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Religion in One Hundred Years of Solitude and The Lost Steps

Religion is a critical part of the development of every known society in history. As soon as civilization begins to develop, one of the first things to occur is that the “shaman” class of priest-healer-magician-leaders diverges, and an organized priestly class begins to develop along with an organized ruling class. Because the development of civilization in Macondo is central to the plot of Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, and the development of civilization in Santa Monica de los Venados comprises a key part of Alejo Carpentier’s The Lost Steps, the role of the newly emerging religion plays an important part in both works.

The role of religion has many similarities between the two works. Because both works are written by Latin American authors, and both cities are located in the South American jungle, the dominant religion in the merging societies is Roman Catholicism. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, it is represented by a series of secular (meaning non-monastic) priests, beginning with Padre Nicanor Reyna. In The Lost Steps, it is represented by a Capuchin friar, the gnarled old Fray Pedro. In both works, the clergymen have come to evangelize to non-Christians: Padre Nicanor to the irreligious town of Macondo, Fray Pedro to the pagan Indians of Santa Monica. Both are invited to their respective towns by the governor, the ruling class: the Adelantado invites Fray Pedro, because he feels the town is large enough to need a church; Don Apolinar Mascote, the magistrate of Macondo, invites Padre Nicanor to Macondo from the nearby swamp to perform the wedding of Rebeca Buendía and Pietro Crespi, and seeing the irreligious state of Macondo,

Nicanor decides to stay. Both of the priests represent a greater level of civilization in the towns: the towns have naturally acquired an organized priestly class as they have grown larger and more complex. Both also impose themselves on the populace: Fray Pedro and Padre Nicanor each conscript labor (and money, in the case of Nicanor) from the populace in order to build large church buildings; and both impose new moral restrictions on the people, as Padre Nicanor tries to force the people of Macondo into the heavy ritualism of Catholicism, and Fray Pedro angrily urges the Narrator to marry his consort, Rosario. As the Narrator of The Lost Steps says, “The shackles beneath the Samaritan’s robe have been revealed. Two bodies cannot take their pleasure together without black-nailed fingers wanting to make the sign of the cross over them” (223).

The evangelists in both works represent civilization with an organized priesthood, by imposing themselves on the populace, by presenting new moral constraints, by proselytizing to a non-Christian people, and by representing the Roman Catholic faith. However, they differ in that Fray Pedro is sincere in his faith where the Padres are hypocritical; Fray Pedro is welcomed by the populace, where the Padres’ gospel falls on deaf ears; and the Fraile adheres to a strict, monastic faith, while the Padres represent what Fray Pedro denounces as “the worldly priests, those he termed new sellers of indulgences, dreamers of cardinals’ hats, tenors of the pulpit” (Carpentier 168). The religion of Fray Pedro is the religion of Jesus and the disciples, of giving up all worldly possessions and taking to the road to spread the Word. The religion of Father Nicanor is the religion of the Renaissance Popes and the sellers of indulgences, of centralized religion supported by the money and labor of the people. Their differences represent the differences between their approaches to religion; in both works the falseness of modern society is reflected as the simple, monastic, *primitive* faith of the Fraile is contrasted against the artifice and worldliness of the *modern* faith of the secular clergy.

The hypocrisy of the Padres is evident in their practices; in order to convince the people of Macondo to grant him the money to build his church, Padre Nicanor must resort to parlor tricks of levitation, passing them off as “undeniable proof of the infinite power of God” (García Marquez 85). Padre Antonio Isabel spends as much time raising fighting cocks—a symbol of all that José Arcadio Buendía had left behind in the civilized world when he and his followers founded Macondo—as he does evangelizing; when he grooms José Arcadio Segundo for the priesthood, “He was teaching him the catechism as he shaved the necks of his roosters” (Ibid. 191). The sexton Petronio confesses to José Arcadio Segundo that some members of Macondo’s church overcome the strictures of Church-enforced celibacy by “[doing] their business with female donkeys” (Ibid. 191). Padre Nicanor even ceases to evangelize to José Arcadio Buendía; at first, “He [José Arcadio Buendía] was so stubborn [in requiring a daguerreotype of God to believe] that Father Nicanor gave up his attempts at evangelization and continued visiting him out of humanitarian feelings” (Ibid. 86), and then as José Arcadio Buendía “tried to break down the priest’s faith with rationalist tricks” (Ibid. 86), “concerned about his own faith, the priest did not come back to visit him [José Arcadio Buendía] and dedicated himself to hurrying along the building of the church” (Ibid. 87). Fray Pedro, on the other hand, is sincere and strict in his faith; he “has served a forty-year apostolate in the jungle” (Carpentier 168). The Fraile bitterly denounces the “worldly priests” (Ibid. 168) and tells frightening tales of his role models, gruesome martyrdoms, “priests torn limb from limb by the Marañon Indians; one Blessed Diego barbarously tortured by the last Inca; Juan de Lizardi, shot through with Paraguayan arrows; and forty friars who had their throats slit by Protestant pirates.” The Fraile eventually joins that frightful host; despite full knowledge that the tribe to whom he left Santa Monica to evangelize was “The only perverse and bloodthirsty Indians of the region” (Ibid. 206) and that “No

missionary had ever returned” (Ibid. 206), he nonetheless goes to evangelize to them; “His body, pierced with arrows and with the thorax split open, had been found by one of the Yannes brothers” (Ibid. 265). The aged Fraile never allowed his cause to cease, despite knowing full well the likely consequences, and so he “had found the supreme reward a man can confer on himself: that of going to meet his death, defying it, and falling in a combat which, for the vanquished, is the arrowed victory of St. Sebastian, the rout and final defeat of death” (Ibid. 263). The artifice of the secular clergy is shown through the hypocrisy and self-serving behavior of the Padres, while the Fraile’s commitment and ultimate martyrdom confirm the sincere and unswerving faith of the primitive, monastic clergy.

The Fraile’s and Padres’ approaches to religion are exemplified by the churches they construct. Padre Nicanor “decided to undertake the building of a church, the largest in the world, with life-size saints and stained-glass windows on the sides, so that people would come from Rome to honor God in the center of impiety. He went everywhere begging alms with a copper dish. They gave him a large amount, but he wanted more, because the church had to have a bell that would raise the drowned up to the surface of the water” (García Marquez 85). Fray Pedro, on the other hand, requires a large building which requires much work, but is still content with a primitive, mud and wattle building, without even Padre Nicanor’s beloved bells: “It was a wide, round cabin, with a pointed roof like that of the huts of palm fronds over a framework of boughs, topped by a wooden cross. Fray Pedro was determined that the windows should have a Gothic air, with pointed arches, and the repetition of two curved lines in a mud and wattle wall was, in this remote spot, a forerunner of the Gregorian chant. We hung a low trunk from the bell-tower, and in lieu of bells I had suggested a kind of *teponaxtle*” (Carpentier 201). Padre Nicanor must build a huge, ornate church to make his message seem more splendid, but Fray Pedro is willing to

settle for mud and wattle, a wooden cross, and a roof of palm fronds: the message alone should be splendid enough.

The natural consequence of the hypocrisy of the Padres is that their evangelism falls on deaf ears, and the people are nearly indifferent to their presence. When Nicanor decided to stay in Macondo to institute Catholicism, “no one paid any attention to him. They would answer him that they had been many years without a priest, arranging the business of their souls directly with God, and that they had lost the evil of original sin” (García Marquez 84-85). He has to resort to his levitating tricks to attract the people’s attention, and when the seventeen Aurelianos are convinced by Amaranta to attend services on Ash Wednesday, they were “More amused than devout” (Ibid. 222). When Padre Nicanor holds an open-air mass in his temporary church with an improvised altar, “Many went out of curiosity. Others from nostalgia. Others so that God would not take the disdain for His intermediary as a personal insult.” No-one comes out of faith in the Church or respect for the priest. The rigamarole and artifice of the secular clergy renders the people uncaring and unreceptive to their evangelism. The ostentatious display and complex ritualism— “baptizing their [the people of Macondo’s] children or sanctifying their festivals” (Ibid. 84), the condemning Macondo’s “prospering in the midst of scandal, subject to natural law” (Ibid. 84), “[giving] sacraments to the dying” (Ibid. 84)—sticks out like a sore thumb against the primitive backdrop of developing Macondo. The Fraile’s approach, however, naturally agrees with the rustic, simple Indians of Santa Monica de los Venados, and they are receptive to his message.

Fray Pedro and the Padres of Macondo are alike in their social position, strict moralizing, Catholic religion, and evangelic mission. Where they differ, they differ over sincerity and commitment, and over artifice versus authenticity, display versus action. The Capuchin friar is

content with rustic accommodations, and spreads his message not just by preaching with his lips, but by showing with his action. He exemplifies Jesus' commandment to be like a city on a hill.

The secular priests of Macondo are content to effect the appearance of faith, to instruct through preaching while contradicting themselves through behavior, and to substitute decadent displays for actual religious leadership. Much like the contrast of Mouche against Rosario, or Úrsula against Fernanda, the differences between these two approaches to religion display the conflict of rustic simplicity against modern pretense.