ELITE VS. GRASSROOTS POWER IN THE CHURCH

Paul Hahn, Theology Department

University of St Thomas, Houston 77006

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Recently two theologians have discussed the decentralization of power in the Catholic Church. One is Selva J. Raj, famous for *South Asian Religions*: *Tradition and Today* (co-edited with Karen Pechilis) and *Dealing with Deities*: *The Ritual Vow in South Asia* (co-edited with William P. Harman). A collection of his essays is *Vernacular Catholicism*, *Vernacular Saints*: *Selva J*. *Raj on* “*Being Catholic the Tamil Way*,” edited by Reid B. Locklin. The other is Miguel A. De La Torre, famous for (among many books) *Santeria*: *The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*.

But I have some concerns about the ideas of Raj and De La Torre.

(1) Marxist analysis

Raj and De La Torre think in terms of class struggle. They see the Church as consisting of two opposed camps: the elite and the people. For the elite, they use the term “religious elite.” For the people, they use the terms “grassroots,” “the periphery,” and “indigenous and organic peoples.”

As is typical in Marxist analysis, these camps are locked in a battle for power. Hence we have the statement, “Raj spends more time discussing religious power structures than he does the politico-social [power] structures that are De La Torre’s main concern . . .” (*Vernacular Catholicism* 221)

Over what do the parties seek power? For what do they contend for control? Religious identity. Religious identity can be “framed . . . by the religious elite” (ibid. 3), or there can be “grassroots religious identities” (ibid. 220)

Also typical of Marxist analysis is a siding with the people against the elite. In the case of Raj and De La Torre, the customs of the people are “an antidote to (official and scholastic) oppressive and out-of-touch centers of power” (ibid. 221-22). De La Torre emphasizes the injustices that result from an imbalance of power in favor of the elite. His ethics of place emphasizes “identifying and challenging unjust structures” and “being actually, physically present at the site of injustice . . .” (ibid. 222)

(2) decentralization

What do Raj and De La Torre propose as a solution to the unjust control of religious identity by the elite? Decentralization. This is shown by such statements as these:

Raj wants to let “ritual unfold, cross boundaries, and develop organically . . .” (ibid. 222)

Raj says that “the organic development of liturgies and identities, especially those at the peripheries, should itself be empowered.” (ibid. 223)

De La Torre places “emphasis on listening (in person) to the wisdom of those at the periphery, on respecting indigenous and organic peoples, cultures, and beliefs . . .” (ibid. 222)

“Both write about the importance of allowing grassroots development . . .” (ibid. 222)

Both “advocate for particularity as an antidote to (official and scholastic) oppressive and out-of-touch centers of power.” (ibid. 221-22)

“. . . decision-making at the most local level possible [is] a principle for which Raj, De La Torre, and many others advocate.” (ibid. 223)

Catholic social teaching, in fact, would seem to agree with decentralization as a solution. This is especially true for the principle of subsidiarity (group decisions should be made at the most local level possible).

(3) examples of the need for centralized authority

But decentralization alone is no solution. There is also need for an agency that acts as arbiter or judge in matters of liturgy and the formation of religious identity through liturgy. Here are some examples.

(a) In the 1500s, Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans all entered China as missionaries. They came across the common practices of honoring ancestors and honoring Confucius. Were these practices compatible with Catholicism? The Jesuits urged Rome to allow them; the Dominicans and Franciscans urged Rome to oppose them. There was need for an agency to act as arbiter.

At first, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith sided with the Dominicans and in 1645 condemned the rites. But in 1656, it reversed itself, and by 1700 the Dominicans and Franciscans had also come to agree with the Jesuits. Nevertheless, in 1704 Clement XI banned the rites; and in 1742, Benedict XIV condemned them. Finally, in 1939, Pope Pius XII gave permission for “Chinese Catholics to observe the ancestral rites and participate in Confucius-honoring ceremonies.” (“Chinese Rites Controversy.” *Wikipedia*. 17 Mar. 2021.)

(b) Then there are Marian apparitions. Guadalupe, Fatima, and Medjugorje, for example, have been approved, but some others have not.

In 1948, Teresita Castillo, a postulant at a Carmelite monastery in the Philippines, reported seeing Mary numerous times under the title, “Mary, Mediatrix of All Grace.” But in 1951, “the alleged apparitions were rejected by a panel of bishops, a decision confirmed by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope Pius XII.” (“Marian Apparitions.” *Wikipedia*. 26 Mar. 2021.) The CDF reasserted that decision in 2015.

Similarly, Ida Peerdeman, a secretary in Amsterdam, reported that, from 1945-59, Mary had appeared to her 56 times under the title, “The Lady of All Nations.” But in 1957, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ruled that a supernatural origin for the apparitions could not be established, and it reasserted that decision in 1972 and 1974. As recently as 30 Dec. 2020, Bishop Johannes Hendriks of Haarlem-Amsterdam announced: “recognition of the messages and apparitions has to be avoided because the Congregation passed a negative judgment about these which was confirmed by Pope Paul VI.” (Ibid.)

(c) In the 1970s, there were rumors of Masses being held at the University of Wisconsin—Madison Newman Center in which the bread and wine were replaced by pizza and beer. I suspect that was urban legend. But if such were the case, should the Church have ignored the practice, or opposed it?

(d) I once had a Mexican-American student tell me about a practice common in some parts of Mexico: placing an egg under a newborn’s crib to ward off the evil eye. Catholicism does not believe in the evil eye, nor in the efficacy of eggs as a defense against it. Should it ignore this practice, or oppose it?

(e) I once had a student tell me about a movement growing in more than one parish in Houston: some parishioners were claiming that Mary is the fourth person of the Godhead. Ignore it, or oppose it?

These are examples of “the people” innovating in the formation of their religious identity. Surely schisms would ensue if all such developments flourished unchecked. The need for an agency to arbitrate such matters seems clear.

(4) *Sacrosanctum concilium*

In 1963, Vatican II promulgated the document, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (*Constitution on the Divine Liturgy*). That document provided (in chapter 1 § 3D) “Norms for Adapting the Liturgy to the Culture and Traditions of Peoples.” It allowed the adopting of local customs if they are “not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error . . .”

According to the document, the arbiter of such matters is the local bishop. He is “to specify adaptations, especially in the case of the administration of the sacraments, the sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music, and the arts . . .”

But more radical adaptations of the liturgy to a culture should “be submitted to the Apostolic See, by whose consent they may be introduced.” And “men who are experts in these matters must be employed to formulate them [liturgical laws].”

(5) truth claims

A final concern I have with the positions of Raj and De La Torre is their disdain for the discernment truth.

Raj, for example, says that “the locus for dialogue is the world of rituals rather than the world of theological concepts and categories.” (222, quoting Locklin *Vernacular Catholicism* 43)

For both, “A risk for even theologizing about these topics is that doing so might reinforce the notion that official stamps of approval by ordained magisterial leaders need to be in place for communal rituals and worship to be accomplished.” (222-23)

This disdain for theology, whose *raison d*’*être* is the discernment of truth, fits with the authors’ Marxist analysis of liturgy as a source for religious identity. Theology is a practice of the elite; hence, it may be disparaged.

conclusion

I believe that the thinking of Raj and De La Torre is flawed at its foundation. Class warfare, though it exists in the Church, does not require a revolution to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. Cooperation exceeds contention. The elite and the people are, ultimately, part of one body.

1 Cor 12:6-25, nrsvue “there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . 18 . . . God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . 24 . . . But God has so arranged the body . . . 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.”