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Can the subaltern speak? The Active Silent Voice of the Pentecostal Women

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Can the subaltern speak? The Active Silent Voice of the Pentecostal Women

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Abstract²

In the midst of the hegemonic patriarchal structure experienced by women within Latina/o Pentecostal churches, Gayatri Spivak's celebrated question about the voice of the subaltern is still valid: Can the subaltern speak? Vitor Westhelle answers with another question: "But can preach? And if [women] can, then this preaching is already a postcolonial act." I argue that Latina Pentecostal women as subalterns have an active silent voice. This active silent voice has to be seen as a postcolonial act of preaching in the pneumatological experiences. Through the gifts of the Spirit (tongues, prophesy, and interpretation), Latina women interrupt and disrupt the patriarchal structure so predominant within Latina/o Pentecostal churches.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Pentecostal, Latina/os, Subaltern.

¿Puede la subalterna hablar? La voz silenciosa activa de las mujeres pentecostales

Resumen

En medio de la hegemonía de la estructura patriarcal que las mujeres experimentan en las iglesias Pentecostales, la célebre pregunta de Gayatri Spivak sobre la subalternidad resulta todavía vigente: ¿Puede la subalterna hablar? Vitor Westhelle responde con otra pregunta: "Pero puede predicar? Y si [las mujeres] pueden, entonces esta predicación es un acto poscolonial". El argumento de este artículo es que las mujeres latinas pentecostales tienen una voz activa silenciosa. Esta voz activa silenciosa debe ser vista como un acto poscolonial de predicación de las experiencias neumatológicas. Por medio de los dones del Espíritu (lenguas, profecía e interpretación), las mujeres latinas interrumpen e irrumpen la estructura patriarcal que predomina en las iglesias latinas pentecostales.

Palabras clave: Poscolonial, Pentecostal, Latina/os, Subalterno.

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² Paper presented at the Rocky Mountain/Great Plains American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature Regional Meeting, April 1-2, 2016, Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO.

Introduction

Traditionally, Latino men have exerted power over women in the context of the United States, Latin American and Caribbean. This gender ideology is highly patriarchal and is reinforced by the idea of *machismo*, according to many scholars such as Cornelia Flora (1976), Elizabeth Brusco (2011), and Bridget Kevane (2008). *Machistas* are stereotypically seen as men who are gamblers, drinkers and who have many women (Drogus 1998, pp. 56-57). They are idealized as “real” men. Carol Ann Drogus states that this patriarchal hegemony legitimizes “male power over females generally and especially within families. It has traditionally divided the world into two spheres: the house (private) and the street (public). Men dominate both spheres” (p. 56). *Machismo* is a version of patriarchal ideology that treat women as objects legitimizing oppression over them.

Religiously speaking, a patriarchal structure can be observed in Christianity, particularly, in Latina/o³ Pentecostal churches⁴. Through three years of observation-participation in Iglesia del Evangelio Completo, Verónica Pérez concludes that due to the structure of Pentecostal churches, women remain as figure-object. She also insists that Pentecostal women are taken sometimes to fill a space or role in the church, but not because they represent a specific sector of the church and society with their own interests, preoccupations and visions (2009, pp. 129-137). Pentecostal men marginalize women due to an inherited model of patriarchal leadership.

In the midst of this hegemonic situation faced by women within Latina/o Pentecostal churches, Gayatri Spivak’s celebrated question about the voice of the subaltern is still valid: Can the subaltern speak? Vitor Westhelle answers, “as Spivak suggests, if a subaltern speaks, her voice is co-opted by hegemonic or self-effaced by dissimulation. But can preach? And if she can, then this preaching is already a postcolonial act” (2010, p. 144). I will argue that Latina Pentecostal women as subalterns have an active silent voice. By active silent voice, I mean a voice that is continuously submitted to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, while at the same time subvert it. This active silent

voice is expressed in terms of a postcolonial⁵ act of preaching and is heard in pneumatological experiences. Through speaking in tongues, prophesy and interpretation, Latina women interrupt and disrupt the hegemonic patriarchal structure so predominant within Pentecostal churches. Westhelle elucidates this postcolonial act of preaching as follows,

To preach (from *predicare*) is to audaciously announce something in the face of a given addressee and can entail a danger. There is no disguise involved. But speaking, for the subaltern, we have seen, cannot but be dissimulative. While speaking entails dissimulation, preaching for subalterns comes about as different form of communication, when they leave any and every disguise behind. Etimologically, “communication” can mean two things. I can either be traced to *co-unio* or to *co-munus*. The first implies a commonality, a camaraderie where there is conversation and sharing in a group of equals, while the second means imparting a gift, delivering a message, as in communiqué. Speaking or conversing belongs to the former and preaching to the latter. What is delivered is properly called a gift insofar as it cannot be returned, it is an expenditure. Preaching belongs to this type of deliverance in which what is given might have rippling effects, but cannot be returned in kind (2010, p. 144).

How do these Latina women irrupt and disrupt this patriarchal structure as an act of postcolonial communication within Pentecostal churches? How do they break male authority and *machismo*?

Preaching as a Postcolonial Act

Pentecostals take their name from the story recounted in the book of Acts, chapter two, when the Holy Spirit suddenly irrupted and filled with tongues those believers who were waiting in Jerusalem (Cox 1995, p. 3). Even though the Pentecostal movement is varied and diverse, all Pentecostals identify themselves in a permanent search for the gifts which proceed from the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals believe in many different spiritual gifts; however, speaking in tongues, prophesy and interpretation play an important role within the community. Pentecostals deem that only those who have believed in Jesus and have been converted from the evil world to the spiritual world through the power of the Holy Spirit can receive God’s grace. According

³ Usually in the Spanish language the term “Latino” refers to the male gender while “Latina” refers to the female gender. Though the competing preferences within the community are understandable, I have opted to use “Hispanic” and “Latina/o” interchangeably.

⁴ Cecilia L. Mariz considers that *machismo* is not so strong in Latina/o Pentecostalism. See “Pentecostalism and Confrontation with Poverty in Brazil,” in Benjamin F. Gutiérrez and Dennis A. Smith. (ed.). (1996). *In the Power of the Spirit: The Pentecostal Challenge to Historic Churches in Latin America*. Drexel Hill: SKIPJACK Press., p. 144. Mariz’s comparison of machismo in Latin American society with Pentecostalism is a subtle way of perpetuating and justifying machismo, so predominant in Latina/o Pentecostal churches. In other words, it is another way of invisible colonization and mask patriarchal structures.

⁵ In this paper the different notions of “postcolonial” and its cognates are related to the “practice, theory and cultural attitudes of a hegemonic metropolitan center, akin to what Said... defined as imperialism.” See Vitor Westhelle, *After Heresy*, 121, n. 2.

to Harvey Cox, the experience of speaking in tongues can be considered as the principal characteristic within Pentecostalism (Cox 1995, pp. 81-83; César 2001, pp. 28-29)⁶. Women who speak in tongues do not know what they are saying and never before had spoken in that strange language. Based on Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12, Pentecostals insist that under the power of the Holy Spirit it is possible to speak this mysterious language. For Latino Pentecostals, speaking in tongues is a gift given by the Spirit and it is seen also as preaching. When women are testifying or speaking in tongues, prophesying or interpreting, they are “imparting a gift, delivering a message” (Westelle 2010, p. 144.) This message is a lawful mode of communication articulated in various pneumatological expressions.

The gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation are linked and are usually performed orally in religious meetings. Latina/o Pentecostals claim that all of them should seek to speak in tongues, but not all people in their community should prophesy. Habitually, these spiritual manifestations are carried out in worship services, and when a woman prophesies, the community remains in silence waiting to hear God’s voice through the prophet. Latina/o Pentecostals affirm that a prophet is the person who receives a divine message and has the capacity to interpret it in a human language. The prophet might deliver his message speaking in tongues while another member in the community or the prophet herself, who has the gift of interpretation, translates into a comprehensive language the divine message. Yong explains that speaking in “tongues with interpretation that moves speaker and/or congregation into a more harmonious relationship with themselves and the world is evidence of the Spirit’s activity.” (2000, p. 180). The term used by some Latina/o Pentecostals is “revelation.” Revelation is manifested in two contexts. One is when someone is filled by the Holy Spirit and communicates a prophecy, and the other is when someone has a dream in which God reveals something important for the whole community or for a specific person. The messenger is seen as a servant who transmits orally the message given by God. Women express the prophecy or the dreams saying: “God shows me”, “The Holy Spirit revealed me”, or “I saw Jesus”.

In her novel *Geographies of Home*, Loida Maritza Pérez relates the story of Marina while she is in a church hearing Pastor Rivera insisting that women are inferior to men and are responsible for the evil of this world. Sudden-

ly, Marina interrupted Rivera’s sermon:

Marina’s arms twitched spasmodically. Her head, hanging as if from a broken neck...
Marina immediately grew still. Words, barely audible, trickled from her lips. “Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah” ...
“I have seen God’s face,” she proclaimed. “He has revealed Himself to me.” (1999, p. 109).

The novelist Pérez continues the story saying that some angry people in the congregation accused her of blasphemy and being possessed by the devil. However, Pérez clarifies that if this situation would have happened in a Pentecostal church, Marina’s behavior might have been attributed to the Holy Ghost (p. 109). In spite of the fact that Latina/o Pentecostalism is predominantly patriarchal, it is important to observe how women adopt a spontaneous role while the Latino men legitimize the prophetic message subverting the male authority (see De La Torre, 2010, pp. 116-117). If the congregation accepts with joy and approves what she is speaking or doing in the worship service, the congregation is legitimizing a spontaneous leadership. Pentecostals see these experiences as pneumatological. They speak aloud: “El Espíritu Santo se está moviendo” (“The Holy Spirit is moving”). In Pentecostal liturgical worship, a solidarity in liminality and spontaneous leadership can be observed. Arlene Sánchez-Walsh succinctly puts it: “Pentecostalism’s transcendent value: an offering of a ritual life to groups who do not feel welcome in other surroundings.” (2003, p. 112). Women can experience this “transcendent value,” having equity with men and having agency through the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation. In this sense, these active silent voices of Latina Pentecostal women are a postcolonial act of preaching that disrupts and interrupts the hegemonic patriarchal structure and reverse the male authority validating the voice and presence (embodied) of Latina women. They engage in a non-hegemonic discourse and a counter narrative in an in-between-space. In this in-between-space Latina Pentecostal women deliver the message as preaching and this “announcement comes always with a denouncement” (Westelle, 2010, p. 144) of the patriarchal structure of Latino men. In this postcolonial act or preaching, the message is gifted and cannot be censored by the male dominant hierarchy.

What we have to consider is that these pneumatological experiences of the spiritual gifts are performed in hybrid spaces. Here hybridity is taken as explained by

⁶ There are several passages in the Bible related to spiritual gifts: Romans 12,3-8; 1 Corinthians 12,8-10,28-30; Ephesians 4,7-12; 1 Peter 4,10-11. Most Pentecostal churches used 1 Corinthians 12,8-10, to describe nine of those gifts, including prophecy and healing. They see a difference between speaking in tongues as a gift and the Spirit baptism. It shows the ambiguity of some of their beliefs. See Villafaña, Eldin. (1993). *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 85.

Westhelle as “the postcolonial consciousness’s criticism of the assumption that a clear dividing line can be drawn between high and low culture, between accepted or hegemonic régimes of truth and those that do not meet the standards of the former, and are thus excluded and marginalized” (2010, p. 157). Then the postcolonial act performed by Latina Pentecostal women transgress the boundaries and domains established by the hegemonic structure. Pentecostal Latino men are one with the domain, while Pentecostal women subversively reverse the patriarchal domain with a “parasitical tactic” of mimicry that accidentally irrupts into preaching. These pneumatological spaces are clear examples of how the active silent of the subaltern Pentecostal Latina women disrupt and irrupt the hegemonic male dominance observed within these churches and find a way as allergic parasites (see Westhelle 2010, pp. 158-159).

Homi K. Bhabha, quoting Lacan, analyzes mimicry as something that reveals “in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but against a mottled background, of becoming mottle” (2004, p. 121). Thus, an ambiguous and incomplete vision of the colonial subject is formed since he is required to learn and reproduce the dominant ideology but is not recognized as part of it. This is what Bhabha calls the ambivalence of mimicry (p. 129). Hybridity functions as a strategy of disrupting the oppression created by the Pentecostal male ideology of fixed identity. In the liminal pneumatological space, Latina Pentecostal women are not engaged in a camouflage that obscures their own identity but engage in a cultural transformation based on their own experience that “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (p. 5).

Spaces are central in postcolonial studies. Given that hybridity defies the idea of fixed and pure categories developed by the dominant culture, identities and cultures interact to develop a form of cultural hybridity in a liminal space. According to Bhabha, a culture-contact cannot be reduced to a collision of two totalized cultures, but is rather a series of encounters of groups and people in different social circumstances. These encounters result in a contradictory and ambivalent spaces in which social identities are negotiated. This effect is called by Bhabha as a “Third Space of enunciation” (p. 54). The word enunciation in the third space here is key to understand the performance, the speech, or the act developed in this space of hybridity by Latina/o Pentecostal women. As Westhelle would say, the subalterns do not speak, but preach. It is in this third space in which Latina Pentecostal women deliver

their message as a postcolonial act of preaching through the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues or the gift of interpretation. In this third space, Latina Pentecostal women create a strategy of resistance that enables them to have agency and in this way resist totalization. They create visible spaces in a world of invisibility, disrupting *machismo*. In other words, it complicates *machismo* through disruption and resistance. Brazilian novelist, Silviano Santiago’s metaphors of the *invisible* and *visible* texts for the reading of the relationship between dominant and dominated literatures are useful for understanding the self of Latina Pentecostal women and their search for identity. According to Ana Lúcia Gazzola and Wander Melo Miranda, his main contribution lies in the “invisible dimension of the copy” (2001, pp. 4-5). In this space-in-between, Latina Pentecostals as a copy of the dominant male culture emulate the “parodic appropriation of the discourse of the Same by the Other who subverts it” (p. 6). This space-in-between provides a soil rife with opportunities where Latina Pentecostals may repress all the values destroyed by the hegemonic culture since they see in the mirror not their own reflected image, but the image of someone that has to be subverted.



Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that as a male writer of this article, perhaps, I am speaking for others or on behalf of the subaltern Pentecostal women. Even though I have been involved in the Pentecostal world since my infancy, it implies certain risks. This situation and Marina's story in *Geographies of Home* written by Loida Maritza Pérez, let me with some questions that spin in my mind: Am I perpetuating or masking my patriarchal *machismo* domain and power under the postcolonial act of preaching? Instead of women speaking by themselves, am I muting their voices? Can be these gifts of the Spirit (tongues, prophesy, and interpretation) be seen like a madness? Can this postcolonial act of preaching of the Pentecostal subalterns a case of ventriloquist (Spivak), in which the colonizer allows or gives voice to the subalterns and then women pronounce the words that reinforce their own subordination within the patriarchal system? Am I romanticizing the voice of the Latina Pentecostal subalterns?

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CAMINO

REVISTA PENSAMIENTO BÍBLICO & CULTURAL



QUIBDÓ / COLOMBIA