominational aspirations, while the Indians must be discouraged from seeing the relationship as a potential 'harvest' or as a source of power over material resources. The Bible must be kept as free as possible from becoming a ritual 'key' to the resources of the

non-Indians. In addition, the missionary must not come to 'question' the Indians nor their culture. The Word itself will confront the culture if it is heard freely.

The missionary as guest messenger seeks to create the context for honest, open dialog around the Word, hoping, believing that the Word itself in such a context will call forth, even provoke, genuine faith.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Luke 24.44-49)
