

## **Spiritualism/spiritism: Challenges to the Church in Latin America**

### ***A study document to be discussed and complemented by the Lutheran churches in Latin America***

- (1) With this document, we the participants at the LWF-sponsored study seminar held in São Leopoldo, Brazil, November 2002, hope to provide the Latin American member churches with basic material as they reflect on spiritualism.

We would like to encourage churches and individuals to study this document and to send your contributions to the coordinator of the Latin America working group, Rev. Prof. Dr Jerónimo José Granados, Instituto Universitario ISEDET, Camacué 252, C1406DOF Buenos Aires - Argentina, e-mail: [granadosbeacon@arnet.com.ar](mailto:granadosbeacon@arnet.com.ar)

We recommend the book Ingo Wulforth (ed.), *Espiritualismo/Espiritismo: Desafios para a Igreja na América Latina* (Geneva/São Leopoldo: Federação Luterana Mundial/Editora Sinodal, 2004). This book contains the presentation at the study seminar and can be ordered at the Editora Sinodal, caixa postal 11, 93001-170, São Leopoldo-RS, Brasil, e-mail: [editora@editorasinodal.com.br](mailto:editora@editorasinodal.com.br)

- (2) The Latin America working group will take your input into consideration before presenting the revised document at the LWF international consultation on “Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church,” in October 2005.
- (3) Similar studies have been initiated in Africa, Asia and Europe. The results of these will be presented at the international consultation which will reflect on the multiplicity and richness of the contextual studies, the challenges and the proposals of all the LWF regions and formulate the final document *Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church - Theses and Guidelines*.
- (4) The study seminar on “Spiritualism: Challenges to the Church in Latin America” focused on spiritualistic phenomena that are being experienced in- and outside Lutheran congregations in Latin America. It was attended by representatives of spiritualistic movements, of all the Latin American member churches and the following academic institutions: Escola Superior de Teologia, São Leopoldo (Brazil), Instituto Universitario ISEDET (Argentina), Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) and Universidade Luterana do Brasil (Brazil).
- (5) Participants discussed fourteen presentations delivered by university professors, pastors and representatives of several spiritualistic movements. Participants also attended a Umbanda celebration (the largest Afro-Brazilian spiritualistic religion). Each presentation was followed by a fruitful exchange of ideas and reflections that included interdisciplinary dialogue and a

comparison of experiences. Throughout the seminar, we acknowledged that spiritualism represents a challenge for our communities and institutions of theological education.

### **Definition**

- (6) The term “spiritualism” has different meanings. Underlying the study program is the following broad working definition of the term: the multi-faceted belief in a vital principle, within living beings, a supernatural, divine, incorporeal being–force, a spirit–*anima* animating their bodies. Adherents of spiritualistic movements believe that the spirits of the dead survive mortal life, and can communicate with the living. Since ancient times, this has been an element in traditional indigenous religions. In today’s world, it is a growing phenomenon manifesting itself in traditional indigenous religiosity on all continents, spiritualistic groups, and many syncretistic movements with elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christian popular religiosity and other elements.

### **Objectives**

- (7) We consider the following to be objectives of the study seminar and program of the LWF:
  - a) To promote in-depth academic as well as pastoral studies, research and reflection on spiritualistic movements;
  - b) To reflect on this topic in an interdisciplinary way including biblical scholarship, systematic theology, pastoral/practical theology, sociology, psychology, psychiatry and parapsychology, and in dialogue with leaders of spiritualistic movements in different cultural and religious contexts;
  - c) To reflect on how spiritualistic movements impact the church, Lutheran identity, dialogue and global mission;
  - d) To develop a strategy for disseminating this document, the findings of the conferences and the resulting debates;
  - e) To coordinate the follow-up in Latin America, to share experiences, to support the multipliers, and to share the results of these studies with the international consultation “Spiritualistic Movements as a Global Challenge for the Church” in Africa in 2005.
  - f) To study, discuss and revise the document *Spiritualism: Challenges to the Church in Latin America* in parishes, congregations, communities and institutions of theological education of the member churches of the LWF in Latin America.

## **Spiritualistic phenomena in the religiosity of the aboriginal people, Umbanda and spiritism**

- (8) Spiritualism is a heterogeneous phenomenon and we will here focus on the following aspects:
- (9) ***Religiosity of the aboriginal people***: the aboriginal people accept the existence of spirits that structure a great part of their everyday lives. Amongst these are spirits of the dead, other spirits, and deities. Whenever the indigenous community tries to communicate with the spirits, the intervention of a specialist (a medium, priest, shaman, etc) who in a trance enters into contact with spirits is necessary.
- (10) During the trance, the specialists leave their conscious state. They manifest that they “abandon” their own bodies in order to dialogue with one or more spirits who will help solve the conflict presented to them. In order to continue with the trance an atmosphere has to be created that suits the culture of those who are taking part in the celebration. Herbs, smoke, animals, musical instruments and songs are the most common elements used to create such an atmosphere. After a certain time, the specialist returns with an answer to the problem on hand.
- (11) There is no belief in reincarnation and death is considered as a passage to another life sphere. We refer to autochthonous cultures that have achieved varying degrees of independence from the dominant Christian religion. The degree to which typically Christian religious expressions are assimilated depends on the level of independence of the aboriginal groups. They have been following the path of adaptation and assimilation from the time of the conquest (by Spain and Portugal). A dynamic of assimilation and cultural integration, and at the same time of resistance, has been established. The result of this is that many of the spiritualistic manifestations are expressed through Christian rituals and forms. In this way, autochthonous cultures resist losing their vision of the world and their religiosity.
- (12) ***African religiosity***: the presence of African religiosity in Latin America dates back to the African slaves bringing with them their cultures and religions. While their religious expressions were prohibited by law, they survived in many regions of Latin America thanks to an underground resistance movement (under the cloak of Roman Catholic symbols). Today African religiosity manifest itself in Candomblé and Umbanda. Candomblé is considered closest to the African roots, whereas Umbanda covers a greater diversity of people who live out their African religiosity with different degrees of intensity.
- (13) ***Spiritism***: in Latin America, spiritism is expressed through diverse schools related to the spiritualistic doctrine of Allan Kardec. Spiritism claims to have a scientific basis, and thus able to explain the phenomena manifested “scientifically” through mediums. Pain and suffering in the world are explained through *karma* according to which errors committed in past lives are to be repaired in this life or in a future incarnation. Inasmuch as the spirit evolves through its pain and charity, it achieves

perfection through several incarnations. In this way, reincarnation is a fundamental concept of spiritism.

- (14) Other expressions of spirituality related to spiritualism such as New Age, Gnosticism, Reincarnationism were not discussed at the seminar. They form a vast universe of spiritualistic religious alternatives.

#### **Aboriginal people's religiosity, Umbanda and spiritism: proposals and challenges**

- (15) We propose that
- a) Lutheran congregations start to promote dialogue with aboriginal people. This dialogue must take into account the aboriginal cosmovision and religious expressions and foster mutual understanding. Groups trying to come closer to Christianity need the support of the churches which, in turn, must not forget their need to reinterpret Christianity through their own cultural universe. We have to bear in mind that since the conquest these groups have been oppressed and economically exploited, restricting the development of their own languages, cultures and religiosity.
  - b) Different groups of African religiosity be studied by the congregations.
  - c) Spiritism be studied in order to foster dialogue with adherents of spiritism. In Brazil, where spiritism has a massive presence, we propose to work together such areas as social work (*diakonia*, music, etc.).
- (16) We challenge churches, their institutions and ministries,
- a) Better to acquaint themselves with the religious background of the diverse groups
  - b) To accompany people in accordance with our tradition of commitment to those who suffer pain and injustice
  - c) To develop communitarian and pastoral strategies in order to give support to those who are frightened and sometimes even terrified because of spiritistic experiences.

#### **Psychology, psychiatry and parapsychology vis-à-vis spiritistic phenomena: challenges and proposals**

- (17) Psychology, psychiatry and parapsychology help us better to understand these spiritual/spiritistic phenomena.
- (18) **Psychology:** we believe that we have to tackle this topic from an interdisciplinary approach. For example, psychology explains these spiritualistic/spiritistic phenomena through such models as the psychoanalytic, behaviorist or systemic. We have chosen the constructivist paradigm of Humberto Maturana and Varela and tried to enlighten

these phenomena with theoretical hypotheses. For example: we do not have direct experiences; the observer has an unavoidable influence on what s/he sees and interprets. We do not know the outer world, only our inner images. Definitely, the map is not the territory. Our difficulty lies in the fact that we behave as if our map were the territory. If we are aware that the map is not the territory, we lose our role as experts. Therefore, the reality is constructed and also our experiences. If this reality causes pain, we are able to change it (= the reality) in order to alleviate or even to eliminate the pain. A spiritualistic phenomenon would only be a problem if it caused pain. If this is not the case, it could be a phenomenon that happens in a conversational environment different from ours and, for that reason, not less valid.

- (19) **Psychiatry**: psychiatry understands that all the alterations of human behavior have biological and/or psychological causes. Schizophrenia, an affective bipolar illness, substance abuse and epilepsy of the temporal lobes are examples in which organic factors predominate. On the other hand, in dissociative identity disorders and in so-called borderline personalities, psychological components are more important. These conditions can provoke important behavioral changes and make the individual perceive, through the senses, people, objects, shapes or any other stimulus that do not really exist.
- (20) **Parapsychology**: parapsychology examines the less common phenomena, apparently inexplicable to those who experience them and the traditional sciences. These phenomena have happened to human beings of all ages and cultures.
- (21) Among these spiritualistic phenomena, the most common are: persons who believe that they have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead, Psychography, haunted houses, knocks on walls or tables, rains of rocks, etc.
- (22) Parapsychology is an important science to analyze spiritualistic phenomenology since it verifies the true phenomena from those that are not. It unmasks and demystifies a series of frauds, tricks and other deceits. In this way, it acts like a filter.
- (23) In Latin America, positivism continues to dominate the theoretical instruments of science, philosophy and even religion. Positivism rejects the possibility of any contribution by parapsychology because it does not acknowledge that parapsychology has a theoretical-practical perspective.
- (24) It is important to mention that spiritualistic phenomena, many of them parapsychological, are provoked by people, who according to parapsychology are “gifted, “sensitive” or “paranormal agents.” These phenomena do not belong to “the beyond” but to our world. They are not “supernatural” but natural. That is to say, they are of a human nature.

### **Recommendations**

- (25) We recommend

- a) To include courses in psychology, psychiatry and parapsychology in the curricula of theological training institutions
- b) To implement the universal priesthood of all the believers for the dialogue with spiritualistic people
- c) To motivate psychologists, psychiatrists and parapsychologists to assume this priesthood and to join in a communitarian pastoral effort.

### **Proposals and suggestions**

- (26) Based on our experiences and reflections, we would like to make some suggestions for congregational work and pastoral care:
- a) To work with other professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and parapsychologists, etc.
  - b) To study spiritualistic phenomena
  - c) To provide a consultancy/advisory service in each church
  - d) To evaluate the results of the consultancy
  - e) To provide an arena for those experiencing spiritistic phenomena to express themselves
  - f) To make use of the external means of grace e.g., eucharistic
  - g) Pastoral care should be expanded to include dialogue with people who are having spiritistic experiences and the training of church members for a ministry of accompaniment of people with spiritualistic experiences (the universal priesthood of all the believers)
  - h) To carry out a field study regarding spiritualistic experiences in the congregations
  - i) To publish a booklet of Bible studies for the congregations, with the help of scholars in systematic theology and Bible
  - j) To carry out a survey regarding the results of the dialogue within the congregations, which will be taken to the international consultation in Africa so as to lay the foundations for further reflection
  - k) To intensify the dialogue about spiritualistic/spiritistic phenomena among Lutherans and with other churches and religions taking into account the following topics: suffering and pain; Satan, demons and the Holy Spirit; the office of the keys: confessor/confidant; what is sin, guilt, mistake, lack; evil in general and the evil of individualization; the immortality of the soul, resurrection?

- (27) We hope that this task motivates the churches to reach a commitment to work on this topic in the congregations and communities so as to be able to make an important contribution to the international meeting that will take place in 2005.