

# Clashes of Confession: The Case of Latin America in a Global Context

---

Vítor Westhelle

*Professor of Systematic Theology  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Ralph Klein begins his massive and authoritative commentary of *1 Chronicles*<sup>1</sup> with an elucidation of the different meanings the name of the book has received. Among them is that the book deals with the events of the day but also about things omitted or left behind. A chronicler in this combined sense is the one who registers the events of the day but with particular care for those things that otherwise would be rendered to oblivion. A chronicler is one who engages facts and events and pledges back. This is what the word *responsibility* means (from the Latin *re-spondeo*—more on this follows). Professor Klein’s service to the church, faithfully paying heed to the pleas and plaintive of the faithful, listening to the diverse voices of the people from all over the world, testifies to this very sense of responsibility. In classroom, in scholarship, in assisting the challenged in technological innovations or carrying the thorns of administration, and as editor of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, he was the “chronicler” in that sense attributed to the book he so deeply studied, the sense of being responsible. My contribution to this volume in homage to Ralph is, fittingly, about responsibility.

I was asked to share some dimension of my scholarly contribution and to reflect on ways in which my scholarship serves the

church and world. This calls for a relocation and reallocation, wherefore I will relocate myself to Latin America, Brazil in particular, and reallocate my thoughts to the subject of “confessional clashes” so as to be faithful to the task at hand. I situate my discussion of clashes of confession in Latin America in a global context, and in order to do that I need to start with the latter, the global context. Hence I need to provide what is entailed by globalization and its impact in Latin America, whose history since the conquest coincides exactly with the history of globalization.

## Globalization

Globalization is not a new phenomenon. The word is derived from the Latin *globus*, meaning a round mass or a sphere.<sup>2</sup> Although part of the English vocabulary since the sixteenth century, designating terrestrial planetary sphere, *globalization* is a rather recent word describing the simultaneity of an event and its planetary consequences

---

1. Ralph Klein, *1 Chronicles: A Commentary. Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

2. The oldest existing world representation as a globe comes from the late fifteenth century, created in Nürnberg by Martin Behaim.

creating a common system by which desires and punishment and satisfactions are waged. Indian writer Arundhati Roy properly defines globalization as a mode of standardization where everyone desires the same thing but only few are able to have it.<sup>3</sup> But what globalization theories have recently described is certainly not a brand new phenomenon. It has been in vogue since the late fifteenth century when *globe* became an operational concept.

Although Christopher Columbus had it wrong when he thought to have reached the coast of India by sailing west, he was right in establishing at least the possibility of traveling around the globe and arriving without returning to the place of origin. This actually was accomplished by Ferdinand Magellan 28 years after Columbus reached the Americas. Since then an incredible intensification of global traveling has reduced the size of the planet, as it were. Not only has physical mobility dramatically increased, reaching supersonic velocities, but virtual traveling and transportation circle the globe at the speed of light.

In all of this drastic increase in velocity and mobility, one thing remains the same—the forward motion that brings one to the point of departure without necessarily having to return. This phenomenon means one simple thing: It is a movement forward without a return, without having to be accountable back. Although Columbus kept the practice of writing *back* to Spain accounting for his discoveries, his accounts answered for the conquest and landfalls but not for the others he had actually met. Tzvetan Todorov, in his influential book *The Conquest of America*, put it like this:

Columbus speaks about the men he sees only because they too, after all, constitute a part of the landscape. His allusions to the inhabitants of the islands always occur amid his notations con-

cerning nature, somewhere between birds and trees. . . . Columbus discovered America but not the Americans.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of decades later, Magellan, first to actually circumnavigate the globe, did not even write back to account for his deeds. As far as we know, he did not even keep a journal. He was only moving forward, perennially.

What happens with globalization can be detected in the first maritime travel around the globe. It is an onward process, a progress without accountability, without responsibility. The words *responsibility* and *response* literally mean to pledge (*spondeo*) back (*re*). The Latin *spondeo* is the root of the English word *spouse*. To respond is akin to what happens in a marriage ceremony, where each partner vows commitments to the other; responsibility is to answer back, be accountable to those vows. This promissory is an adroit hermeneutic to interpret globalization. Globalization averts responsibility in the same way as Magellan averted landfall by circumnavigating the continents. His greatest accomplishment is emblematic; he bypassed what is now Latin America by being the first to cross Cape Horn without making landfall. Globalization is when rules of accountability or responsibility may be suspended. We keep surging ahead oblivious to what is left behind.

Even more insidious and pervasive is the fact that the other to whom supposedly one owes a response becomes faceless, is excluded from the conversation, is no longer taken into account, becomes what Kafka in

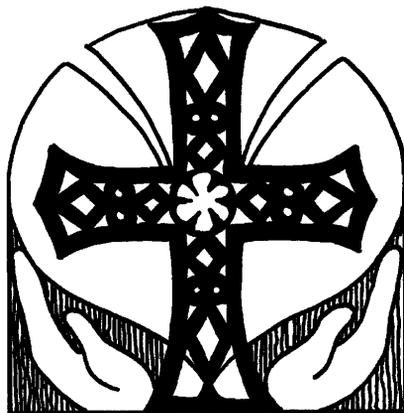
3. Arundhati Roy, *The Check Book and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004), 40.

4. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 34, 49.

*The Trial*<sup>5</sup> called a non-person—an expression Gustavo Gutiérrez applied to describe the excluded ones in Third World societies, people who live in what he called the “underside of history.”<sup>6</sup> These people are “invisible,” in the sense Ralph Ellison in *The Invisible Man*<sup>7</sup> or Manuel Scorza in *Garabombo, the Invisible*<sup>8</sup> describe them. It is a social and economic invisibility, which is required for responsibility to be denied or excused.

Since the era of globalization began in the sixteenth century, the more the globe is crossed and circled, be it through virtual or physical travel, the more places—entire countries—are rendered invisible. Where in the world is New Guinea? Where is Guinea Bissau? Where is Guyana? In this random selection, it is more likely to miss a country or even a populous continent than it is to find Web sites worldwide. And one can be anywhere in the world in a shopping mall, a hotel, or an airport and it all looks the same everywhere. Thomas Friedman tells the story of why he titled his bestselling book *The World is Flat*. He was playing golf (something he shares with Ralph Klein!) somewhere in India, and all of the external references were about the same as if he were playing in New York or anywhere else. When he came home he confided to his wife: “Honey, I think the world is flat.”<sup>9</sup> A flat globe is an oxymoron that has come to symbolize what globalization means.

If nonresponsibility is a feature of globalization, invisibility is another. However, invisibility as it is used in the works of literature I mentioned functions as a metaphor. It is not that these people are translucent, but their individual existence is so dispensable that one does not need to see them, to be responsible toward them, to address them. Invisibility has a Janus face; the invisible becomes also picturesque. Pictures in magazines, newspapers, television



shows, and other media make people ultra visible and only magnify the irresponsibility. One does not write back to the aboriginal people one finds beautifully portrayed, say, in *National Geographic*. You see the photograph, but you don't see the person. You remember the picture, not the person; one knows the framed photo, not the complex and multidimensional reality that exceeds any frame.<sup>10</sup>

The struggle for visibility is the struggle to entreat a response, to be addressed. But to be addressed is to have one's “address”

5. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (London: Pan Books, 1977).

6. Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology from the Underside of History,” in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

7. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

8. Manuel Scorza, *Garabombo, the Invisible*, trans. Anna-Marie Aldaz (New York: P. Lang, 1994).

9. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 5.

10. For more on this, see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977).

defined. To have one's address defined is the question of affirming an identity that can be claimed and acclaimed.

This is one of the functions of a religious community that says who people are and whose they are, i.e., they are children of a god who has claimed them as his/her own. In most cultures this identity is attributed in a religious ceremony in which a person is given a name. Take the example of Christianity, which has its proper face linked to a person who received the name Jesus. Not everyone remembers this, but in the Christian tradition the date of January 1 was celebrated as the day Jesus was given his name. On that occasion, on the eighth day after his birth, he was circumcised. So that was the day, the tradition maintains, that marks the beginning of a new era some 2008 years ago.<sup>11</sup> That event, repeated every New Year, gave to the Christian church a unique identity; every baptism reenacts that event, and a person is given a name and is claimed to belong to the flock of Christians. That is what I mean by having an address or a claim to a recognizable visible identity.

Latin America, like Europe and the United States but unlike Asia and much of Africa, claims to have an overwhelming Christian identity, almost 90 percent of its population professing to be Christian. Therefore, Latin America should be more easily recognized than Asia or Africa because of its shared religious allegiance with the North Atlantic world. This is not the case. The two literary examples about invisibility, the North American Ellison and the Peruvian Scorza, give us a clue as to what the issue is. In both cases it has to do with race, ethnicity, or economic marginalization, or often all three together.

The obvious begging question is: Why would people claim an identity that puts them in the company of exactly those who

dispense with them, rendering them invisible? One response is that they have no another option due to the early colonial imposition of the Christian religion. But their identity is viewed as not genuine, as counterfeit, very much as the "new" Christians in the Spain of the *reconquista* in the second half of the second millennium in the Iberian Peninsula were. This led to a fierce struggle to prove one's identity beyond the suspicion of having a fake claim to being a Christian.

Under these conditions, how are identities construed?

## The construal of identities

1. *The co-optation by the Enlightenment.* The marginalization of those who would have a claim to the Christian identity historically has produced some side effects with confessional implications. A few, for example, have rejected the Christian faith and tried to integrate into the history of the West by adopting secularization and rejection of any form of organized religion. This would be the case of Uruguay and Cuba,<sup>12</sup> and in general such assimilation into the European Enlightenment and French positivism in particular has been a characteristic of the formation of the intellectual class. But for the size of Latin America and the Caribbean together this is still a small, though influential, minority.

2. *The hybrid option.* A significantly greater contingent has sought to develop

11. Hermann Brandt, "Was feiern Christen am 1. Januar? Zur Wiedergewinnung eines Christuszeugnisses älterer Gesangbücher und Zinzendorfs," *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt, Jahrbuch des Martin-Luther-Bundes* 54 (2007): 79–106.

12. Cuba more than a century before the revolution of 1959 was very secularized, which explains the persisting endurance of its regime under constant U.S. assail.

hybrid identities, moving into a syncretism with African religions that the former slaves brought and disguised under the Roman Catholic formal exterior. These religious expressions have become increasingly more distinct in the autochthonous shapes they have assumed. Comparable was the case of the indigenous communities, particularly in the Andean region of the Inca Empire, which led José Carlos Mariátegui to say that the Spaniards did not bring a religion; they brought rites, priests, religious orders, and liturgies under which the old Inca religion survived using the church as its disguise.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is fascinating to examine the early missionaries' accounts of the people they met. In the Iberian Peninsula these missionaries were shaped in their religious formation by a struggle on three fronts: with the Muslims, the Jews, and the apostates who in the wake of the Reformation in the Peninsula kept the counter-Reformation busy. So, it is amazing indeed to observe that they would interpret and classify the indigenous people they met exactly along the lines of these three perceived enemies they fought in their homeland. The indigenous people often were described as descendents of Muslims, of Jews, or of renegade Christians, once evangelized by St. Thomas (!), who lost the true faith, not unlike those who were lured by the Reformation to abandon the Holy Roman Church.<sup>14</sup>

### Christianity in Latin America

The hybrid options have been and probably will be of higher significance in the future of Latin American religious distinctiveness, to which significant attention should be given. But the task at hand is to address clashes of confession as they manifest themselves in Christianity. Before we begin, be reminded that for a subaltern population, as most of Latin America is, to have a claim

for recognition (to have an "address") that waits for a response is the common characteristic. To be a subaltern<sup>15</sup> is to live under a hegemonic regime, a regime characterized by having control or dominion and also for mustering compliance without having normally to resort to violence.<sup>16</sup>

### Taxonomies

Subalterns have been classified in different ways. Taxonomies, the art of drawing classifications, are always oversimplifications of facts, but they serve didactical purposes. The most common taxonomies of religious expressions are based on sociological criteria that focus on denominational or group affiliation. Denominational affiliation is a sociological way of categorizing demographic groups according to rules of institutional allegiances.<sup>17</sup> Thus, one would speak in broad terms about the Roman Catholic Latin America (with four main internal groupings: the Ultramontanists, the

13. See José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Marjory Urquidi (Austin: University of Texas, 1990), 135.

14. Cf. Vitor Westhelle, "Conquest and Evangelization in Latin America." In *Word Remembered—Word Proclaimed*, ed. Stephen Bevens and Roger Schroeder (Nettetal: Steyler, 1997), 89–107.

15. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

16. See *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgas (New York: New York University, 2000), 249, for an elaboration on what *hegemony* means. Gramsci called hegemony the condition under which assent is given and compliance accorded to dominant power.

17. Legion are these typologies; among the best known are the works of Ernst Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Avery Dulles.

Base Community movement, the popular or syncretistic Catholicism, and the charismatic faction) and the Protestant Latin America (including denominations formed by immigrants, the mission churches, and the Pentecostal movement). This typology is the result of the influence the social sciences have had in ecclesiological studies that is, or attempts to be, methodologically neutral. The claim of neutrality implies what is known as methodological atheism. Such an approach sidetracks theological claims that lie at the root of the very faith expressions of the people who are being classified. Why would that be the basis for the most widespread method for ecclesial analysis? Taxonomies are not only about knowledge; they are about control and power.

The method itself was, and largely remains, even when used by Latin Americans, a tool that inscribes the other by the ones that are already known (not unlike the missionaries of the sixteenth century who classified the indigenous people by those they knew in the Iberian Peninsula—Muslims, Jews, and Protestants). Jean Jacques Rousseau already in the eighteenth century said it perceptively:

For the three or four hundred years since the inhabitants of Europe have inundated the other parts of the world, and continually published new collections of voyages and reports, I am convinced that we know no other men except the Europeans.<sup>18</sup>

### A faith-based taxonomy?

Any typology by itself is the imposition of a frame in which the subject matter depicted is reduced to the parameters of the grid. Therefore it is a political practice (“I know who you are as long as you remain in the frame I devised for you”). In the case of methodological atheism the problem is compounded by the fact that what the grid excludes is the faith commitment of the communities of faith in it depicted. Tax-

onomies are dangerous in that they violate the integrity of the subject matter by reducing the multidimensional reality that is being studied to the frames of the grid and the evaluatory criteria devised to tabulate, catalogue, and finally label it. In the case of applying a sociological method to religious phenomena, it is a double violation as it does not even tabulate that which is central to the identity being portrayed.

Given that this identity is of a confessional nature, the confessional principle should be employed at the start in what could be called a faith-based taxonomy. Confessional identity provides phenomenological and theological ways to describe the distinctiveness of a particular group’s attitude toward the content of their belief.

The one I propose groups the confessional clashes along three distinctive ways of understanding confessional identity. Confessional identity is not the same as denominational affiliation. It can better be described as an *attitude* toward the object of faith and with the goal of shaping one’s identity, i.e., of having an address.

The different types of attitudes take three distinct formations. My inspiration here comes from the helpful way Philipp Melancthon, following a tradition from Augustine through Thomas Aquinas, defined the structure of faith.<sup>19</sup> Faith entails, first, an object that appears as the representation of the sacred or the holy and toward which the gaze of the believer is turned (*notitia*). I call this the *theoretical attitude*. Faith is further defined by a relationship

18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s, 1964), 210–11.

19. Philipp Melancthon, *Loci Communes 1521: Lateinisch-Deutsch*, trans. Horst Georg Pöhlmann (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1993), 208–11 (*locus* 6:5–6).

that is established (namely: worship) between the believing community and the object of its devotion to which it gives assent (*assensus*). This I call the *practical attitude*. Faith is finally expressed as an existential hopeful confidence or trust to which one holds even when the external object or the worshiping practice of the community is under attack or falters (*fiducia*). This is the *poietical attitude*.

These three structural components are intimately linked, but one normally takes primacy and norms the other two, becoming the controlling principle. For lack of a better expression, these three demarcate the battleground of confessional clashes. Why? Because each reveals a distinct way of construing one's basic identity. And this is reflected in other dimensions of life, particularly politics. But how does it manifest itself?

1. *The theoretical attitude*. The first is a theoretical attitude in the etymological sense of the term (*theoreo*), which is defined by being absorbed in passive contemplation and receptiveness. The object of devotion varies. It can be a saint, an image, a vision, the eucharistic event, Mary, the Bible, a pilgrimage site, or the confessional writings of a given ecclesial tradition. In this case the believer or the believing community surrenders its autonomy to a heteronomy. One is defined by the representation of the Other, the holy other. Catholic Ultramontanism, conservatives of every stripe, traditionalists, Protestant confessionalists, and Evangelical fundamentalists, no matter how distant they are from their specific ecclesial affiliation or object of devotion, belong to this mode of defining identity. What keeps them apart as to what the object is that defines them, is much less significant than the fundamental attitude of being defined by it. This normally corresponds to the attitude toward the state, the political

regime, and venerable cultural traditions. The fundamental adherence to the status quo keeps in the same fold disparate expressions of how the holy is represented. This is the type that has the most defined "address" in the worldwide scenario where they form global networks like some religious or lay orders in the RCC, some Bible societies, internationally linked Bible institutes in conservative or fundamentalist Protestantism, and confessional societies in traditional Protestant denominations.

2. *The practical attitude*. The second mode of construing a religious identity is by being actively engaged with a community that understands itself as experiencing the presence of the divine in the interrelationship of the worship community. One's identity is defined by interconnectedness. The relationship with the holy happens in the intersubjective engagement among the members of the group and also externally by engaging the world. To use Paul Tillich's terminology,<sup>20</sup> if in the previous type one encounters the Other as a stranger whom one receives in a passive attitude toward its representation, here one meets the other as an estranged one to whom one longs to be reunited. In this case, confessional identity is in process and dynamically defined as an ongoing act of *confessing*, of living out one's faith without any stable object or representation to anchor it; representations exist, but they are malleable, *in processu confessionis*. Identity is formed in the interface. To put it more theologically, the Gift is not that which is received but that which is being shared. McLuhan's apothegm here is normative: The medium is the message. This type of faith community can easily be recognized in many sectors of

20. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10.

the RCC's work developed among popular masses (such as the Base Christian Communities), in most of mainline Protestant denominations insofar as ecumenical openness is being exercised, interfaith dialogues pursued, secular sectors of society engaged, and so forth. In this attitude there is political motivation to participate in the construction and transformation of society. Much of liberation theology has its birthright also in this type.

3. *The poietic attitude.* The third guiding theological motif by which one's identity can be construed is distinctively different from the others, although often it is not recognized as such. Instead of creating an identity by derivation from the representation of the holy other, or by inter-subjective relations, in this case the identity is construed from inside out. It differs from the first type, where identity is created from outside in, and the second, in which it is created by communal sharing. The relation to the holy in this latter case is the result of a sense of divine indwelling that has an authoritative and authorizing power, unbound to external canons and free from societal norms of procedure or communal bonds. If the first type has a theoretical quality, and the second a practical one, this one is poietic (from *poiesis*, production, creation) in character; it is the *production* of a *sui generis* identity. The charismatic movement within the RCC, the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements, and many forms of mystical experiences are expressions of this form of inner referentiality.

This is the most difficult "address" to be recognized because, unlike the other two, it does not rely on an external common reference and also does not engage in inter-subjective practice to establish a common ground for identity building. A person embodies, becomes, the other who dwells inside. In relationship to the state and politics,

this type will adjust as needed by means of dissimulation in order not to expose to confrontation that which is proper to it. Dissimulation is a sort of camouflage that protects an identity from exposure. The relationship of the Pentecostal movement to different regimes in Latin America is revealing of this attitude. If the first type says that the message is what rules the means, and for the second the motto is that the medium is the message, in this type the conviction is that the message disposes of the means at its own whim.

Clashes happen between these three. With all the differences and even tensions within each type, they show some cohesion internally, because they share the same principle or attitude by which identity is construed. Hence, there is within each type a shared spirit. But between them they are at odds, if that is what is meant by clash. There is no common denominator, except one: recognition of the need for construing one's identity in search for belonging in a global reality in which accountability is that which first prompted this search—that is, the reality of globalization when "addresses" disappear, responsibility falters, and the globe becomes flat.

If the clashes are the result of the effects of globalization and the lack of accountability it engenders, the only approach to respond to the challenge these clashes pose is precisely to be responsible, to answer back when we are addressed, addressed by God and by the neighbor. To remind us of the dispatches sent to us is the work of the chronicler, the one who registers the events of the day and reminds us of what has been left behind.

(P.S.: "Retirement means no pressure, no stress, no heartache . . . unless you play golf."—Gene Perret)



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.