

First Inter-Religious Encounter of the Southern Cone and Argentina **Dr. Rev. Pablo Navarro Hernández, MCC San Juan, Puerto Rico**

Under the title **Seminario Interreligioso de Diversidad Sexual y Religión Del Cono Sur y Argentina**, eighteen panelists and sixty participants came together for a first such encounter in this area of the world. The meeting held on July 11, 12, 13th, 2008 was welcomed into the ISEDET University which serves as a bastion of interdenominational education, for leadership training of Protestant Churches in Argentina and the rest of Latin America. The event was sponsored by *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (Catholic Women for the Right to Decide). This was an exciting and highly successful first encounter in which Christians, Jews, People of African Decent, as well as none affiliated or nonreligious people, sought to make sense of the often repressive and dehumanizing relationship of queer folk with institutionalized religions. The event focused on the life of Argentinean, Brazilian, Chilean, Paraguayan, and Bolivian believers. The speakers and panelists examined this relationship from historical, sociological, theological perspectives, but it was the life stories of all that seemed to provide the data from which to ponder. As citizens of the Southern Cone, these participants have experienced some of the most brutal political dictatorships known to humanity; as queers we have all endured the dictatorship of religious dogma.

It was acknowledged that as far as LGTTBI people are concerned, the church is in most cases repressive and dehumanizing. The prevalent theme of the conference was the political relationship between beliefs and practices of the church and the daily life of those that have been branded as "sodomites" and perverts by the religious establishment. These participants point to organized religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church, as the source of repression for sexual minorities. This is accomplished by using the unique capacities of churches for planting terror within the hearts and minds of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people and in our immediate families. Given the ascribed and assumed powers of the church in this region of the world, leaders can generate a unique form of symbolic and psychological aggression that easily foments social violence. For example, if the college of Roman Catholic bishops in Mexico are united against LGTTBI rights, even including many that are otherwise on the edge of progressive thought. Although on the issue of homosexuality they maintain a fundamentalist posture, one bishop defies this norm. The same can be said for Protestant churches and their leadership. People of African decent and Jews that were represented point to a much more welcoming atmosphere while pointing out that even in these religious contexts the LGTTBI community is not necessarily free of discrimination.

Throughout the conference it became apparent from the testimonies of participants that LGTTBI people are not passive entities. Many of us are not involved in neurotic complicity with the religious establishment. We are not willing to live a life of invisibility and self hatred as docile homosexuals. As was eloquently pointed out, "the most political thing that we can do is to proclaim that God loves us just as we are." Furthermore, testimony was given that as queers we create our own safe spaces and form our own institutions. Increasingly LGTTBI people and their allies will rebel against unjust and even sinful treatment from those that claimed to be doing God's work here on earth. Therefore, the tone of the conference was of militancy and courageous resistance.

Nevertheless, it was also evident that no church is monolithic. Participants cited instances in which leaders in clerical positions could be healing and welcoming. We met in a space that is the property of organized religion. But for a few precious days it was liberated by queers and their friends. We were sponsored by *Católicas Por el Derecho a Decidir*, a group that works within the church and has been willing to challenge the religious establishment on the very thorny issue of reproductive rights. Now these courageous women want to further their knowledge and extend their solidarity with their LGBTT sisters and brothers. I could not help noticing the irony that these women are referred to as *Las Católicas*, as if they had appropriated the church for themselves. I can only say Amen and Amen.

In organizing this conference it was evident that there was real commitment to inclusivity and diversity. No doubt this type of event must work within a budget that will inevitably limit participation. The fact that a great deal of important work is done in a space of anonymity was given as the prevailing

reason for the lack of some important voices. As Aracelli Ezzati, an ordained Methodist who currently serves as an MCC pastor in Uruguay said, "We do what we can, not what we wish." Clearly an effort was made to include transgender people and to bring in heterosexual allies as they chose to share with LGBTT communities and thus broaden their understanding, finding commonality in their life work and spheres of activism. There is no doubt that a shared past in struggles and alliances among militants inevitably come into play when deciding on a list of speakers and participants, yet the goal of being inclusive and representative was accomplished.

Unfortunately there was no active participation of people who declare a bisexual identity. Therefore their voices were not heard and it was needed. Furthermore, even though we were politically correct on the issues of Tran gendered people we are far from incorporating them into systematic theology and liberating readings of scripture.

Numerous participants made it very clear that we people live in societies where oppression comes in many ways; gender, social class, political hegemony, militarism and the rape of the environment are realities that as Latin Americans we experience daily. Therefore, the issues of sexual orientation intersect constantly with other cultural and social concerns. We cannot responsibly examine our sexualities without looking critically at the context in which we live. Thankfully this was constantly in the minds of all that participated. Significantly, many participants have lived their entire lives in a religious context that drew inspiration from theologies of liberation. But there was a continuous sense that theologians that side with the poor, and even the poor themselves can be equally repressive when dealing with the liberation of their gay, lesbian, bisexual and Tran gendered brothers and sisters. The same can be said of feminist theologies.

The twenty panelists drew from theology, history, sociology, social psychology, political science. Unfortunately, there was little use of literary analysis and the work of analytical psychology to help understand the world view and life experiences of LGBTT people. One noticeable exception was the wonderful presentation of Andre Musskopf who shared his preliminary findings on research into Frieda Kahlo as a source of queer theological inspiration. Some of the papers had an empirical basis; others drew from testimonies and reflect on their life work as activists, pastors and members of a variety of faith communities. The program was enriched by allowing ample time for participants to respond to the presentations; consequently, the comments from the audience were often as rich as that of the panelists and often even more acute and pertinent.

This was a conference with very little acrimony. There were only two moments of very passionate yet friendly disagreement. The first dealt with participation in acts of symbolic violence, specifically the painting of the Roman Catholic cathedral, as methods of defiance. The second was on the participation in Gay Pride marches and counter marches. Some participants objected to the privatization of the parade, while others claimed that there is little to celebrate. The Brazilians pointed to the political nature of the celebration as a continuation of the spirit of carnival that originates as a thinly veiled way in which people of African descent can, under the guise of a festival, join in protesting their life conditions. There is little doubt that three million LGBTT participants and their supporters send a very clear message to the political establishment. Uruguayans and Brazilians can feel joyful that a great deal of their political agenda has been fulfilled. Without being naïve regarding all that still needs to be done in addressing discrimination and prejudice, we can still share their joy and draw strength from their accomplishments.

In organizing the conference no distinction was made in conceptualizing on the difference between the spiritual and the religious. In addition, no mention was made of theistic versus non-theistic spirituality. This led to some confusion and I think to a serious omission. The fact is that LGBTT people express our innermost spirituality through art, drama, film, lyrics and creative musing. These are spaces that while not religious, serve us as a way in which we access the transcendental, sacred and the unifying. In doing this we do not ask permission from church leaders, frankly because we do not need it. In addition, since we are often expelled from institutionalized religious spaces, we have searched for our spirituality in post-Christian or in counter-religious movements and in new age activities of all types. I

am sure that in the Cono Sur there are queer people that bring their spirituality to yoga, transcendental meditation and other similar spiritual practices. This concern may well have been deliberately omitted given the title of the conference as an inter-religious conference. I would hope that future conferences include these types of responses to our human yearning for the divine.

Repeatedly presenters pointed to the need for creating a bridge between theologies of the spirit with body with those of our sexuality. The active participation of very verbal and highly articulate Tran gendered participants pointed somewhat to this issue. The Tran gendered body is one major issue but clearly not the only one. Many of us have learned to hate our bodies even as we hate our sexual inclinations. Many participants made it clear that regarding this topic we have a long way to go.

Too often there was a revisiting of gender issues that have received ample discussion in the last twenty or thirty years. Admittedly, given the variety of experiences of the participants some of these discussions were new to some of the people in attendance. The same can be said for the discussion of texts of terror as they apply to GLBTT people. The exception was the contribution of a representative of Judaism who pointed out that the Leviticus texts have received a new interpretation. Given a world view in which women are property, the prohibition to "lie as a woman" does not extend to men who willingly enter into sexual intercourse unless it is a case of rape.

To those of us that have attended numerous gatherings of this kind it would seem that everything has already been said, so it was with a great deal of joy that we heard from Fernando Candido. He compares the messiah texts in Micah and Amos with that of Isaiah. In the former the prophet internalizes the norms of the oppressor and proposes a messiah that is a military ruler. In the latter the prophet sees a new type messiah that is communal and all encompassing. To me this queer reading has far-reaching consequences. In the process of gaining liberation the oppressed can easily fall into the temptation of imitating the oppressor. Candido takes on the role of a present day prophet to Queer People and warns us against this. If a new crop of gay thinkers are proposing these types of readings the future is bright indeed.

In general the format of four panelists each speaking for about twenty minutes with a great deal of time for participants to question and comment on what was said worked very well. There was no censoring of participants and everyone that wanted to speak was respectfully heard. Other formats, namely workshops where the leader involves the participant in doing not just listening, would have enriched the gathering. The one thing I would have done differently was to assign more time to Father Julian Cruzalta who travelled from Mexico and was given twenty minutes to speak. I am sure some panelists, especially those that had more than one intervention, would have given up their time to hear this uniquely inspirational man who as an ordained Roman Catholic priest, in addition to his work as a scholar and social activist, serves gays within the priesthood.

In the end this was by no means just one more scholarly meeting. More than any thing it was a celebration of GLTT people (the omission of the B is deliberate). This was apparent in the one communal festivity in which we joined our Jewish brothers and sisters in ending the Sabbath. We read liberating scripture, prayed in Quechua, Guarani, Spanish and English. We heard in the voice of the composer, Pablo Sosa, a Christmas song written with transsexuals in mind. We drank wine and had bread showered upon us as manna that came from heaven. We sat for long hours over meals in which we could talk and get to know each other. This gave us the opportunity to ask questions, catch up with old friends and above all make new acquaintances. I can only look forward to the next meeting, perhaps in Paraguay, July 2009, some have suggested.