CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TRADITIONAL VALUES AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A MAYA PROTESTANT SPIRITUALITY

*Antonio Otzoy*

"We indigenous do not believe in lost causes. We patiently resist pain, enduring the infringement of our rights and continuing disrespect by others. In silence and hope, and love and compassion, we also await the manifestation of the children of God." Pastor Antonio Otzoy is the General Secretary of the Hermandad de Presbiterios Mayas, which fosters ethnic identity, as well as common ecclesial goals and strategies, for the numerous Maya communities of the National Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, of which he is an ordained minister.¹ This paper, prepared in 1992 in the midst of growing tensions between Presbyterian "mestizos" and their indigenous sisters and brothers, has been translated with the author’s permission.

*Introduction*

This has not been an easy essay to write. There has been all too little fraternal dialogue between the values of the gospel and the values of that distinct culture of Guatemala called Maya! With some hesitation I should like to argue factually that we indigenous people have never been understood because no one has cared to listen to us. Instead, we have been caricatured. Pejorative—even insulting—terms are constantly hurled at us, exceeding, at times, the bounds of common decency. It is one thing to talk about the gospel, it is another to experience it as a transforming force that dignifies, redeems us, and affirms our equality before God.

If only those who interpose themselves between Jesus and the Maya—who label us pagans—would recognize that he² speaks to us, walks with us, and shines upon our pathway. We feel somewhat like the blind man who cried out to Jesus to have compassion upon him while the multitude

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¹ Otzoy, a Kaqchikel Maya, is a graduate of the Faculty of Theology of the Protestant Mariano Galvez University (Guatemala) who for seven years was instructed in the mysteries of his ancestral religion.

² Editor’s note: Mayan cosmology reveres one God who is both male and female, Father and Mother. However, the Spanish language and a patriarchal society predispose us to use male pronouns for the Supreme Being.
repressed him. Undeterred, he cried even louder; Jesus healed him and he went on his way singing. We Maya experience the same thing as the blind man. We have heard the voice that tells us that our faith is saving us. We follow him and glorify his name (Lk. 18:35-43). We want to deepen our knowledge of the Jesus who held people spellbound, who exalted the nobodies, welcomed the marginalized (lepers and others), and who condemned the proud and the sinners. Because he does the same today, we are eager to meet this Christ whose voice enthralls us and does not make us afraid.

Admittedly, we have no right to demand from any group of Christians attitudes that are outside the boundaries of their comprehension nor is it for us to label them. We do recognize that, in the providence of God, there are situations and conditions that, from our indigenous perspective, may seem inadmissible, if not to others. Keeping this in mind, we shall attempt to point out some elements that could help us to discover where we are in agreement and where we disagree with our "mestizo" sisters and brothers.

In the five sections of this essay we shall talk about God the Creator and the value of life; about how we relate to God in community, and toward each other. By way of conclusion, I shall suggest some challenges to the church. We want to discuss these matters, not in a theoretical way, but from an indigenous perspective, hoping to inspire an open and frank dialogue on the subject of the interface between Maya and Christian spirituality and values.

**God the Creator**

One way or another, every human being acknowledges the ultimate existence of one Creator God. We Presbyterians confess that:

In the beginning it pleased God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Heb. 1:2; Jn. 1:2,3; Jb. 26:13; 33:4), to create the world out of nothing in order to reveal the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness (Ro. 1:20; Ps. 104:24). He made everything in the world, visible and invisible, in the space of six days, and it was very good (Gen. 1-2:3; Col. 1:16).³