

Pluralism versus Pluralization. How the Protection of Cultural Diversity Can Turn Against New Forms of Religious Diversity

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ABSTRACT. Objective/Context: This paper examines the arguments of the Constitutional Court of Colombia in a sentence declaring that Pentecostalism represents a threat to indigenous cultures and to the country's cultural diversity. The sentence was issued in 1998, a few years after the political Constitution (1991) declared that Colombia is a pluralist nation that protects the cultural diversity of the country and the right to religious freedom. **Methodology:** A qualitative and hermeneutical study of the sentence was implemented to understand the arguments presented by the Court. Subsequently, a critical analysis of those arguments was carried out, questioning the pluralist presuppositions related to key categories such as "indigenous cultures," "religion," and "diversity." **Conclusions:** The pluralist institution has been unable to recognize the dynamic and manifold realities of lived religion, as well as the problems related to the double marginalization of a religious minority within an ethnic minority. Furthermore, the pluralist imperative to protect cultural diversity places limits upon alterity and promotes new forms of exclusion. **Originality:** The jurisprudence under scrutiny is not studied in its legal or ethical dimensions—as it has been done in the past—but as the implementation of a pluralist ideology grounded in a certain worldview. Thus, pluralism is critically examined in its ontological, axiological, epistemological, and praxeological principles.

KEYWORDS: Pluralism; religion; diversity; identity; indigenous communities; new religious movements.

Pluralismo versus pluralización. De cómo la protección de la diversidad cultural puede actuar contra las nuevas formas de diversidad religiosa

RESUMEN. **Objetivo/contexto:** este trabajo examina los argumentos de la Corte Constitucional de Colombia en una sentencia que declaró que el pentecostalismo representa una amenaza para las culturas indígenas y para la diversidad cultural del país. La sentencia fue emitida en 1998, pocos años después de que la Constitución Política (1991) declarara que Colombia es una nación pluralista que protege la diversidad cultural del país y el derecho a la libertad religiosa. **Metodología:** se ha implementado un estudio cualitativo y hermenéutico de la sentencia con el fin de comprender los argumentos presentados por la Corte. Posteriormente, se ha realizado un análisis crítico de esos argumentos, cuestionando los presupuestos pluralistas relacionados con categorías clave como *culturas indígenas*, *religión* y *diversidad*. **Conclusiones:** la institución pluralista ha sido incapaz de reconocer las realidades dinámicas y múltiples de la religión vivida, así como los problemas relacionados con la doble marginación de una minoría religiosa dentro de una minoría étnica. Además, el imperativo pluralista de proteger la diversidad cultural pone límites a la alteridad y promueve nuevas formas de represión y exclusión. **Originalidad:** la jurisprudencia bajo escrutinio no se estudia en sus dimensiones legales o éticas — como se ha hecho en el pasado— sino como la implementación de una ideología pluralista basada en una determinada cosmovisión. El pluralismo se examina así críticamente en sus principios ontológicos, axiológicos, epistemológicos y praxeológicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: pluralismo; religión; diversidad; identidad; comunidades indígenas; nuevos movimientos religiosos.

Pluralismo versus pluralização. Como a proteção da diversidade cultural pode agir contra novas formas de diversidade religiosa

RESUMO. **Objetivo/contexto:** neste trabalho, examinam-se os argumentos do Tribunal Constitucional da Colômbia em uma decisão que declarou que o pentecostalismo representa uma ameaça às culturas indígenas e à diversidade cultural do país. A sentença foi emitida em 1998, poucos anos depois que a Constituição Política (1991) tivesse declarado que a Colômbia é uma nação pluralista que protege a diversidade cultural do país e o direito à liberdade religiosa. **Metodologia:** foi realizado um estudo qualitativo e hermenéutico da sentença para a compreensão dos argumentos apresentados pelo Tribunal. Posteriormente, procedeu-se a uma análise crítica desses argumentos, questionando os pressupostos pluralistas relacionados com categorias-chave como “culturas indígenas”, “religião” e “diversidade”. **Conclusões:** a instituição pluralista tem sido incapaz de reconhecer as realidades dinâmicas e múltiplas da religião vivida, bem como os problemas relacionados à dupla marginalização de uma minoria religiosa dentro de uma minoria étnica. Além disso, o imperativo pluralista de proteger a diversidade cultural limita a alteridade e promove novas formas de

repressão e exclusão. **Originalidade:** a jurisprudência sob escrutínio não é estudada em suas dimensões jurídicas ou éticas —como se fazia no passado—, mas sim como a implementação de uma ideologia pluralista baseada em uma determinada cosmovisão. O pluralismo é, portanto, examinado criticamente em seus princípios ontológicos, axiológicos, epistemológicos e praxeológicos.

PALABRAS-CHAVE: pluralismo; religião; diversidade; identidade; comunidades indígenas; novos movimentos religiosos.

Introduction

Established in 1991, the current political Constitution of Colombia affirms that this country is a multicultural and pluralist nation. This Constitution declares that the state must respect the right to religious freedom (Article 19) and must protect ethnic and cultural diversity (Article 7). The Constitutional Court of Colombia, created shortly after the promulgation of the Constitution, is the main official institution entrusted with the protection of constitutional principles in all legal cases. When the Constitutional Court (the Court, hereinafter) deals with a complex case, it issues a “sentence” (“*sentencia*”): usually a long text with all the considerations, reasonings, and arguments that led to the Court’s final decision. Sentences are jurisprudence that guide future legal cases and political decisions taken by the state in similar situations.

In 1998, the Court issued an important and particularly polemical sentence (the Sentence, hereinafter)¹ in which the right to religious freedom as well as the protection of cultural diversity appear as two contradictory principles: the Court considers that the state cannot privilege one of them without ignoring the other. Specifically, the Sentence in question leads to the conclusion that Pentecostalism in indigenous reservations cannot be tolerated because it represents a threat to native cultures and, therefore, a threat to the cultural diversity of the country. This Sentence has become a reference for more recent jurisprudence regarding religious diversity in ethnic groups.² In practical terms, the decision made by the Court has implied that indigenous people are not allowed to freely practice Pentecostalism within the indigenous reservation where they live.

1 Sentencia SU-510/98. Available at <https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/1998/SU510-98.htm> (This text is not paginated).

2 See other sentences by the Constitutional Court, for instance: Sentencia T-001 de 2012, Sentencia T-921 de 2013, Sentencia C-463 de 2014, or Sentencia T-026 de 2015.

The Sentence originated from a legal case between a group of thirty-one Pentecostal natives belonging to the Unified Pentecostal Church of Colombia (Iglesia Pentecostal Unida de Colombia–IPUC), who lived in the Arhuaco reservation, and the so-called “traditional authorities” (or “*mamos*”) of the same ethnic group.³ After a long process of deliberations, and considering the advice of social scientists, the Court declared that the traditional authorities of the ethnic group have the right to forbid all Pentecostal activities in public places and may expel from the indigenous reservation people who insist in carrying out such activities. To confer such powers to the *mamos* was based on constitutional articles (notably, Articles 246 and 287) which enable the local authorities of ethnic groups to exercise a certain degree of political and juridical autonomy. Considering that Pentecostals feel compelled to “spread the word” (Martin 2002) and organize open church services, the Court’s decision means that Arhuaco Pentecostals would have to leave their indigenous reservation if they wanted to practice their religion.⁴

As described by Sarrazin and Redondo (2018), the case opposing the Pentecostal Arhuacos and the traditional authorities has been understood by the Court and academic sectors as a legal, political, and ethical controversy. On one hand, there is the (“human”) right to religious freedom of the evangelical natives. On the other hand, there is the pluralist urge to protect the cultural diversity of the country by preserving the traditional cultures and religions of ethnic groups.

The magistrates who did *not* agree with the final verdict argued that—in a liberal democracy—anyone in the country (indigenous or not) is free to choose any religion, be it “traditional,” Pentecostal or other, as long as its practices do not violate other constitutional principles. The magistrates who *did* agree with the verdict argued that the constitutional mandate to protect the country’s cultural diversity would be in vain if the state did nothing to stop a kind of religious proselytism that may provoke the Christianization of ethnic groups and thus lead to the abandonment of their native religion. This debate can also be understood in terms of an opposition between liberals who defend the individual right to

3 Arhuaco is the contemporary ethnonym for an indigenous group whose reservation is situated in the north of Colombia. More details about this ethnic group will be provided in the next section of the article.

4 The Sentence has been studied elsewhere (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018) as part of a research project entitled “Religion and Pluralism. Contemporary problems.” This paper originates from the second part of this project; upon previous findings and conclusions, the present text tackles new research problems, proposes a different methodology, envisages a larger theoretical perspective, and engages in more recent and complex debates on liberal pluralism.

choose a religion—such as John Rawls (1996)—and communitarians who insist on the importance of collective norms and values—such as Charles Taylor (1989).

However, the objective of this article is not to participate in this debate, nor to assume a position in favor of or against one of the parties. Furthermore, this paper is not intended to discuss the juridical and political autonomy of ethnic groups, nor to deliberate about the legitimacy of the rules defined by certain indigenous authorities—as it has been done in the past (Zambrano 2002). What motivates this investigation is to understand the pluralist reasoning of the Court, taking the concept of pluralism not as a term describing diversity, but as the positive valuation of religious and cultural diversity (Beckford 2003, 74).

Pluralism should not be at odds with the liberal ideal of religious freedom, since pluralism can be considered as a derivation of “liberal commitments,” among which stands “the right of individuals to ‘be themselves’” (Spickard 2017, 1). In fact, the arguments of the Sentence in question were constructed by liberal magistrates and cannot be considered as “conservative.” Following its liberal roots, pluralism respects the right of indigenous people to “be themselves”: we are referring to what Connolly (2005) calls “liberal pluralism.” To restrict a religious expression is a very sensitive issue—even from a pluralist perspective. Nonetheless, it has been argued that some religions or religious manifestations can be in tension with or even be a threat to liberal democracies, because those religions are not tolerant or pluralistic enough.

This issue has received much attention in recent academic literature around the world (Lehmann 2013). Cases of Islam in the West, for instance, have been largely debated. In his revision of a series of cases, Joppke (2016) notices that the European Court of Human Rights has decided to restrict Islamic practices “following the model of ‘militant democracy’ that is assertive of democratic values and principles against presumed enemies of democracy” (92). Islam can be viewed as a threat to democracy because it would not be tolerant nor pluralist.⁵ This leads to what Joppke calls the “pluralism vs. pluralism” paradox; to defend religious pluralism, some religions need to be restricted: “the opposite of ‘tolerance,’ a prohibition, is justified by reference to ‘tolerance’” (Joppke 2016, 92).

In the case analyzed in this article, a religion—Pentecostalism—is restricted in the name of pluralism, and yet another religion—the Arhuaco “traditional religion”—is protected in the name of pluralism as well. We could identify it as a case of “pluralism vs. pluralism,” but not in the ways studied by Joppke (2016), Mahmood (2009), and many others. In our case, the “traditional religion” of an

5 This view is strongly contested by authors such as Mahmood (2009).

ethnic group is fully recognized, respected, and even protected by the pluralist state, whereas the other religion—Pentecostalism—is represented as a Western threat, not to the (human) right of individual freedom, but to something called “cultural diversity,” a fundamental category used in the pluralist discourse that needs to be questioned.

As noticed before (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018), the Court chose to prioritize the protection of cultural diversity, concluding that Pentecostalism is a foreign religion that can gradually destroy the religion, culture, and identity of the natives. The destruction of Arhuaco culture would undermine the country’s cultural diversity, so the state, following the Constitutional mandate to protect this diversity, must stop the activities of the Pentecostal church in the indigenous reservation. This article analyses this reasoning and its consequences, a reasoning that has been used to regulate some religious forms in other ethnic groups as well.⁶

The actual analysis goes beyond the “either/or” situation: either individualistic liberalism, or communitarianism; either respect for religious freedom, or respect for cultural diversity. Rather, the article inquires into the fact that “pluralism recognizes some kinds of religious interactions and encounters and some kinds of religions (but not others) as normal and natural” (Klassen and Bender 2010, 3). Is “traditional religion” considered as the “normal” or “natural” religion for ethnic communities? Why is Pentecostalism not accepted by this liberal pluralism? *Contra* Rawls (1996) and his “reasonable pluralism” dictated by human (and universal) reason, Mouffe (2007, 129) reminds us that the limits of pluralism are always based on a political decision and, as such, should always be subject to debate. This article engages in such debate and concludes that this pluralism can reproduce and legitimate new forms of exclusion and cultural domination, restricting possibilities to differ and imposing limits upon alterity.

Methodology

A qualitative and hermeneutical study of the Sentence has been implemented to understand the arguments proposed by the Court. A critical analysis of those arguments has been subsequently carried out in the light of recent theories and debates on liberal pluralism, examining particularly how “diversity,” “indigenous cultures,” and “religions” are conceived.

The pluralist reasoning exposed by the Sentence is analyzed as a result of a particular worldview. Drawing on cultural anthropologist André Droogers (2014),

6 See other sentences by the Constitutional Court, for instance: Sentencia T-001 de 2012, Sentencia T-921 de 2013, Sentencia C-463 de 2014, or Sentencia T-026 de 2015.

other authors have recently noted that ideologies, such as nationalism, humanism, or neoliberalism, can be understood as worldviews (Taves, Aspren, and Ihm 2018). A worldview can be defined as a complex set of representations related to questions such as: “(1) ontology (what exists, what is real), (2) epistemology (how do we know what is true), (3) axiology (what is the good that we should strive for), (4) praxeology (what actions should we take)” (Taves, Aspren, and Ihm 2018, 208). Studying pluralism as a worldview allows examining the ontology, epistemology, axiology, and praxeology that support and justify the arguments and decisions taken by the Court. This perspective contributes to explaining why pluralism fails to meet its own standards in the local case, and why it could also fail in other cases around the world.

1. Some basic facts about the Arhuacos and the context in which they live

Part of the Arhuaco reservation is in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and the other part is on the Caribbean coast. The Arhuacos are constantly in contact with other indigenous groups such as the *Kogui* and the *Wiwa*, as well as *mestizo* and Afro-Colombian populations (Uribe 1998). Since the beginning of the Spanish conquest, the Caribbean coast and its neighboring Sierra constitute an area of intense commerce, migrations, and cultural exchanges (Sarrazin 2016).

According to the census carried out in 1993 (the closest date to the year when the Sentence was issued), there were at least 81 indigenous groups in the country, and they represented 1.6% of the total Colombian population (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística 1993). These numbers vary considerably according to the source of data and criteria applied to decide who is “indigenous” (“*indígena*”) and who is not (Sarrazin 2017a). Indeed, the cultural boundaries separating indigenous groups from the rest of the national population (especially in the countryside) are diffuse, porous, and unstable (Chaves 2003). Most of the ethnic groups in the country have received cultural influences from Europe and Africa, which means that they could also be considered as *mestizos*, depending on the classification criteria. Furthermore, a notorious process of re-ethnization and ethno-genesis began in 1991, when the state started to give some special advantages to ethnic groups (Sarrazin 2019). This meant that groups of people who had previously been considered by most of the national population and by themselves as peasants or *mestizos* were later considered as “indigenous” (Chaves 2003).

The presence of a church, Christian religion in native lands dates back from centuries: catholic missions advanced together with European *conquistadores* in the Americas. There have been missionaries among the natives in the Sierra since the seventeenth century, a process that has led to profound cultural and religious syncretism (Uribe 1990). The Capuchins were the most present in the actual Arhuaco territory, and they have been held responsible for some forms of cultural violence (Bosa 2015). For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Capuchin order founded “orphanages” and primary schools, separating the minors from their families, trying to educate the largest number of them in an attempt to “civilize them,” forcing them to speak in Spanish and change many of their traditions (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018, 209). The presence of this Catholic order was promoted by the Colombian government, which believed that Christianization was a useful tool to civilize the “savages” and build a unified nation (Bosa 2015, 155-156). The Capuchins finally left the Arhuaco reservation in 1982.

Although the IPUC can be classified as part of the New Religious Movements in the country (Beltrán 2013),⁷ the arrival of the Pentecostal church was linked to the previous presence of Catholic missions. Indeed, the Sentence cites the statement of one of the *mamos*: “The same state that allowed the Capuchin mission to stay in our lands for more than 67 years cannot impose on us the Pentecostal church now.” Even though Pentecostalism has not been “imposed” (or promoted) by the Colombian state, it was presumed that the Pentecostal church would act like Catholic missions in the past; the era of Catholic domination and violence was still in the memories of the Arhuaco community. The arrival of the Pentecostal church was also the beginning of a political rivalry between evangelical pastors and the *mamos*, two types of actors that—up until now—are mutually exclusive powers: people who obey the pastors do not always follow the rule of the *mamos*, and vice versa (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018).

More than twenty years after the Sentence under study here, there are reports showing that the presence of Pentecostalism in the Sierra is still a source of social conflicts. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Pentecostalism in the country has grown considerably during the last decades (Beltrán 2013). According to the local and national press (*Opinión Caribe* 2019; Urieles 2019), there have been skirmishes and even violent clashes between evangelicals and other sectors of the native population that are usually categorized as “traditional.”

7 On the definition of New Religious Movements, see Barker (1989).

2. The Sentence and its reasons

As it has been demonstrated by Sarrazin and Redondo (2018), the main arguments in the Sentence presuppose that the presence of a Pentecostal church in native reservations leads to the destruction of native cultures, something that, in turn, would lead to the destruction of cultural diversity. In this article, we show that the Court's conclusion is founded on a certain *worldview*, which responds to the following questions: (1) What is cultural diversity and what are indigenous cultures and religions? (ontology); (2) How should we judge cultural diversity? (axiology); (3) How do we know about cultural diversity, ethnic cultures, and their relation to religion? (epistemology); and (4) What should the state do to preserve cultural diversity? (praxeology).

Colombian pluralism has been legitimated by some of the guidelines coming from the United Nations Organization (UN). The UN has entrusted the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) "to ensure the preservation and promotion of the fruitful diversity of cultures." In 2001, the UNESCO issued the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. The first article of this Declaration defines cultural diversity as the "plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind," and it affirms that "it is the common heritage of humanity." Article 4 states that "[t]he defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative"; and Article 7 complements that "cultural tradition [and] heritage in all its forms must be preserved" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2001).

In the same vein, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, produced by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, also a part of the UN), uses concepts such as cultural identity and traditions, and establishes a link between cultural diversity and indigeneity. This Convention affirms to be "[c]alling attention to the distinctive contributions of indigenous and tribal peoples to the cultural diversity." According to its second article, governments shall have the responsibility of "promoting the full realization of the social, economic, and cultural rights of these [indigenous] peoples with respect for their social and cultural identity, their customs and traditions and their institutions." In its Article 5, it is added that "the social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices of these peoples shall be recognized and protected" in their "integrity" (International Labour Organisation 1989).

Both the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention have been adopted by the state of Colombia; they have become imperative guides and important references for political and juridical decisions, and they are cited in the jurisprudence of the country. Indeed,

the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention is quoted in the Sentence. Based on these principles, the Constitutional Court of Colombia decided that to protect the cultural identity, traditions, and religious values of indigenous peoples, Pentecostalism should be expelled from the native reservation, if its “traditional authorities” decide to do so.

The Court, in different sections of its Sentence, presents statements such as:

- ✧ “A native who follows the bible and the pastors no longer shares the Arhuaco worldview and culture.”
- ✧ “When an Arhuaco abandons her/his religion, s/he abandons, at the same time, the existential order that supports her/his cultural identity.”
- ✧ It is necessary to avoid the “breakdown of cultural homogeneity” that would result from the “penetration” of Pentecostalism.
- ✧ It would be incorrect to “force the Arhuacos, against their will and beliefs, to tolerate in their territory the presence of a foreign God”.⁸

With respect to such statements, some questions should be raised. What exactly is the “Arhuaco worldview and culture”? Is there such “cultural homogeneity”? But before making any attempt to answer those questions, it is important to remember that, in a country like Colombia, and particularly in the area of the Sierra, the borders between the natives and *mestizo* peasants are diffuse, porous, and malleable (Bocarejo 2011). More generally speaking, one should acknowledge that the notion of a world formed by defined and contoured *cultures* is extremely problematic (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Grimson 2011). In a similar fashion, Connolly (2005, 41) criticizes the pluralist view according to which human groups are like closed circles. Inside each circle there would be one culture whose characteristics are recognized. This is the pluralist ontology describing the existing diversity.

Moreover, according to this pluralist worldview, there is only one religion in the Arhuaco ethnic group, or, in other words, the Arhuaco people share one religion. As Masuzawa (2005, 61) has pointed out, according to the modern taxonomic system, each ethnic group is identified with one religion: ethnic identity is thus inevitably linked to a religious identity. Following this worldview, the Court presumed that all Arhuacos think in the same way and are “forced” to tolerate the arrival of a “foreign God.” However, we know from the very Sentence that there are natives who believe in this God and do not consider it as a foreign entity. The Arhuaco society is heterogeneous and the result of cultural fluxes in a globalized context. The so-called “traditional religion” is a syncretic religiosity

8 All quotes from the Sentence presented in this article have been translated from the official text in Spanish.

(Uribe 1990, 151-159), constructed in power relations and influenced by Catholic missionaries who have been in the area for centuries.

The Court was right to presume that religious change entails cultural change. New worldviews and cultural configurations may indeed appear when the natives encounter different religious actors, but this does not necessarily imply the disappearance of an identity, nor the end of an ethnic group or the destruction of the country's cultural diversity. Ethnic identities do not depend on the isolation of social groups, and they are not dissolved every time there is a cultural or religious change. As Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1998) noticed, the identity of a group can survive in a culturally heterogeneous environment; individuals with remarkably different cultural characteristics can share the same identity. Identity depends on the feelings of belonging to a collective (Grimson 2011, 138). Consequently, the presence of the Pentecostal church in the ethnic reservation will not necessarily cause the destruction or the weakening of the Arhuaco identity. The Sentence itself lets us know that, for a group of natives, it is perfectly possible to claim an Arhuaco identity and, at the same time, adhere to other religions such as Pentecostalism.⁹

Ethnic groups do not construct their identity in the absence of a Western Other; on the contrary, they define themselves in relation to “Western” alterity (Hall 1992, 1996). Indeed, ethnic groups in Colombia reconstruct and reinvent their traditions in a complex and ongoing dialogue with the hegemonic discourse (Chaves 2011, 19). Historical processes and power relations lead human groups to adopt certain cultural features as markers of their identity. However, the Court presumes that the Arhuaco identity is *essentially* linked to a certain “traditional religion.” As in this case, it has been observed in other countries that the modern state is “a key force in constructions of religion as the main site for legitimate identity” (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014, 165). This assumption, however, is rooted in what Bruno Latour (2005) calls a “regime of enunciation.” Depending on such regimes, different cultural traits—other than a “traditional religion”—could be chosen as “essential” markers of an identity.

The assumption that Pentecostalism destroys diversity because it destroys ethnic cultures is based on academic advice delivered by “experts” from the social sciences. This is epistemology in a pluralist worldview. Indeed, before making its decision, the Court asked several academic institutions to provide information about the possible effects of Pentecostalism on indigenous cultures. Those experts

9 Indigenous Pentecostals have actively promoted their ethnic identity in other parts of Colombia (Demera 2007).

referred to ethnographies written in the 1970s and before, ethnographies that present ethnic groups as the loci of traditional religions and cultures.

As Amselle has shown (2013, 211), most classic ethnographies provide the necessary references to reconstruct an imagined primitive culture. Several authors in Latin America have insisted on the problems of this type of anthropology. Pacheco de Oliveira (2004), for instance, compares it to a kind of astronomy, that is, an anthropology that conceived “cultures” as separate planets. This author also criticizes a preservationist ethnology constantly worried about cultural loss. In the same vein, Grimson (2011, 152-153) argues that, frequently, the purpose of those ethnographies was to take a picture of cultural relics and then deposit them in a (virtual) museum, but never to explore the cultural relations and imbrications among different groups.

Locally, Uribe (1988, 11) has noted that most of the ethnographies conducted in the geographical area where the Arhuacos live insisted on finding and describing sacredness and Mother Earth ideologies kept with zeal by alleged spiritual leaders (in this case, the *mamos*), while ignoring the diversity of beliefs within those communities, as well as their internal divisions, conflicts, and power struggles. Sarrazin (2019) has evinced that—up until recently—the Colombian government has continued to dictate ethnic policies according to a preservationist model, which promotes the image of “indigenous cultures” as separate and petrified entities.

It is quite probable that the *mamos*—whose authority is being threatened by Pentecostal pastors—preserve certain religious traditions, but if we follow Hobsbawm’s seminal work (1992), we can understand that other types of actors belonging to the Arhuaco ethnic group are preserving and inventing other religious traditions as well. The decision as to which tradition is more “authentic,” legitimate or necessary for ethnic identity is a value judgement, a moral and political decision that cannot be inferred solely from scientific research. As Sarrazin and Redondo (2018, 219) noted, decisions regarding whether a German Jew must leave Germany, or a British Muslim comes “from outside,” are issues that cannot be made “neutrally” by scientific research alone. Purity is only a theme of political discourse justifying political actions (Beyer 2005). The unexpected quest for purity found in pluralism is supported by an epistemology that looks for cultural purity and pristine traditions in ethnic groups while lamenting any form of cultural syncretism among the natives (Serje 2008; Uribe 1998).

The idea of cultural homogeneity in indigenous societies is also reproduced in the Sentence when it declares that “every indigenous community is a collective subject.” The concept of “collective subject” has been adopted by the Colombian legislation to avoid the fragmentation of ethnic lands and protect thus the integrity

of ethnic reservations. Each ethnic group is then represented as a single person, a unified entity, a body whose parts move always in the same direction.

When the Court expressed that the state should avoid the “*penetration*” of Pentecostalism, it reinforced the metaphor of indigenous cultures as bodies with an inside and an outside. Elsewhere in the Sentence, we can read that it is necessary to protect the natives from external agents (the Pentecostal believers) who “seek to change [the Arhuacos’] primordial status and destroy their beliefs and their faith.” In this worldview, indigenous cultures are like pure bodies that must not be “penetrated” and contaminated by external agents. Translating the metaphor into political actions, this means that the state should try to preserve the purity of indigenous traditions by stopping “external” agents such as Pentecostal believers.

The sharp division between an inside and an outside implies the existence of symbolic boundaries that, when widely agreed upon, can take on “a constraining character and pattern social interaction in important ways” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 167). These boundaries produce other dichotomies such as “the indigenous” and “the West,” or “traditional religion” and “foreign religions.” These dichotomies ignore the mentioned continuities of the socio-cultural space, as well as the constant cultural fluxes, syncretisms, reinventions, and divisions that affect ethnic groups.

To pretend that indigenous cultures like the Arhuacos can be preserved from the “outside” (through state actions) is part of a preservationist utopia—still present nowadays—that ignores the speed, strength, and scale of global flows (Trouillot 2003). This preservationist pluralism thrives on the idea of clearly drawn cultural boundaries that separate the “outside” from the “inside,” the West and the Rest, polluting agents from the outside and the purity of the (ethnic) inside. The preservationist worldview not only imagines the boundaries, but it also imagines itself as the savior of some ethnic purity: this is part of its praxeology.

The Arhuaco society (like most other ethnic groups today) has long been in contact with different types of actors, such as traders, state education institutions, transnational media, Afro-descendant peasants, tourists, environmental NGOs, etc. (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018). These actors have been “penetrating” the “indigenous culture” for quite some time, and they have surely influenced the values and worldviews of the Arhuaco population. However, the pluralist Court is particularly worried about the presence of the evangelical church. Why is it so?

To answer this question, we need to look deeper into the concept of “religion” as it is conceived in the pluralist worldview. Pluralism, as already noted, inherited some liberal principles, among which stands, of course, secularism. Liberal modernity has made of secularity a fundamental epistemic category (Casanova 2009). From the beginning of modernity, “religion”—that is, church

religion and institutionalized Christianity—was to be left behind or, at best, restricted to the private sphere.¹⁰ According to the Enlightenment ideal, “religion” should be a separate sphere and modern people should advance from the “dark” Middle Ages, when religion (the Church) reigned, into the “light” of emancipated Reason and a new social order (Casanova 2009, 1054). From the modern and liberal stance, church religion should not influence a nation’s culture or its public sphere. It thus became “natural” that any modern and liberal person should be a secularist (Casanova 2009, 1055).

The Sentence suggests that Pentecostal churches are not like any other type of actor; their presence among indigenous peoples would be particularly harmful to ethnic cultures. As we have just seen, from its beginnings, liberal modernity has fought to exclude church religion from the public arena. This version of “religion” is modernity’s Other, as Mouffe (2007) points out. It is an Other that is morally sanctioned and excluded from the political debate by labeling it as irrational and/or “fundamentalist”; it represents evil, a threat to pluralist democracies (Mouffe 2007, 13-56). The Court does not approve of the fact that Pentecostals seek to “Christianize” new populations: Pentecostalism seems to be a threat to liberal pluralism because it would be against religious diversity.

However, there is no empirical evidence that the cultural diversity of the planet has declined due to “Christianization” or, indeed, that it has declined at all (Hannerz 1990; Sahlin 2000). There is no empirical evidence either that the Pentecostal church forced people to convert or that it behaved in violent ways as the Catholic missions did. However, from the modern and liberal point of view, Pentecostalism or Catholicism belong to the category of church religion: the anti-pluralist Other referred to by Mouffe (2007).

Although we can say that pluralism is secularist in the sense described above, contemporary pluralism celebrates religious diversity and is willing to accept the presence (and, indeed, the dominance and imposition) of some religious forms in ethnic groups as long as they are “indigenous” and “traditional.” We cannot explain such contradiction in this article, but the Court justifies its decision to protect “traditional religion” (against Pentecostalism) by affirming that religion is at the “core” of indigenous culture. To support this idea, the Sentence quotes the following phrase from an ethnography: “if they are not faithful to their own religion, Arhuacos will disappear as natives.” But what exactly does it mean

10 Several authors, such as Casanova (1994) or Habermas (2010), have pointed out that this privatization of religion in modernity is neither an empirical reality, nor a desirable functioning principle in democratic societies.

to be “faithful to one’s own religion”? Whose “own religion” are we talking about? And how “faithful” does a native have to be in order to avoid “disappearing”?

Empirical researchers like Orsi (2005) and McGuire (2008) have shown that people’s “lived religion” seldom coincides with institutionalized, “traditional” religion, so there is not a single, fixed religion to be faithful to in the Arhuaco ethnic group. In other words, a group’s “own religion” is not necessarily a “traditional religion,” but their “lived religion.” Furthermore, it is known that a considerable part of believers in the world constitute their beliefs and practices in a sort of bricolage with the cultural resources available to them in a particular social and historical setting (Hedges 2017, 22). People’s lived religion is never a pure, traditional, and static religion. All traditions are dynamic and syncretic inventions, but various regimes of enunciation declare that some cultural formations are “traditional religions,” and other ones are not. The pluralist urge to protect “traditional religions” as the “core” of ethnic cultures and cultural diversity comes from the urge to preserve *pure* cultural forms.

In relation to the presumed importance of “traditional religion” for ethnic groups, it is also quoted in the Sentence that “in the Arhuaco culture—*unlike in other cultures*—there is a close relationship between the spheres of the sacred—religion—and the profane—the political and the legal” (emphasis added). For this additional reason, it is suggested that religious change caused by the activities of the Pentecostal church would provoke profound and irreparable damage to the ethnic group.

To consider “religion” as “the core” of pre-modern or non-modern cultures is in fact a very modern invention (Asad 2007; Nongbri 2013). The imagined spiritual native is part of a primitivist myth found in modern contexts, including Colombian *intelligentsia* (Sarrazin 2017b). It should also be noted that, in modern and secularized societies, there is also a close relationship between the sacred, the political, and the legal (Casanova 2012, 22; Derrida 1996, 42). More generally, different authors have demonstrated the political implications and practical impossibility of understanding religion as a “sphere” or a “domain” separated from other aspects of social life, even in the secularist West (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013; Beyer 2013; Smart 2005).

Some pluralist models, according to Connolly (2005, 28), are “superficial” because—from their secularist perspectives—they pretend that religious matters can be totally private and thus separated from the public sphere. These models are based on theories (coming from the Enlightenment) that presume that faith and reason can be clearly separated; they underestimate the influence of faith, feelings, and passions in modern political institutions and practices (Connolly 2005, 91-92). Mouffe (2007, 31) goes in the same direction when she insists that modern

democracies and their public decisions are not free from all sorts of “passions” such as the ones coming from religious convictions.

The Court has ignored all those arguments and it has also reinforced the myth of ethnic religiousness by categorizing the Arhuaco society as a “religious community.” If the ethnic group were a religious community, it would be logical to conclude that their religious authorities would have the right to expel those who do not follow the community’s rules and principles. The Court considers that “a religious community [...] may restrict the actions of individuals who wish to introduce ideas that are not compatible with its principles.” Here, we agree entirely with the magistrates: one cannot deny that a religious community may disintegrate and even disappear if its members do not share some basic principles.

However, as it has already been pointed out, the Arhuaco ethnic group is heterogeneous, and all of its members are certainly not part of a single “religious community.” Considering an ethnic group as a religious community is an assumption that may have been partially supported by canonical texts such as “The Sacred Canopy” (Berger 1971), affirming that, throughout human history, religious establishments have existed as monopolies in “traditional societies.” Such an idea, notwithstanding, has been contested more recently: “traditional societies” are not necessarily united under a religious monopoly of truth (Beckford 2003, 83).

According to Frigerio (2018), up until recently, social research in Latin America has followed a methodological and theoretical trend (influenced mainly by important authors such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann) that conflates religious phenomena with religious identities, denominations, and institutionalized belief systems. Furthermore, it has been assumed that traditional societies are dominated by a religious monopoly, that is, they are unified under the “sacred canopy” of one religious institution. The Court—in its epistemology—has been biased by this erroneous academic perspective and, in the name of diversity, has placed limits upon alterity. This perspective on religion has impeded the recognition of lived religion.

The notion of a “religious community” is problematic in its use of the term “community” as well. As Baumann (1996, 5) has pointed out, what academics or state functionaries call “communities” are in fact groups of people with various alliances; thus, there are communities within communities, different “cultures” or “religions” within a “community,” or several “communities” within an “[indigenous] culture” (Baumann 1996, 10). Likewise, Beckford (2015, 229) holds a critical argument against the notion of “communities” since it supports a political discourse where differences are being effaced.

Beyond specific cultures, communities or religions, diversity is destroyed and created in dynamic processes. Cultural differences reappear in configurations that have not been included in the pluralist taxonomy. Evangelical natives have configured an unprecedented religiosity far from an imagined “Western religion.” In fact, Pentecostalism in countries like Colombia is known to have transformed itself in processes of adaptation to different local populations (Beltrán 2013, 61). Accordingly, Pentecostal natives adapt their beliefs and practices to their own concepts and interests. The members of these ethnic groups are not just passive subjects who are innocently persuaded or brain-washed by Western churches (Demera 2007, 495).

Ignoring the agency of Arhuaco evangelicals, the Court has also affirmed that it would be mistaken if it “forced the Arhuacos, against their will and their beliefs, to tolerate in their territory a foreign God, despite their devotion to their own deity.” Although the phrase seems totally respectful towards indigenous religions, it also ignores the actual religious diversity of the country in its manifold, complex, and ever-changing manifestations. Moreover, the idea that other peoples have their own “deities” is an ethnocentric projection of the notion of “belief in deities,” simply because such a notion is a very modern one (Latour 2013). The quoted phrase also leads to an exclusionist “either/or” situation¹¹: either the natives believe in “their deities” or they believe in the Pentecostal deity, ceasing, in that very moment, to be indigenous at all. This dichotomy corresponds with the idea that “real” or “authentic” natives are the ones who are faithful to a “traditional religion.”

Conclusions

Although the legal case that gave rise to our analysis has been understood elsewhere as an opposition between the right to religious freedom and the protection of cultural diversity, we have shown that the legal (and ethical) debate as to which of the two principles should prevail in a pluralist democracy is only one aspect of a much more complex issue. The pluralist arguments are based on a particular worldview formed by key categories such as “diversity,” “identity,” “indigenous cultures” or “traditional religion,” a series of erroneously conceived categories. The central argument in the Sentence is that the presence of “a Western religion” such as Pentecostalism in an ethnic territory leads to the loss of cultural diversity through the destruction of traditional religions; religious influence from the “outside” destroys ethnic cultures and annihilates cultural diversity. As it has

11 Masuzawa (2005) has critiqued this frequent way to understand religious matters by modern institutions.

already been noted (Sarrazin and Redondo 2018, 223), the Court has presupposed that cultural diversity is formed by a defined set of indigenous or ethnic cultures that are internally homogenous, perpetually traditional, profoundly attached to a specific religious institution, clearly defined by cultural boundaries, and radically different from other cultures. But those ideas constitute only the ontology of a pluralist worldview; its other parts (axiology, epistemology, and praxeology) are very important as well to understand the political relevance of this worldview. Its axiology prescribes that cultural diversity is a good thing that should be preserved; its epistemology presupposes that we can learn the truth about these ethnic cultures through research that has been conducted in the past by officialized social sciences, particularly by ethnology; its praxeology affirms that the state should do everything it can to preserve the traditional religions of ethnic cultures.

Furthermore, it must be said that the implicit notion of cultural and religious purity is a key (and undisclosed) element here. Cultural diversity is ideally composed of pure—or always in need of purification—entities: new mixtures are not included in the pluralist taxonomy. This worldview can also be observed in more recent discourses produced by the UN. “The heritage of humanity” should remain intact, “traditions” “must be preserved,” according to the UNESCO. The natives who have remained pure and practice a traditional religion are granted official recognition and are praised as the best examples of cultural diversity. Accordingly, Arhuaco Pentecostalism does not belong to the world’s cultural diversity.

In practice, “diversity” is an idiom to designate legitimate alterity. Lived religion, because of its syncretic, unofficial, unreported, and ever-changing nature, seems incompatible with this pluralist worldview. If pluralism recognizes traditional religions, it considers only a fixed set of them, just as it includes only certain (and mostly imagined) “ethnic cultures.”

Pluralism will always face the challenge of new forms of diversity appearing in the socio-cultural landscape. But the problem does not end by pointing out that the pluralist model studied in this article is incongruent with the diverse realities of constant religious transformations. It should also be noted that such hegemonic conceptions of diversity provide the ontological, epistemological, and axiological grounds for a praxeology that translates into legal and political impositions affecting human lives. In this case, we have seen that a group of natives cannot really practice their religion within the territory that belongs to them and where they have always lived. They are sanctioned because they do not practice the religion that ethnic groups *should* profess according to some prevailing models. Paradoxically, this is done today on behalf of tolerance and the protection of cultural diversity. Pluralist policies thus become an institutional device that places limits upon alterity and constitutes another form of exclusion.

The pluralist state—following dictates from the UN—has tried to understand, recognize, and protect some cultural and religious traditions supposedly present in marginalized communities. But, by the same token, it has ignored the heterogeneity and changing nature of ethnic groups, the dynamics of religious pluralization, and the invention of traditions. It has also promoted the double marginalization of a (religious) minority within an ethnic minority.

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