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Special Section II: Using Group Analysis in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Related Sciences

In the Church: Ethnopschoanalytic Research in Ecuador

Elisabeth Rohr

In my ethnopschoanalytical research I encountered a phenomenon that over the past twenty years has strongly influenced not only culture and society but also the sense of identity and personality of many people in Latin America. This is the invasion of North American, predominantly conservative, Evangelical missions that in the process of conversion play upon unresolved biographical conflict, offering a fundamentalist religious solution.

Until recently the South American continent was considered a stronghold of the Roman Catholic Church. This image is changing rapidly as a result of the massive invasion of predominantly North American Protestant missionary groups that began about twenty years ago. In some regions of Latin America, for example in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico or Brazil, membership in one of the many Protestant missionary churches has risen to almost half of the population. Conservative estimates assume that about a third of the Latin American population will be members of a non-Catholic, predominantly Evangelical, Protestant church within a few years (Martin, 1990; Rohr, 1991).

These missionary churches have little in common with the well-established Lutheran, Baptist or Methodist churches. Mostly independent, or belonging to one of the many Pentecostal or Adventist churches, they operate in many Third World countries according to

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their own rules and regulations. Together with the Mormons, who are also very influential in Latin America, they share a so-called fundamentalist view of life: liberal sexuality, women's liberation, abortion, homosexuality, adultery, divorce, alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, tobacco and dancing are sinful and an offence against the laws of God. The words of the Bible are sacred and life has to be lived literally, according to its laws, without any interpretation or alteration, because this is God's will and testimony.¹

In the USA Evangelical Protestants gained considerable political and social power under the Reagan administration and came to dominate many aspects of political life.² In Latin America they are also pushing their way into politics. With their totalitarian and puritanical view of life, these missionary groups are not only altering the religious landscape of the South American continent, but are changing daily life, as well as the culture and society of Latin Americans (see Willems, 1967; Clawson, 1984). From my ethnopschoanalytical research I have come to the conclusion that the changes brought about by the Evangelical churches are altering the personalities of the people, their corporeality and sensuality and thus affecting the structure of collective schemes of life. This means that they are able to touch and manipulate the unconscious of large masses of people (Rohr, 1991).

How do they manage to influence and change personality, and why is this radical change, which often produces alienation from the ethnic society, the immediate family and friends, not only tolerated, but almost yearned for by a growing number of people?

I illustrate the problem by describing three church scenes, which I was able to experience and observe during Protestant, Mormon and Catholic services in a small Indian community in the Ecuadorian highlands. I apply ethnopschoanalytical methods of interpretation by using my countertransference reactions as a basis for trying to understand this foreign culture (Indian and fundamentalist or Catholic), focusing on significant scenes which caught my attention. Through my interpretation, I show how the researchers' subjectivity and autobiographical preconceptions and experiences influence the process of understanding and even help to find access to the unconscious of this alien culture. My intention is not to explain the method theoretically, but to demonstrate it through a specific example.³

In a Protestant Fundamentalist Church

The Indian church of the Christian and Missionary Alliance is situated on the edge of a small town, Otavalo, in the northern highlands of Ecuador. The Indians of this region are known throughout the country to be diligent weavers, traders and farmers.

Indians dressed up in their Sunday clothes, gather in front of the church and look at me curiously when I arrive. As far as I can see, I am the only white person. Feeling a little awkward, I am relieved to find a familiar face in the crowd. Manuel, one of my informants, steps forward and greets me very formally before conducting me into the church and all the way up to the front, where he asks me to take a seat on the women's side of the benches. Soon the church is filled to the last seat. The Indian believers are sitting left and right of the aisle, strictly separated by gender. Braided rush-mats are spread out on the clean wooden floor of the aisle and mothers squat on them with their toddlers. The room is bright and flooded with the early morning sun. It is very plain except for a few bouquets of flowers next to the orator's desk.

The church service lasts almost two hours. But the crowd of Indian believers seems spellbound. They listen attentively to the Indian preacher in his dark-blue poncho, his white trousers and his woven sandals. The discipline is amazing. Everybody gets up, kneels, sits, prays and sings almost as on command. Everything is said in Quichua, the language of the Indians.

Suddenly a little boy walks all the way up to the front and positions himself in front of the first bench. He is facing my way. His legs are spread, his body slightly tilted and his head held low. He seems completely absorbed in himself, very quiet and motionless. Soon a puddle runs around his feet and shortly thereafter a strong stench reaches my nose. He tilts even more to the side, very tensely, listening quietly to himself. Suddenly the mess between his feet turns black and the stench becomes unbearable. He looks at the increasingly big puddle in amazement. Then a mother rushes up, touches the bottom of his trousers with a suspecting look, and carries him out hurriedly. What remains are dark tracks on the light wooden floor and a little black lake with two light-brown islands in the middle.

In the Mormon Church

The yellow painted building of the Mormon temple looks clean and proper in the midst of a fenced-in lawn. Situated on the outskirts of Otavalo, at the end of a small cobblestone street, the spacious temple complex makes the small Indian adobe houses in the neighbourhood look like poor and tiny huts.

Indian children play on the lawn and groups of church-goers are standing under the arcades, talking in a low voice, greeting newcomers politely. Yolanda, the daughter of Don Segundo, who was my favourite informant, introduces me to several friends before we enter the church, where she leaves me in a room filled with women and small children.

The big classroom, known to me from previous visits, is now separated by

removable walls and divided into several compartments. It is obvious that women, men, boys and girls all gather separately to study the book of Mormon. The women's room has no windows, the walls are barren except for a clock that is ticking loudly, grey plastic chairs are lined up properly in rows. But in spite of the clinical, almost antiseptic impression of the room, I am struck by an almost overwhelming stench: roasted corn, urine, faeces, sour milk, rancid butter.

A woman, very advanced in pregnancy, is reading from a book in Quichua. Children are playing underneath the chairs and quarrel over a cookie. Women leave with the squabbling children and then return. A screaming child is handed towards the back where an elderly woman picks it up playfully until it starts smiling again. A door opens and a little girl is shoved into the room. She is crying. She stands there and looks lost until the mother motions her and the child flees into her arms. The orator's words are lost in all the commotion. A song is started. They drag out three verses until they finally stop, dulled and tired. A young woman moves towards the front to say a farewell prayer. Slowly she turns towards the gathered women and stands there, lost and shy. She is holding a little boy in her arms who devotedly suckles at her breast. Then she straightens out a little, closes her eyes and silently starts to say a prayer. At this moment her little son screams out in indignation and angrily grabs his mother's big bosom with his hands. Then he closes his eyes again and drinks greedily.

Palm Sunday in the Franciscan Church in Otavalo

Radiant sunshine bathes the Indian families who are squatting in the esplanade, right in the heart of the city, in a bright and warm light. In the distance the Cotacachi in all its 5000 m splendour can be seen, with its snow-capped summit, without clouds. The streets are crowded with children, women and men, carrying braided palm branches, every one of them a little piece of art. Bands of people flock into the church, buying bunches of herbs, icecream and mussels, pickled with wild onions, just before they enter.

Inside the church, the amount of people is simply unbelievable. The room is almost bursting at the seams. The Indians are standing very closely together. A forest of branches towers over the heads. There is a constant coming and going. The priest seems to be blessing the palms and herbs. His words are hardly audible in all the commotion. Children play, laugh, argue and run around between the adults. Dogs howl and push their way through the legs. Then, during a hymn, everyone starts to fan with their palm branches. There is a rustling and crackling and it smells like in a tropical forest. Suddenly I feel tears of emotion filling my eyes, I feel choked up and have the impression of an ecstasy flowing through the mass of bodies around me.

Voyage into the Underworld — First Impressions

In these three scenes the underlying, unheard and foreign language slips into the background and lets the religious staging move into the foreground. Having been stripped of all means of verbal communication — since I do not understand Quichua — I am excluded from the religious dialogue, and thrown back to sheer somatic sensations and pure emotions — especially to all kinds of different and mostly disgusting smells, but also to specific emotions: to disgust, shame, embarrassment and ecstatic sentimentality. Apart from the ecstatic emotions in the Catholic church, the smells and feelings in the Protestant and Mormon church only produce discomfort. Following these impressions and sensations further, it becomes quite obvious that all these disgusting smells and uneasy feelings are linked exclusively with the mother and child scenes in the Evangelical and Mormon churches — and suddenly, with a childhood memory of my own.

I see myself as a very little girl, maybe three years of age, holding on to my father's hand while climbing up the steep spiral staircase of the village Catholic church. I am courageously overcoming my fear of the height and hardly dare to look down upon the ever smaller growing heads of the women just below, but proudly absorb the comments of some church-goers: 'So small and already able to go to church!'

I had never understood what my big accomplishment was supposed to have been. But I do not think I shall ever forget what agony I went through, when all the men around me in the gallery including my father, fell asleep, one after the other. They were woken only by the occasional snoring of their neighbour, while I waited with increasing desperation for the service to end, so that I could hurriedly find the restroom.

High up in the gallery, way above the heads of the other believers, a father-child drama takes place. Surrounded by a bunch of sleeping men, the girl is left alone with her agony and thrown back upon her corporal sensations, without any support from anyone. The only consolation seems to stem from the praise: 'So small and already able to go to church'. As if this would turn the pain, experienced later up in the gallery, into a tolerable and maybe even reasonable experience, compensating for the feeling of being left alone with overwhelming and yet uncontrollable bodily sensations.

This childhood memory has a lot in common with the scenes described in the Mormon and Protestant churches: the attention always focuses upon the *drama* of a child, but this drama is portrayed from quite a different angle: here the little girl in the midst of a crowd of sleeping,

snoring men, there the lively relationship between children and their mothers. Whereas the little girl is thrown back upon herself and left alone with her agony, the boys in the two other churches are being taken care of by their mothers. In contrast to the little girl, these boys do not suppress their corporal needs and enjoy freely their physical desires. Whereas the father in my childhood memory plays a decisive rôle, it is the mother who is of great importance in the other scenes. But in contrast to the men in the Evangelical and Mormon churches, who are either hidden behind removable walls or barely to be seen on the other side of the aisle, in my childhood memory the women are to be found way down below the gallery, completely out of reach.

In my countertransference this discrepancy between the images is mirrored as well: whereas the feelings in the Evangelical and Mormon churches create nothing but discomfort, my childhood experience leaves not only uneasy feelings, rather a sensation of strong ambivalence: There is pain and agony, but also praise and pride.

This ambivalence is missing in the scenes of the Evangelical and Mormon churches, as if my childhood memory expresses something which cannot be expressed in the other scenes and vice versa: in all three scenes the major subject theme is corporeality and in all instances mentioned, a drama of a child is being portrayed. But while this drama takes place between child and father in my childhood memory, it focuses on child and mother in the other scenes. Can this childhood memory be understood as a key to the hidden meaning behind the other scenes?

The Religious Process of Civilization

The noteworthy aspect of my childhood memory is how the pride to have overcome or mastered this physical drill is closely linked with the memory of the agony that this initiation into the control of bodily functions and drives once required. Corporeality, sensuality and physical desire appear in the Protestant church and in the Mormon temple as embarrassing, offensive and humiliating. The little boy did not only leave a trail of faeces and urine and spread a terrible stench, but he also interrupted and disturbed the discipline and the concentration of the believers. The breast-feeding scene at the Mormon Bible class seemed no less offensive and out of place.

The little boy in the Protestant church obviously took over an important function for the rest of the believers by portraying the not yet accomplished control of bodily sensations and urges. By doing so, he put on stage a central aspect of the religious civilization process.

The torment that the church drill demands, and that I recovered through my childhood memory, remained subconscious in the Evangelical and in the Mormon church. The unseemly behaviour of the little boy could not be appreciated by the rest of the crowd: his mother hurriedly carried him outside and his still improper functioning body disappeared from the religious stage. So it was not only the corporeality that was offensive, but also and especially the desire and the satisfaction that were linked with these physical expressions. Through all of this it is easy to see what the priorities of the Evangelical and Mormon churches are: *to create an aversion towards the uninhibited desires of the body.*

In the Mormon temple still another aspect of this civilization process was being put on stage, since it was not a child alone, but mother and child, or rather a mother and child symbiosis, who represented what was offensive. This mother-child symbiosis stood in complete opposition to the religious ritual. The seemingly desperate and embarrassing attempt to conquer this desire- and satisfaction-creating corporeality through prayer deteriorated into a small and visible demonstration of protest: the little boy screams with indignation and pinches the mother's breast in childish outrage. This mother-child symbiosis is already isolated through the arrangement of the rooms within the church: the mother-child room was separated from the other rooms into which the men and the youths disappeared. So this clearly defined and confirmed the aspect that was supposed to be overcome and marked off: *the rampant chaos of the mother-child symbiosis.* The taboo here, unlike in the Evangelical church, was, however, not limited to the child's uninhibited corporeality, but mainly concerned *regression, symbiosis and the power of the early mother-child relationship.*

First Conclusions

If the Protestants' priority is the rigid control of a child's corporeality and sensuality, the Mormons' priority is to overcome the maternally dominated, regressive and unstructured relationship between mother and child, and to tame the drives. The Evangelical Protestants and Mormons are both aiming at something similar: to overcome childlike behaviour and to learn how to control one's physical and emotional drives and desires, in other words, how to become a mature and responsible adult, who knows how to deal with symbiotic and regressive wishes.

But the missionary work of the Mormons and of the Evangelical

Protestants will only succeed, if they are able to let the ambivalence of this process of civilization, which showed itself in my childhood memory, vanish into unconsciousness. The bond to the mother, and the sensuality connected to the pleasures of the body, have to be made in part or totally unconscious — otherwise conversion will not work and will not last because a person dominated by his or her drives is not capable of strictly adhering to the words of the Bible and to the laws of God.

Counterproductive therefore is the ecstasy experienced in the Catholic church. The host of believers here, in contrast to the experiences in the two other churches, is coagulated into an amorphous mass of people. The barely audible words of the priest seem to put the crowd into a trance. A mystical, almost symbiotic experience is performed, combined with an almost ecstatic sense of bliss within the sacred room. Within this mystical-sensual experience male and female sexuality dissolve. Childlike and animalistic creatures are crawling on the floor, between the grown-ups' legs. Above them an ecstatic mass of bodies is floating.

The difference from the experience in the two other churches is striking. There seems to be no structure, no dialogue, only ecstasy and emotion. Does this mean that only in the Catholic church is ecstasy possible and would not this lead to the conclusion that within the Catholic church a civilization process cannot take place? My childhood memory advises me differently. Here — and that is what is so exceptional — the access to immediate sensual experiences remains intact and finds unlimited space within the religious cult. Through that, the ambiguity of the bodily-spiritual process of civilization is also preserved, without having to be separated and suppressed. The corporal sexuality, however, is abolished and neutralized through the ecstatic symbiotic experience.⁴ Similarly symbiotic experiences are impossible in the Evangelical and Mormon churches, within those brightly lit rooms, that allow no shadow, no dark corners, and most definitely no dreaming or sleeping. In contrast to the sacred rooms of the Catholic church, mass regression is neither possible nor wanted.

The Evangelical Protestants and the Mormons allow regression and symbiosis only inside specifically designated compartments, strictly separated from the congregation of believers. Ecstasy and symbiosis are obviously incompatible with the religious concept that these churches have of themselves. Only as a child and when you are a mother taking care of children, are you allowed regression and sensuality to a certain extent. Then you have to grow up and forget about

childish pleasures and behaviour; if not, you will stay a child, a primitive, forever.

Final Conclusions

In their missionary work the Evangelical Protestants and the Mormons play on the ambivalence of desire and drive, thereby directly interfering with three different aspects of identity building processes: (1) with collective and ecstatic symbiotic experiences; (2) with the mother-child symbiosis and (3) with the yet uncivilized corporeality and sensuality of a child.

Protestants and Mormons are dependent for success on being able to abolish psychological structures linked to symbiotic experiences, to regression and to corporal ecstatic sensations. Ultimately these resist a way of life directed towards rational criteria and the development of Protestant virtues (discipline, sobriety, diligence), because close life-long ties to the mother prevent the process of growth and individualization as well as the development of gender-specific identities, according to the Western concept of culture.

Why then do so many people follow these missionary churches, when conversion means having to restrain from all kinds of pleasures and joys of life? Without doubt the prohibitions that the Protestants and the Mormons instil would be useless if they did not offer something which makes all renunciation of pleasure worthwhile. Looking at the rigid suppression of corporeality, regression and symbiotic experiences, it becomes quite clear that this suppression is not experienced only as something painful, because it conveys at the same time a sense of maturing. The increasing amount of control over impulse is associated with feelings of pride and triumph, as could be shown in my childhood memory.

Because of this gain, detachment from the regressive symbiotic experiences, celebrated by the Catholics, is perceived as progressive, and this progress is highly regarded in a society that for centuries has been marked by exploitation and oppression. For the Indians, progress means salvation from misery: it means being well fed and satisfied, being rich and free. So conversion to the Evangelical and Mormon missions means breaking away from a childlike corporeality and from a mother-dominated symbiotic relationship to find access to the world of the father. The missionaries offer the opportunity to pick up a relationship with the father, who, until now, played no major rôle in Indian society related to the developmental processes of the children.

But how do these missions solve the problem of the absent father, one of the major social problems in all of Latin American societies?

The Evangelical as well as the Mormon Church use the scriptures to serve this purpose. Where men either remain completely invisible, and thereby mysterious and abstract within the church, only the biblical word, as God's law, can become the ultimate legitimate authority. Biblical language now serves exclusively to discipline the uninhibited desire for ecstasy and regression.⁵ From the Evangelical and Mormon Churches' point of view the process of separation and division from the mother that they initiate serves an outstanding purpose: the development of a modern way of living and acquaintance with modern civilization and culture techniques. Without doubt it is precisely the separation from the mother which allows the development of virtues and accomplishments that are of importance and benefit in a patriarchal society striving towards a modern, that is capitalistic, way of life. Within this promise of progress lies a big part of the temptation of the Evangelical Protestants and the Mormons. Because Latin Americans, especially Indians, have had only little chance to progress and have been forced to live in misery and poverty.

Consciously the missionaries offer salvation out of poverty, but unconsciously they offer a solution for an unsolved, yet smouldering, biographical conflict: the close life-long bond to the mother and to the ethnic community, which only turns out to be a conflict when traditional ways of living cannot compete any more with the demands of modern society. Many people suffer because of this and especially the younger Indian men and women often experience the ethnic community as a tedious chain that impedes them in their craving for freedom and individualization and that stops them from more extensive integration into national and white society.

This is a conflict that is cardinal and I would even say one that is unresolved in most Third World countries: how can people who grow up in close, collective and predominantly maternally domineered relationships, not only survive in the modern world, but also find their place in it without having to give up their cultural traits or their own ethical concepts of life?

The Evangelical and Mormon missionaries show a Western and Puritan way out of this dilemma. They offer concepts of life, that, even though they are adjusted to the norms of a modern and Western society, are based on the denial of one's childhood experiences and on placing one's sensuality and regressive desires under taboo. They promise a larger degree of freedom, autonomy and individuality, but

this liberation is a fake liberation, based upon the internalization of a rigid biblical authority that cannot be criticized and of a puritanically confined sexuality.

Notes

1. 'Fundamentalism' means an orthodox, that is, a literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Any historical, critical or scientific questioning or interpretation of the biblical scriptures is forbidden. Any form of phantasy, any form of free association that could be connected to biblical scenes or pictures is being suppressed. For the consequences of this form of repression also see Lorenzer (1981).
2. Political pressure groups like the 'moral majority' of Pat Robertson, exercise their influence in the economy, in film industries (censorship), in the Army (Oliver North) and elsewhere. (cf., Ruthven, 1991).
3. For the question of ethnopschoanalytical interpretation and the meaning of countertransference see Devereux (1976) and Lorenzer (1986).
4. These ecstatic symbiotic experiences also form the nucleus of Indian religious cults and the basis for collective processes of socialization of Indian societies.
5. I described the consequences of such an identity crisis as a result of the conversion in Rohr (1990).

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