



# What I learned in Eight Weeks in Bolivia

## Studying religious syncretism in the Andes

By Reuben Sairs

I teach World Religions and Cults at Rosedale Bible College, and I am especially interested in the issue of religious syncretism—the combining of religious ideas. Last winter RBC granted me a short sabbatical to go to Bolivia and study syncretism in the Andes.

Syncretism is a bad thing when we combine ideas that don't belong together. A Christian, for example, might mix pagan religious ideas into Christian faith and come up with a monstrosity.

### Syncretism is everybody's problem

We all bring a culture with us to the Bible; sometimes we get them confused. Learning a bit about syncretism can help a believer sort out what comes from the mind of God and what is merely the human imagination, exercising its great powers to invent religious ideas. Add up false, invented religion in the Bible from Cain's sacrifice to the distortions by the Pharisees and it is a sobering picture.

Not everything added by humans to religion is wrong, of course, but we shouldn't put God's name on those things that really belong only to us. As I see it, this is the real meaning of "taking the Lord's name in vain." It is like signing his name to a check he didn't write.

In evangelism and missions, syncretism is often talked about at the same time as contextualization. Contextualizing is allowing the gospel to freely express itself within a culture. Christians in Bolivia don't need to become North Americans in order to follow Christ.

Here is a definition from Moreau, Corwin and McGee's *Introducing World Missions*:

*The core idea is that of taking the gospel to a new context and finding appropriate ways to communicate it so that it is understandable to the people in that context. Contextualization refers*

*to more than just theology; it also includes developing church life and ministries that are biblically faithful and culturally appropriate (12).*

You might say that contextualization is unavoidable, necessary and good, but some of the same goals that drive it can also lead to syncretism. There can be problems, though, when you start snooping around for syncretism in other people's cultures. Theologian Justo Gonzalez says that "contemporary third-world theologians debate the very notion [of syncretism]." They see it as "a way in which old missionary centers sought to retain their control by raising the specter of syncretism whenever a younger church sought to inculturate the gospel in ways that threatened the hegemony of the traditional centers" (*Essential Theological Terms*).

You don't have to visit other countries to see syncretism. We have plenty of our own. It is all around—all Christians can make the mistake of importing cultural or religious ideas into their faith that don't belong there. For us the prosperity gospel is a good example. We have a this-world orientation and it usually involves God giving us stuff, making our paths easy as "we are raised up to the skies on flowery beds of ease." Overstated nationalism can be another form of syncretism. Ethnocentrism, the belief in the superiority of one's own culture, comes in many forms, might be unconscious, and can skew our Bible interpretation.

Consider how much of our Christian practice is biblical strictly speaking, and how much comes from culture and tradition. Consider our holidays—very few of us believe Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. I'm not among those who sit it out and scowl at Christmas, but it is a typical holiday example.

I am not a missionary, but I know one of the great issues in modern missions has been to sort this out—a pure form of the faith doesn't go out with the missionaries (they have their own problems with syncretism), and the groups they go to are probably not any more or less susceptible to the charms of syncretism than we are. In other words, it's everybody's problem, but usually it's easier to see it in others than to see it in the mirror.

### Syncretism in Bolivia

La Paz, Bolivia remains in large measure inhabited by indigenous people—the Aymara especially. Their culture is by no means extinct or hard to find, although in the city it isn't lived out in completely traditional ways. Since the Roman Catholic church dominated the region in earlier times, it has a long history of struggle with syncretism. The Virgin Mary, who is venerated and prayed to by the Catholics and whose statues are pervasive in the churches, is often not clearly distinguished from the *Pachamama*—the earth goddess of the Andes. Pouring



Taxi drivers and car owners bring their cars to Copacabana to be blessed at the cathedral.



A yatiri purifies and blesses a family's offering on El Calvario in Copacabana (on the shores of Lake Titicaca).



Every year, families of those recently departed visit cemeteries and leave gifts for the spirits of the *abuelos* (literally, grandparents, but the term includes all of your ancestors).

out a little of a drink on the earth as an offering to the Pachamama is a common sight. I saw it.

I also saw the *yatiris* (indigenous officiants/priests/witch-doctors, if you will) who oversee offerings, enclosing offerings called *mesas* with a native incense, and pouring some type of wine over them. Coca leaves are often part of the offering, and setting off firecrackers helps draw necessary attention from the invisible world. In Copacabana cars get similar treatment, and Catholic priests might be the officiants. The *mesas* that I observed, especially during the *Alasitas* festival, had small models of items that a person desired or depictions of areas of life in which they wanted abundance or success. The miniature models included everything from food and laundry detergent to houses, tools, passports, diplomas, smiling (and more) couples in bed and much else. Presiding over this particular holiday/festival is the god Ekeko—a friendly looking guy about whom there is much more to say. Coca leaves might be offered at his statue, and apparently he enjoys a good smoke, too.

It is very festive and market booths by the hundreds sell these tiny items. Families come out to enjoy food stalls and peruse the offerings. Many, but not all, evangelical Christians stay away from the festival and

regard it as fetishism. I got various answers as to how seriously it was all to be taken.

Other elements present syncretism issues for the church, some of them relating to practice as much as to theology. Drunkenness is a particularly thorny problem at public festivities. The history of alcohol abuse in religious festivals in the Andes is well documented. Days of the Dead in early November in which the spirits of ancestors come in from the mountains to visit, especially the first three years after their deaths, bring a lot of people out with food and drinks and maybe coca leaves to the cemeteries. A particularly interesting festival call *Nitas* involves bringing skulls to the cemeteries.

I have read that the skulls are brought dressed with scarves, hats, and sunglasses. Some are toted in humble boxes, some in fancy cabinets. Households keep these skulls as a spiritual protection to watch over their homes and affairs. It is best to find the skull of a person who died a violent death. I only got to read about it!

Several mornings I went to ISEAT (Instituto Superior Ecueménico Andino de Teología) to study in their library. They have a very good collection of books and were very helpful and friendly. They also held a conference on indigenous wisdom and knowledge while we were there and allowed me to attend a few sessions. All of the speakers had church ties, but few were what we might consider evangelical Christians. ISEAT is a project of the World Council of Churches in Switzerland and their use of the term ecumenical might be contrasted with our term—evangelical. Their kindness and learning were delightful, but I usually felt very EVANGELICAL when I was in conversation. We probably differed with regard to syncretism and what to think about it. Many of them would see what I call syncretism as a healthy spirituality that deserves an equal place alongside my type of Christian faith.

I learned a fair amount about indigenous religions and how they are woven into the fabric of daily Roman Catholic life, which is the normal life of La Paz. I learned that evangelical churches are not immune, but try to sort it out, usually a little more aggressively, but not with complete success. Most importantly, I learned that thoughtful leaders are likely to ask us about our own syncretism. I am reading between the lines, but it seems to me that the church in Bolivia is not particularly interested in our opinion about their issues with regard to syncretism. They might be asking us about our own struggles. They do not necessarily regard the North American church as the center of God's activity in the world, nor do they think that we should have the last word. What I came back with was a conviction for us to listen to Jesus again.

Matthew 7: 3-5: "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

And just a final tidbit: There are virtually no Mennonites in La Paz, although there are tens of thousands of colony-type Mennonites in other parts of the country. The closest we got to them was frying Queso Menonita (Mennonite cheese), which makes me hungry to think about. **BB**

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Reuben, in our favorite internet café, Blueberries.