

If You Just Close Your Eyes: Postcolonial Perspectives on Preaching from the Caribbean

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Abstract: *This essay builds on the author's experiences hearing preaching while growing up in the Caribbean. The author offers an acute critique of the traditional sermon, affirming that "deductive preaching is colonial preaching." Acknowledging the contradictions common in the Caribbean, where the colonial and the postcolonial clash every day, Jiménez calls for the development of a postcolonial Caribbean homiletic.*

Introduction

I had the joy and privilege of growing up in the Caribbean. While the majority of my friends grew up in Puerto Rico, where I lived most of my childhood, life led me to experience firsthand the English-speaking Caribbean.

I was born in New York City, in 1960, where my mom had escaped to hide the shame of being a single mother. In turn, my father moved to the US Virgin Islands, where he lived for almost 25 years. My mother's untimely death forced my father and me to begin a father-son relationship when I was 14 years old. From that time and until I turned 21, I spent close to three months of every year in St. Croix, which became my second home.

I came to the faith of Jesus the Christ when I was 15 years old, in the midst of much emotional turmoil. Therefore, I experienced life in the greater Caribbean at a crucial time in my formative years, not only in my social life but also in my intellectual and spiritual life.

St. Croix at Pentecost

Maybe the deepest spiritual experience I had in St. Croix was a Pentecost celebration. I was a 20-year-old candidate to the ministry in 1980. I preached at my home church in Bayamón, PR that Pentecost morning, leaving straight to the airport to catch the short PRINAIR flight to the Alexander Hamilton Airport in St. Croix. My father picked me up around 2:00 p.m. and told me: "We are going to a *fiesta* before getting home."

The "*fiesta*" was a Pentecost celebration at an open-air auditorium in the middle of the Island. Over a thousand persons from different Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal congregations were gathered there, praising God. About a dozen ministers, including four Catholic priests, sat at the podium. The most amazing part of the celebration was the "Confession of Sins," where every priest and pastor acknowledged that they had contributed to the divisions of the Church. They not only asked God for forgiveness, but also apologized to their fellow ministers and to the ecumenical congregation in front of them. Then we all sang the "Our Father" to a beautiful Calypso beat, while one of the priests encourage us to dance to the Lord.

Sadly, that wonderful celebration ended on a low point. And, you guessed it, that low point was the sermon. The preacher for the evening was a renowned pastor affiliated with the Assemblies of God. He was considered as the best preacher in the Island at the time. He was so good, that a friend of mine once described him using the following words: "If you just closed your eyes, you think Billy Graham is preaching." If you just close your eyes...

Deductive Preaching as Colonial Preaching

In all justice, the sermon was a flawless example of the traditional “three points and a poem” expository form. This form arrived to both the English and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean through books that advanced principles taken from the British rationalistic homiletic school, exemplified by Charles Haddon Spurgeon and John A. Broadus. It is a rather rigid form that sees the sermon as a rational exposition of the gospel, which aims to persuade the listener. It begins with an introduction where the preacher states a “proposition,” which is developed in the three sections or “points” that form the body of the sermon. The conclusion restates the “proposition,” illustrating it with an anecdote or a poem. At the end of the process, listeners should be convinced of the veracity of the proposition, leading each hearer to a deeper personal relationship with God.

As I hinted earlier, this deductive preaching style is a colonial vestige. It is patterned after colonial values and, unbeknownst to the preacher, even today it promotes a colonial mentality and a culture of dependency.

Let us enumerate some of the key characteristics of the traditional sermon.¹ First, it is deductive, privileging the concepts, ideas and hypothesis presented by the preacher from the very beginning. Such ideas are disincarnated from the biblical text, following a similar logic to Bultmann’s demythologizing program.² The biblical story is seen as the “outer shell” that must be “discarded” in order to reach the “propositional truths” that abide at the core of the Bible.

Second, the traditional sermon is monological, because it aims to be a scholarly discourse preached by an authoritative figure. In this scheme, the preacher is the expert that pours knowledge in the parishioners’ empty cups. This reminds us of Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking model of education.”³ Therefore, the roles are clear: the preacher speaks while the congregation listens.

Third, the traditional sermon is rationalistic, given that it aims to be an exposition that “proves” the veracity of its “propositional” central statement and its ultimate goal is to “persuade” the listener.

Fourth, if I stress the role of the listener—using the word in the singular—is because the traditional sermon is individualistic. Following the evangelical tenets of the eighteenth century, deductive preaching calls individuals to make “personal” decisions of faith. The aim is not to effect social change, but to help individuals to become closer to God. Instead of transforming society, traditional preaching seeks to change individuals. This explains why deeply pious people could preside over monstrosities, such as slavery, in the Caribbean. While they pitied the fate of the slaves, they felt no urge to challenge the slave trade nor to change the social system based on such trade.

Fifth, this all leads us to consider the topic of authority. The traditional sermon is authoritarian, because—in large part—it mirrors how authority is exerted in colonial societies. As we said earlier, in Colonial times deeply devout people presided over monstrosities, without ever challenging the system. This was all due to the idea that social stratification was divinely ordained. If Kings and Queens ruled by divine providence, then God legitimized all colonial structures, including slavery. According to this perspective, God also called preachers to affirm the colonial social order, in which religious leaders occupied positions of authority. The colonial

¹ I have addressed this issue in my book, *La predicación en el Siglo XXI: Homilética contextual y contextual* (Barcelona: Editorial CLIE, 2009), particularly in Chapters 1 and 7.

² See Norman Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

sermon is authoritarian because a person that is not only considered an authority but who also represents the colonial powers expounds it.

In short, traditional deductive preaching is colonial preaching. The persistence of this preaching style in the Caribbean transcends personal preferences, for traditional deductive preaching is an ideological expression of colonialism.

Worlds Colliding

The reason why that wonderful Pentecost celebration in St. Croix fizzled as the sermon began was because the experience showcased the clash between the colonial and the postcolonial.

The celebration as such was thoroughly postcolonial. The gathered crowd, including its religious leaders, offered immense hope for change. White, Black and Latino/a parishioners and leaders united to worship as one. Differences disappeared, as people from the US Virgin Islands, The British Virgin Islands, Trinidad, Tobago, Martinique and even Puerto Rico worshiped to the beat of Calypso and Soca. Religious leaders transgressed traditional ethnic, racial and denominational lines in order to affirm the one true God. This was liberation worship at its best.

However, as soon as the sermon began, “if you just closed your eyes...,” everything changed. The preacher’s diction was flawless, leaving behind any Caribbean accent. His theology followed traditional Evangelical lines, ignoring the ecumenical setting of the service. The sermon was rationalistic, individualistic and authoritarian, betraying its colonial roots. This traditional sermon could have been preached in any other English-speaking country, given that it never made direct references to the Caribbean.

In short, while worship was postcolonial, the sermon was colonial. While worship called to liberation, the sermon called the people to acquiesce to inherited colonial power structures.

In many ways, the Pentecost Celebration I just described exemplifies what is wrong with preaching and homiletics in the Caribbean as a whole. As our societies struggle to move forward, negotiating the impact of colonialism in our many Islands, the traditional sermon continues to be a beacon of colonial ideology. Even when we make an effort to change our theological perspectives, the very form of the traditional deductive sermon affirms the values of colonial times.

The clash between the colonial and the postcolonial is evident in the Caribbean, leaving us with only one choice: We must “deconstruct” the traditional deductive preaching style in order to develop new homiletic vehicles aimed at the liberation of our people. Ministers, denominations and local churches must unite in this effort, creating myriad new preaching forms that embody the tenets of a postcolonial Caribbean theology.

Building a Postcolonial Caribbean Homiletic

Of course, building a postcolonial homiletic from the Caribbean is no small task. Many factors divide our many islands. Beyond geographical considerations, we are divided by our colonial heritage into three main groups: English-speaking, Spanish-speaking and French-speaking nations. In turn, these groups may be also divided by language and culture, given that some islands still have colonial relations with the US while others relate to Great Britain.

Another wrinkle is the political spectrum, given that the political status may vary from island to island. In the Caribbean you can find independent nations, commonwealths that relate to a former colonial power, fully incorporated territories that function as “states” of the former metropolis, and non-incorporated territories, which are little more than colonies. Currently, I live

in Puerto Rico, a “non-incorporated” US territory, which makes it one of the oldest colonies in the world. Puerto Ricans are US citizens; yet, those who live in the island cannot vote for president and have no senators or voting representatives in Congress.

Finally, we are also divided by our economies, for in the Caribbean you can find some of the poorest nations in the world, such as Haiti, and nations with large per-capita income, such as the Cayman Islands.

Still, people of the Caribbean have many elements in common, which leads me to reiterate the need to somehow join efforts in order to rethink the faith from our multicultural and multilingual Caribbean setting.

Building Blocks

In the space left we will point out some of the blocks needed to build a new postcolonial homiletic from the Caribbean. It is a simple outline, given that an in-depth exposition would require a book on the subject, illustrated with sermons preached from a postcolonial perspective.

History

The first building block is a new reading of history, both of general and ecclesiastical history. Our point of departure must be, as Dr. Justo L. González stressed in *Mañana: An Introduction to Hispanic Theology*, a non-innocent reading of history.⁴ Such non-innocent reading confronts us with the crimes of modernity, many of which took place with the Church’s silence or complicity. We know that we are born out of an act of violence of cosmic proportions in which our Spanish forefathers raped our Indian foremothers.⁵

Seen from the Caribbean, the violent conquest of America, the genocide of native peoples and the slave trade are modernity’s foundational crimes. Of course, these crimes took place with the blessing of the Church, as Luis N. Rivera-Pagán demonstrated in *A Violent Evangelism*.⁶

Church history, as a discipline, has minimized the role of the Church in the conquest. This explains why so many books about the Protestant Reformation fail to point out that this movement took place at the same time as the conquest of America. King Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire was Charles I of Spain. Therefore, the same King who confronted Martin Luther also presided over the colonization of the Caribbean basin. For that reason, González argues that it is impossible to understand the Reformation without studying the conquest of America.

However, many of us studied church history precisely in that way, as if the Reformation and the conquest had nothing in common.

Besides, church history rarely analyzes the development of Christian movements in the Caribbean. Most surveys read church history from the perspective of the so-called “First World,” expounding on the development of the Christian movement in Europe and in the United States. The history of Christianity in the Caribbean has been largely relegated to books about the history of Christian missions;⁷ volumes that are rarely used as main textbooks on required church history courses.

Following González, we argue that a non-innocent reading of history will lead us to

⁴ Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁶ Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁷ Justo L. González, *The Development of Christianity in the Latin Caribbean* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969); Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in The Caribbean* (Kingston: LMH Publishing Limited, 1989).

recognize the continued impact of our colonial heritage in our collective minds. Furthermore, such new reading will help us overcome the artificial geographical and cultural boundaries imposed on the Caribbean by our colonial condition.

Pastoral Theology

From history we move to theology. We use the qualifier “Pastoral” because we want to stress that all theological endeavors must empower the people of God to face and overcome personal and social sin as well as its dire consequences. This leads me to repeat a statement written by José David Rodríguez, a Puerto Rican theologian and professor of systematic theology, who said: “Our theology..., being the product of the painful encounter between the word of God and the experience of marginalization of our communities, will necessarily reflect the marginality to which this experience is subjected in the context of the social structure.”⁸

This formidable statement affirms that theology, in order to be faithful to God and relevant to the people of God, must take reality as its starting point. Theological reflection must be based on the condition of our communities, taking into account both their religious experience and its socioeconomic condition.

Viewed from the Caribbean, this means that the point of departure of a postcolonial homiletic must be the very condition of poverty, marginalization and disenfranchisement experienced by our communities.

For those who have not experienced it, colonialism may be seen as a benign paternalism that ultimately aims to better the condition of the colonized. However, such view minimizes the psychological impact of colonialism in our societies. For example, Aimé Césaire, the scholar and politician from Martinique, wrote a wonderful poem titled “Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal,”⁹ about his return to Martinique after studying in Paris where he befriended scholars such as Leopold Sédar Senghor.

Césaire expresses the long pain endured by communities of African descent in the Caribbean; peoples who lost their languages, their traditions, their religions, their tribal allegiances and their folklore. I read this poem at the University of Puerto Rico, led by Jean-Claude Bajeaux, a Haitian scholar who also happened to be a former Catholic priest. The late professor explained us that one of Césaire’s aims was to denounce the colonial condition; a condition so pervasive that even to insult the French, people from Martinique had to do it in French.

This condition repeats itself throughout the Caribbean. Only islands like Puerto Rico, which was ceded by Spain to the USA at the end of the nineteenth century, have the “luxury” of insulting their current colonial power (the USA) using the language of its former colonial power (Spanish).

While the impact of contextual and political theologies is now taken for granted in most theological schools, the fact is that most churches in the Caribbean still see theology as something you learn from a thick book. It is seen as an intellectual exercise, largely futile, that focuses on rather esoteric issues that have little or no impact in our daily lives.

Many churches are still distracted by traditional theological debates, most of which are totally alien to our Caribbean context. For example, the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism is still “alive and well” in the Caribbean, as well as the debates over

⁸ José David Rodríguez, “De apuntes a esbozo: diez años de reflexión,” *Apuntes* 10:4, (Winter 1990): 75 (our translation).

⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2000).

Dispensationalism, Millennialism, and the Rapture. And we cannot underestimate the impact of prosperity theology, which glorifies the pursuit of fame and fortune as a godly endeavor. Preaching a pseudo-theology of success in the midst of a context of dire poverty is simply immoral.

In order to develop a postcolonial homiletic from the Caribbean, we must reject these futile controversies, focusing on the pastoral aspects of theological reflection. We must deconstruct theological statements that advance individualistic, otherworldly and authoritarian views. We must deconstruct such ideas in order to forge new ones.

The emphasis in daily life, “lo cotidiano,” is a concept increasingly common in Latina Theology. This concept can help us to better understand the pastoral and contextual aspect of Latino/a Theology. Loida Martell-Otero defines this concept in “Abuelita Theology,” the introductory essay to *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, co-written by Martell-Otero, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier & Zaida Maldonado-Pérez. The second characteristic of a Latina theology is that it is a critical reflection based on the day-to-day, or popular, religious belief of the Latin@ community, whose faith forms what Espín has called the “epistemological womb” of daily life. It is an integral part of *la vida cotidiana*. *Lo cotidiano* is more than the simple translation of “daily” or “every day.” According to Isasi-Díaz, it is that which “constitutes the immediate spaces of our lives, the first horizon in which we have our experiences that in turn are constitutive elements of our reality.” As such, *lo cotidiano* is not an object to be studied, but the very matrix of life as it is lived by the marginalized and oppressed. For cultural and historical reasons, popular religious faith is integral to *la vida cotidiana* of the Latin@ community. Thus Latina theology is not simply about a list of specific practices upon which Latina scholars reflect. Rather it is the articulation of a given praxis, a reflection on *una manera de ser* (“a way of life”) in a community that struggles daily with issues of survival within a context of economic injustice and multilayered discrimination.¹⁰

A pastoral theology understands that “lo cotidiano” is an important *theological locus*. Only by departing from such a standpoint can we achieve our goal: the transformation of the oppressive colonial mentality that keeps us in a permanent state of dependency.

Biblical Hermeneutics

The idea that “lo cotidiano”—the reality that we face daily—is the point of departure of all relevant theological reflection is compatible with an idea advanced by Carlos Mesters in his beautiful *Flor sin defensa*.¹¹ Mesters affirms life has a deep connection with the Bible, so that we can read “life in the Bible and the Bible and life.”

We come to understand the Bible as we trot through life. The Bible helps us understand both the giver of life, and life itself. Read in such way, the Bible becomes a doorway to the life of our people.

The Bible also leads us to discern the liberating presence of God in *la lucha por la vida*, in our daily struggle for life. As we correlate the experiences of suffering collected in the Bible with our own experiences of suffering, we learn to read Scripture in a new light. In particular, we learn to seek in the Bible answers to relevant questions that stem from our own reality.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Zaida Maldonado-Pérez; & Loida I. Martell-Otero. *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* ((2013-01-15, Kindle Locations 273–283) Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Carlos Mesters, *Flor sin defensa: Una explicación de la Biblia a partir del pueblo* (Bogotá: Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos, 1984).

From a postcolonial standpoint, biblical interpretation is also a communal experience that takes into consideration the questions of those who suffer around us. Exegesis, thus, should not be done in isolation by individuals seeking academic approval.

In short, postcolonial exegesis sees the Bible as a “faithful ally” that fosters the liberation of people of faith.¹² Such emphasis on liberation leads us to cherish anti-hegemonic readings of the Bible; interpretations that reject the imperialism that has been pervasive in the Caribbean.

Postmodern Homiletics

As any scholar in the field of homiletics can discern by now, I believe that those of us who teach and preach in the Caribbean must enter into a critical dialogue with the New American Homiletic school, particularly with the writings of Fred B. Craddock, Eugene Lowry and, my mentor, Ronald J. Allen, among many others. I say “critical dialogue” because we cannot simply import foreign preaching styles to our many islands. On the contrary, we must develop our own homiletic reflection, informed by the provocative changes spun by this new homiletic school.

While we have much to learn about sermon design and the theology of preaching from these new generations of American homileticians, some topics have to be addressed from and for our context. A burning issue that the Church in the Caribbean has neglected to address is language. In which language should we preach? How can we develop resources for the Caribbean as a whole, when language barriers divide us?

I have had the privilege of teaching and preaching in the Spanish-speaking, in the English-speaking and, albeit clumsily, in the French-speaking Caribbean. However, I do not speak Creole, the language common in Haiti, nor Patois, the Jamaican dialect. Homiletic resources in French are few and largely dated. For example, you can download a copy Alexandre Vinet’s *Homiletique* for 99 cents from Kindle, but this survey was written in 1853. However, I have found impossible to a copy in French of Fred Craddock’s *Prêcher*, the translation of his groundbreaking *Preaching*. Therefore, finding textbooks on homiletics for Haitian preachers is a daunting task.

Sermon Delivery is another key issue that we must address from our context, given that preaching styles are determined not only by culture but also by denominational traditions. Again, little has been written about this issue from the perspective of the Caribbean.¹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am convinced that the Church in the Caribbean must develop a postcolonial homiletic, through a critical dialogue with contemporary homiletic theory in the United States. I am also convinced that such postcolonial homiletics must be multilingual, multicultural, and ecumenical.

We cannot continue to foster a preaching style so alien to our people that “if you just close your eyes...” you may think that the preacher is a foreigner. Our preaching style, in both theory and practice, must honor the Gospel of Jesus Christ, leading people to salvation, liberation and self-determination “for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22.2).

¹² Fernando F. Segovia, “Hispanic American Theology and the Bible: Effective Weapon and Faithful Ally” in *We Are a People!: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, edited by Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

¹³ Justo L. González and I addressed this issue from a Latino/a perspective in Chapter #4 of *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).