

**ECUMENISM OF PERMEABILITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE
BASE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN BRAZIL**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research on the ecumenism practised by the Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil, in the national gatherings they hold periodically, has shown that the story of the CEBs did not stop with Liberation Theology. It has shown that the CEBs are also a movement within the church for dialogue and inter-religious relations. At the core of the CEBs' theological concern and practice is the Gospel of/for the poor, and also a concern with the question and practice of how Christianity relates to the ancient traditions of Africa and of the Indian/Ava origins.

This research has shown that the CEBs have been able to implement an ecumenism of permeability within Christianity and beyond, with traditions other than Christianity. The CEBs grew in their ecumenism to the point of welcoming priests of Afro and Ava traditions in their gatherings and to the altar of Christian celebrations including into Eucharistic rites.

The experience of the CEBs shown in this thesis leads us to realize that the ecumenism of permeability practised by them allows scope for different religions to slot together, like a hinge, on particular occasions and also to absorb significant symbols, rites, concepts and stories from one another.

I argue that permeability supersedes other categories of inter-religious relations, even pluralism, because it allows interpenetration temporary and topical. Despite the tensions permeability also helps to preserve the catholicity of Christianity.

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LIST OF DEFINITIONS, ABBREVIATIONS AND PRONUNCIATIONS

Ava (avva) - That is the name the Tupi-Guarani people use for the original inhabitants of the land. The first Portuguese colonizers to arrive in Brazil, thinking they had gone around the world and arrived in India, called them Indians. It is a misnomer still to be corrected. One attempt has been made, naming them Amerindians. I propose a return to *Ava*, or at least to add *Ava* to the use of other names, because until the Portuguese Court was exiled to Brazil, fleeing from Napoleonic domination in the beginning of the 19th Century, the *lingua franca* in Brazil was Tupi-Guarani. There are records of around 170 to 200 languages spoken in Brazil, commonly divided into four great groups: 'Tupi', covers from the North to South of Brazil; then the 'Ge', the 'Caribe', and the 'Arauaque'.¹

¹ Caldeira, J. (1997) **Viagem pela história do Brasil**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. p. 8. Also as reference for Guarani terms and legends, see, Ibanhes, B. with illustrations of Márcia Szeliga, **Kyvy Mirim, O Índio Mago e a legenda do Pé de Tarumã**. Curitiba: no editors, no date.

Axé (ashea) – Explained by Bastide as: “Mystic forces which may inhabit certain objects. For this reason the term is also applied to magical preparations deposited in the foundations of the *Candomblé* house.”² However, it is used more loosely than that as a passing on good wishes, blessings. Term always connected with *Candomblé*.

Babalorixás - tend to be male Afro cult leader of Bantu (Angola and Congo) tradition.

CEBs (sebbs, as in 'sell') - *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*. Base Ecclesial Communities, also translated in other works as Base Christian Communities, Small Communities. Well known for their particular methodology of reading the bible in relation to present issues and for their emphasis on liberation. Here we will also explore their inter-religious engagements.

CELAM - *Conselho Episcopal Latino Americano*. The Council of Latin American Bishops. First proposed by Dom Helder Camara, it is an elected body of bishops from Latin American and Caribbean countries that meets regularly and has its office in Bogotá. The General Conference of the Latin American Bishops meets less frequently but with great impact, maybe the most famous ones have been Medellín in 1968, and Puebla in 1979, and Santo Domingo in 1992 to a certain extent.

² Bastide, R. (originally published in Paris, 1960, this edition 2007) translated by Helen Sebba **The African Religions of Brazil, toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations**. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 469.

CNBB - *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*. The National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil

Intereclesial - Avoiding calling it a national gathering to prevent problems with the National Bishops' Conference (CNBB), the CEBs called the gatherings: Inter-ecclesial of CEBs.

Mãe de Santo - priestess of Afro-Brazilian religions. "In *Candomblé*, the cult centre is often headed by a woman (usually one who has passed through menopause). So it is thanks to the example of the *Candomblé* that women of today are able to perform the function of the old masculine *pagé* ... most of whom are black or mulatto women."³

MEB - *Movimento de Educação de Base*. This is a literacy movement operational in the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. Paulo Freire, the author of, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, founded it.

Orixás (Orishas) - spirit of distinguished ancestors or legendary heroes also related to specific deities of different names, Exu, Ogum, Oxossi, Xamgo, Oxum, Yemanjá, Iansa, Omolu, among others.

³ Bastide, R. **The African Religions of Brazil**. p. 182.

Pagé (pagea) - shaman, priest of indigenous peoples. The Ava (Indian) pagé is always a man.

Terreiro (teahheiro) - Place of worship of the Afro-Brazilian religions. The word literally means 'back yard', or 'outside space', without flooring. *Terreiros* tend to be quite simple and almost improvised spaces. There are the drums and a circular space where the religious ecstasies are performed, spiritualist counseling happens and where the celebration of religious festivals takes place. Protestants are not expected to visit such places, and there is a kind of spiritual war against them waged by Pentecostalism. Many Roman Catholics also consider it a place dedicated to devil worship. They are spaces mostly for nighttime sessions. Services can go all through the night.

Yalorixá - High priests of a *Candomblé*⁴, also called *Mãe de Santo*.

⁴ Bastide, R. (2007) *The African Religions of Brazil*. p. 481.

INTRODUCTION

i) What is new?

Anyone vaguely interested in the religious movements from the Southern Hemisphere would recognize that the Brazilian religious field has proved itself to be fertile, although many of its more recent phenomena are not particularly new for the researcher. It would be difficult to convince anyone interested in the religious dynamics of Latin America and specifically Brazil that there could be any dimension of it that has not yet been investigated and studied, that there might be something new coming out of that part of the world. So what is new in that field, and specifically, what is new with the Base Ecclesial Communities?

What is not new is that, on the one hand, there has been a massive growth of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movements in the dynamic religious field of the Brazilian cultures. What is also not new is that there has been a sea change ideologically speaking coming from the old crisis in the left wing parties and in the Marxist ideologies, and the impact of this on the political expressions of Christianity.

Those changes came combined with a dominant culture of consumerism. All of this mistakenly appears to have crushed all community orientated, solidarity based and politically transforming religious movements. In particular, it may appear to have crushed the Church of the Poor and its expression in the Base Ecclesial Communities, here called CEBs. (see list of definitions)

What is not new either is that there has been a conservative reaction to the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church with the long Pontificate of John Paul II and now of his successor Benedict XVI. They have taken concrete moves to limit the changes brought by the Council and to bring the conservative hierarchy back to power, certainly in the Brazilian church and also in the Vatican and around the World. This might have given the impression that there would be no space for the church gathered around the themes of liberation and that that church was actually starting to disappear.

Meanwhile, one of the expressions of the Church of the Poor, the CEBs have commemorated 30 years of successful national gatherings. From the first one in 1975 to the eleventh Gathering in 2005, these gatherings have grown to be mega events with thousands of people present. The Roman Catholic Bishops have supported them both individually and as the Brazilian National Conference of Bishops. The CEBs come together to celebrate their faith, their journey, to gather strength for the struggle for justice, agrarian reform, and for other social and political changes. But one cannot claim that this is new.

So what is new?

Significantly new is the fact that, more recently, the Gatherings have demonstrated a rather surprising element to them: a wider-than-Christianity ecumenical development. There was from the beginning of the national gatherings an ecumenical concern. The CEBs invited to their national gatherings Christians from other denominations and traditions and later on gave them a high profile. What is new is that there has been a widening of the CEBs' ecumenical practices. Beyond that well-established ecumenical embrace, the CEBs have put into practice a rather wider-than-Christianity ecumenism in their national gatherings, bringing an inter-religious dimension to them. The liturgical celebrations in the national gatherings have incorporated elements from and representatives of the Afro-Brazilian and Ava-Indigenous religions.

In this thesis, I will be trying to explain that phenomenon observed in the national gatherings of the CEBs, that is to say the welcoming of representatives of the Ava and Afro religions into the Christian worship. I will use the concept of permeability to describe and analyse it. I have called the phenomenon the ecumenism of permeability.

The concept of permeability is therefore fundamental to this thesis. It is used to explain the slotting in of different religions in the time and sacred space of worship

but without syncretism, consequently preserving the originality of each religion.

Syncretism entails a blurring on spiritual and doctrinal levels; permeability involves shared attitudes towards social and political issues from the standpoints that are spiritually and doctrinally distinct.

Permeability is not syncretism. Syncretism is a form of mixing the religious traditions together. A syncretistic form of religion has been diluted several times. Permeability differently from syncretism allows contact in time and space without a diluting or mixing of characteristics, on the contrary, permeability affirms differences by celebrating them. For example, in the CEBs' national gatherings there is joy, encouragement and respect for the differences, whilst the political space for the minority religions to be is created.

This research revealed that the commonality necessary for a relationship to exist is found in the struggle for justice. It also revealed that there isn't an attempt to force the religious traditions to have the same ritual, doctrine or faith. This ecumenism is new in the sense that it does not seek unity. It is not syncretism; it is an ecumenism of permeability. Permeability in the case of the CEBs allows for interpenetration but without saturation. There is a shared commitment to the struggle, celebration and joy, blessing and peace but not a take-over. There is inculturation going on when there is ecumenism of permeability, but without osmosis. This is a new contribution from the CEBs not yet exposed nor explored more deeply in theological circles.

This dissertation seeks to register these practices, the processes involved in getting these ecumenical practices in place. I strive to understand them from the perspective of those who have made them happen and then will try to relate these new experiences to sociology of religion and try to extract some theological learning from them. I am asking the question of whether there is a theology, or rudiments of a theology, of ecumenical and inter-religious engagement coming from the CEBs' experiences that could contribute to the present state of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and practices.

ii) The problems it poses

The first set of problems that will emerge from this research is concerned with the significance and the place of new practices in the midst of old traditions. For example, the contribution that the Base Ecclesial Communities have made to the development of the Liberation Theologies has been widely acknowledged. There are those who even argue that in fact the CEBs were the first step and that the Theology of Liberation was the second step, in the sense that they were practising Christianity in a particular way and that later a theology came as a response to that practice.

Now we have observed, and we hope it will be demonstrated in the body of this thesis, that there is something new happening in the CEBs' practices, that the CEBs in their national gatherings have gone a step further in the direction of an ecumenical and inter-religious engagement. Apart from the need to register these ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practices and the need to explore how they

fit in the whole history and theology of the CEBs, it poses several questions about how these practices might challenge the present way we understand this ecclesial movement. It also poses further questions in relation to the tensions these practices might produce between the CEBs and the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

It will be important to see how they account for these new practices in relation to their religious allegiance; to identify where there is continuity with the past tradition and where there might have been discontinuity with it. Once we have identified these practices the question of what is the basis for them and how they justify them will need to be investigated. What is the relationship of these new practices with the liberation approach, and the implications they might have for the wider church and inter-religious dialogue?

A second set of problems has to do with the wider context of growing religious fundamentalism connected with perceived struggles for liberation. There are issues raised by the new breed of terrorist martyrs, claiming for themselves the archetype of a freedom fighter but being in reality and perceived as the stereotype of a terrorist, a suicide bomber. This research is an effort to understand how the CEBs, although connected to the struggle for liberation, including martyrdom, have not been identified with the exclusivist and fundamentalist religious views. On the contrary, the CEBs have developed an ecumenism of permeability. Here we will try and show how the CEBs' movement has been able to engage with and, in the context of the community struggles for liberation, develop a practice of religious inclusivism,

pluralism and beyond. If indeed the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are sufficient to understand the CEBs' ecumenical and wider ecumenical practices. Therefore, the question arises of how a conviction that leads to martyrdom, and martyrdom itself, can be received as a gift of the Spirit and given, offered back as a gift to the community and not as an imposition or threat to others.

In this second set of problems we will also demonstrate how the CEBs in their national gatherings were dealing with the search for common ground and conviviality amongst the different cultures and religions even before the events of 11th September 2001 (9/11).

The third set of problems to be faced in this research is about whether and how these practices fit with the theological schemes developed so far to understand inter-religious dialogue. Or whether we are dealing with a particular practice that might go beyond these schemes, *viz a viz*, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. I will not be able to place a great emphasis on this, but nonetheless, I should at least situate the question in the context of the present understanding of inter-religious engagement. Here we will try also to see how a religious movement influenced by Marxist ideology, operating in a secularized society, and also with openness of mind to incorporate difference did not diminish in number and in religious fervour but the opposite, how and why it grew and distinguished itself from others within the history of Christianity in that country. The expectation might have been that a movement that is critical and open, non-directive in its catechetical tasks, orientated to the

implications of the Christian faith for society might have the weakness of not offering community cohesion and religious enthusiasm to bring in the crowds.

The question here is how were/are they able to combine what seems to be an active religious pluralism with a deep religious fervour. What was the secret to achieve such an unusual combination of religious commitment, social cohesion, mass movement with critical approach and openness of mind?

In short, the task of this research will be to observe, register and learn from what is new in the way the CEBs live and celebrate their Christian faith in their specific context. It will also consider the questions and problems of how their practices relate to the tradition they claim they belong to. How do they challenge the perceived view of martyrs and liberation movements? How do they fit or not into the present scheme used to understand interfaith dialogue? How and why has that movement avoided the lukewarm characteristic of more critical and open-minded religious expressions elsewhere?

iii) Opportunities, aims and issues

As was pointed out earlier in this introduction, the CEBs were a popular subject for studies and theological investigation in the 1980s extending into the 1990s.

However, with the crisis of Marxism it became more doubtful if there was still any ecclesial and theological contribution coming out of them. My hope is that this dissertation will represent an opportunity to show that the CEBs did not stay stuck in

the past, but have moved into areas more akin to the present concerns of a plural and multicultural world. On the other hand, it will also need to be considered whether these developments contribute to or get in the way of the older struggles and social concerns they have been engaging with, e.g., the struggle for land reform, proper living conditions in urban and rural areas.

I also hope to make material that is otherwise inaccessible, accessible to the English reader. In doing so I expect to bring to light practice that may not yet be known or not yet understood.

It is my aim simply to write the history of the CEBs, including now a new phase in their existence. Furthermore, it is my aim to show how this development happened and its relation to the previous theological emphasis, i.e., liberating Christianity, and therefore, to propose a new periodization for the movement. Lastly, I will attempt to relate the developments in the CEBs' practices and theology to the theological debate about inter-religious dialogue.

In doing so, it will be natural that some themes will suggest themselves, and the intention is to highlight them and learn from them. For example the relationship with the bible and the sacraments; the struggle of marginalised people in church and society; martyrdom as a gift to the church and the journey of the poor; the spiritual and transformative value in other cultures and religions.

Some issues will also present themselves: What is the CEBs' gatherings' position in relation to inter-religious dialogue? How do these inter-religious concerns and practices relate to the agenda for liberation? How do they relate to the struggle for justice, for recognition of women's position in church and society, for the rights of minorities, and for the environment? How do the inter-religious practices in the gatherings of CEBs relate to their particular faith and church? Are there elements that militate against the CEBs' ecumenical and inter-religious emphasis? Are there complications in accommodating such practices within the tradition of the church? How does it relate to the previous emphasis of the movement and what changes have occurred?

This will also be an opportunity to check whether the theologians in Brazil have noticed that there is something new happening in the CEBs' movement. This is an opportunity to ask what can be learnt from their practices of inter-religious dialogue and how they have dealt with it in their gatherings? How are these concerns expressed theologically, in liturgy and in their reflection and practices? What can be learned for the purpose of a Christian theology of religious pluralism from their prophetic way of engaging with the social, political and cultural dimensions of their contexts? What can be learned from their mysticism, from their spirituality, from their martyrs?

iv) Hypothesis

The aims spelt out above include identifying new practices that could shed light on the more general theological debate about inter-religious relations and religious pluralism. It is a hypothesis of this research that the liberation approach of the CEBs provides a sharper edge to the ongoing religious dialogue. The struggle towards liberation is the way and means by which a whole community or communities struggle towards fulfillment, the way and means by which the suffering people of God seek the promises of the Kingdom of justice, peace and joy (Romans 10. 14). Therefore pluralism in the CEBs' case is not just a simple matter of curiosity about the other or a need to accommodate the arrival of migrants; much more than that, it is a means of achieving the high level religious and political expectations for society, in particular, for those excluded by the laws of the free market economy.

Another hypothesis is that the particular practice that the CEBs have in relation to representatives of other traditions and religions in their gatherings is an opening to a different approach to inter-religious relations, namely, a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism of permeability.

v) Methodology

There have been eleven gatherings of CEBs at a national level in Brazil. In total, the people of the CEBs have been meeting at these national gatherings, through their representatives, for 30 years now. The methodology that will be used in this research is, in the first instance, to simply look at these gatherings, particularly at the more recent ones, at some of the statements coming out of the gatherings. This is the

Letter that at the end of each gathering the CEBs sent to the churches. Moreover looking at some of the enactment in the gatherings and also at the preparatory material they produced to see if they can address some of the questions that have been raised, and will confirm or not the hypothesis mentioned above. This is simply a description.

In the second instance the methodology will be to investigate the history of the CEBs, especially the history that they tell, and investigate the way they understand their journey and practices. This can be understood as interpretation.

A third strand in this methodology will be to check this against some other understandings of their history and theology, against some sociological and theological references. This will imply some analyses.

The methodology is simple. There is only one complication, which is that these descriptions, interpretations and analyses, might not necessarily be applied in a sequential manner. Concerning the whole thesis, description, interpretation and analyses will come in this order; although within chapters they may be present in a more dynamic way, interrelating the three.

As in a computer programme, the 'web' pages will open windows to be explored, then another window within the first one will be opened with further information and study presented in the same subject. In this way gradually a more in-depth picture

may be emerging. A danger in this process is that the reader may feel there is some repetition of content. I hope that this feeling will be mitigated by furthering the reader into the life and dynamics of the national gatherings, the issues they raise and finally the learning one can absorb from their practice, particularly the wider-than-Christianity ecumenism.

The research undertaken was based on several prime source materials related to the CEB's national gatherings and to the CEBs in general. The question is how representative of the CEBs and their national gatherings were the different documents collected? Among them there were the final Letters from each gathering, the preparatory material for the gatherings, songbooks, newspapers and magazines reporting on the gatherings, other letters and personal interviews.

The prime source material was classified in the following order of representation:

- First, the Letters from the gatherings to the churches were taken as the most representative of the documents. That was because the Letters were produced during each of the CEBs' gatherings as a journal and voted for by the assembly or acclaimed as a documents representing their views of what the gathering was all about and containing a message to the communities and churches. The gatherings are the *de facto* instruments for signalling agreement to particular developments, much like a synod in more traditional ecclesiastical contexts. Thus, the Letters have a high authority because they arise from this general consensus.

Second, the *Textos-Base*, which are the preparatory material sent to all participants in anticipation of each gathering addressing the theme of the gathering. They are edited and published under the responsibility of the CEBs' National Secretariat, which is the body that coordinates the arrangements for each of the gatherings. Therefore, although written by different individual authors, they can be considered very representative of the CEBs' theological emphasis. At this level too I placed the Songbooks with songs from different places and authors, but sung with enthusiasm in the gatherings.

The third and last category includes the newspapers produced as reporting on the gatherings, the "A Caminho" and similar publications; and also personal interviews with key figures, e.g., with Dom Pedro Casaldáliga and Oscar Beozo; then there are also other documents registering the event, papers and correspondence.

The material collected was certainly not exhaustive, but enough to give a firm basis for the thesis. The translation is my responsibility.

vi) Structure of the work

The research undertaken about the CEBs' ecumenical practices will be presented in three Parts. Firstly, there will be an exploration into the nature, origins and history of the CEBs' movement in Brazil. This will be dedicated to defining the movement, and to set its history against a periodization. The periodization will explore the role and place that the national gatherings of CEBs have had in animating that movement,

proposing directions, and influencing the relationship with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. More importantly, it will also show the steps the CEBs took from a theology of social liberation to their ecumenical practices up to the inter-faith relations they managed to create. Notwithstanding the fact that ecumenism has been an important element for the CEBs from their beginnings. The CEBs were born in the ecumenical spirit.

Secondly, there will be a description of the kind of permeability the CEBs are practising. This will focus on the Afro and *Ava* religions and traditions as well as on popular religiosity. In relation to the latter, the ecumenical core of the great hallmark of the CEBs, which is their mysticism in relation to martyrdom, will be exposed. The prophetic dimension of the CEBs is also connected with the cry for justice to the poor and oppressed, to women, and Afro and *Ava* Peoples. All of this reveals a *stricto sensu* and a *latu sensu* ecumenism of the CEBs, in other words, an ecumenism within Christianity and an ecumenism beyond Christian denominations.

Following the above, which could be understood as a provocative stance of the CEBs, in the last part of the thesis there will be recognition of the resistance to the CEBs' practices. In contrast to this, there will be the support they receive from the bishops. Also a document from the Vatican dealing directly with the way the CEBs have engaged with evangelization will serve as support to the work of the CEBs.

Then it will only be left to show some sociological and theological implications derived from the ecumenism of permeability the CEBs are living. In this third part I will be testing the ability of the ecumenism of permeability to be a force for the catholicity of the church.

vii) *Missões Populares*

My interest for this research comes out of my personal experience with the CEBs in Brazil. I am a Methodist who has learned a great deal with the CEBs, and who has been intrigued by their commitment to justice, their spirituality, their form of being church and now by their ecumenical practices. I would like to describe my more recent experience with a Base Ecclesial Community and how it confirmed what I have experienced in other places in Brazil and in particular what I had observed in their national gatherings. *Missões populares* are one of the activities the CEBs have all around Brazil to encourage the small groups of communities, to extend the presence of the church to places where there is no church building, to assist the needs of the people.

The *laos* (the New Testament term for ordinary people) came for the monthly celebration of the Mass in a small village populated by fishermen and lace making women in August 2006, in the Northeast of Brazil, the State of Ceará.

In the village there were a few large houses and one hotel scattered amongst the houses of the local residents. The house next door was hosting the Mass. I attended it.

From the beginning it was lay led. The parish priest was doing some pastoral work, talking intensely with a small group at the back of the semi circle of people gathered around a table prepared for Holy Communion. They were being led in singing by a local young man playing the guitar and led by a local young woman singing missionary songs. The service was also connected with the *Missões Populares* period that the parish and the CEBs of the area were engaged with.

The parish comprises a town and several small villages, some by the sea, others in land. All the songs in the booklet were written especially for this period of *Missões Populares*. The rhythm could not be more inculturated. Ceará and the Northeast in general is well known for its characteristic and prolific production of cultural artistic talents. The lyrics were written locally. They mention the struggle of the people, as well as referring to the names of towns and villages and the beauty of the place.

They had created a few symbols for 2006 *Missões Populares*. A cross made of two small ice-cream sticks glued together and decorated with little shells stuck to it, at the cost of £0.25 each, very cheap even by local standards. A t-shirt, each one tastefully painted by hand individually with a scene that includes a *jangada* (a small,

precarious fishing boat that is just like a big surf board). They had recorded a CD with the new songs for the Missionary campaign.

When the priest was moving towards the improvised communion table on the veranda of the house, I approached him and said, 'I am a protestant brother, should I come to receive the Eucharist or not?' He gave me a huge embrace, asked my name and said a convincing: 'certainly'. He got to the table, put on his white cassock, and started the Mass inviting me to the front, welcoming me by name. He asked people to give a round of applause because being an '*Evangélico*' I still came for the Mass. He offered me his chair to sit in. I felt a little embarrassed, as there already were women and children standing or sitting on the floor. He led the Mass in a very participatory way. He was at home amongst the people. The songs, the readings were all lay led. They all had a strong Northeastern accent.

The house we were in was also to be honoured, as just after he called me, he calls the family link person, mentions the family stories of suffering, imprisonment, and torture of two of the woman's siblings, at the time of the military dictatorship. Their names are mentioned, the years of imprisonment referred to, the recognition that if it was not for Dom Helder Camara's intervention they would not have survived to tell their tale. The woman, the owner of the house, herself had to go underground for several years supported by the church to hide. He acknowledged their long history and present stance of supporting the struggle of people and the struggle in particular

of the local initiatives in education and community activities. They gave her a round of applause, more songs were sung. It was a celebration.

At the time of the sharing of the bread and wine, as the invitation was said, he nodded at the stranger in the midst and moved towards him (me), intending to serve me the honour of receiving communion first. I accepted the invitation. Here, as in the Holy Communion in the CEBs' gatherings, no questions were asked, no barriers imposed, but an embracing attitude, welcoming and offering, what the Methodists would call, extending the right hand of fellowship.

The experience confirms for me the life and vitality of the CEBs in their particular way of being church. A strong lay female leadership, a lay movement supported by the clergy, rooted in the struggles of life. And coupled with the struggle to see justice done and poverty alleviated. They are conscious of the example of the martyrs and of those who suffered persecution for the cause of justice. Their liturgy can be inculturated. They offer an open table of Holy Communion for all. The CEBs remain in communion with priests, bishops and with Rome. And I hope to show in this thesis and start to unpack that the CEBs have pushed their ecumenical practices from within Christianity to a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism.

PART 1

BORN IN THE ECUMENICAL SPIRIT

CHAPTER 1:

THE NATURE, ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE CEBS

1. 1. WHAT ARE THE CEBS?

There have been several attempts to describe and define the Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs). They are said to be one of the expressions of the Church of the Poor. As in the movement of Jesus, these CEBs have been about small initiatives from, to, for and with the poor.⁵ It has been pointed out that they are small groups of Christians that gather around the Bible to reflect on their ways of engaging with social and community matters.⁶ It has been suggested that they are primarily initiatives for catechism, moreover that the CEBs are concerned with small scale economic alternatives for poor communities, sometimes being organized around a co-operative, or a particular struggle for land, or for justice in one matter or another.⁷ It has been said that these contemporary faith communities are lay focused

⁵ See for example, Frei Betto (1981) **O Que É Comunidade Eclesial de Base**. Coleção Primeiros Passos. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense.

⁶ See, for example, Wikipédia, pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/comunidade_Eclesiais_de_Base

⁷ See, for example, Hebblethwaite, M. (1994) **Base Communities, an Introduction**. Mahwah: Paulist Press.

movements.⁸ However what has not been expected is that the CEBs would be described in terms of their ecumenical, interdenominational and inter-religious characteristics. Indeed they have yet again charted new pastoral territory, exploring liturgically as well as theologically new practices, namely, ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical permeable relations.

There might be similar communities around the world, but in this work I am going to concentrate on the CEBs in Brazil and on their national gatherings named by themselves, Inter-ecclesial gatherings. It has to be said that the CEBs have been particularly connected with the movement of the Church in Latin America, the roots of which seem to have come from the Brazilian soil, although the Church of the Poor and a liberationist approach to Christianity are not exclusive to Latin America or Brazil.

Whilst all the above ways of describing the CEBs remain feasible, it seems that there are many different forms in which the CEBs appear. This dynamism of the CEBs remains a challenge to a general and all-embracing definition.

1.1.1. Definition

Despite the varieties of ways CEBs appear and the different activities they host and organize, it may be possible to identify some common elements to characterize

⁸ See, for example: Boff, C., Lesbaupin, I., Oliveira, Pedro de Assis Ribeiro de. et al. (1997) **As Comunidades de Base em Questão**. São Paulo: Paulinas.

them; and, in so doing, try to achieve a definition for that movement. In engaging with this task of finding these common elements, I shall first of all refer to and use the preparatory material that appeared in a national magazine which is significant because it represents an independent voice from the CEBs, although, obviously, supportive, as well as, being a tool of the CEBs to prepare and strengthen the network. The editors were also using the opportunity to engage the magazine production and distribution with a significant event in the life of the churches – the tenth Gathering of CEBs, so to increase the circulation. The event was to happen in Bahia, in 2000. This is the Combonian edited Magazine '*Sem Fronteiras*' of which a whole edition was dedicated to the tenth Gathering of CEBs. In one of the articles it argues in the following way to try and explain what CEBs are:

They are called 'communities' because they are groups formed by people within the areas where they live, in the neighbourhood, in the outskirts of big cities, in the city centres, in hills and shanty towns, in the rural areas... These people try to live fraternal relationships of sharing, helping one another in solidarity and service. They are called 'ecclesial', because they referred to groups of followers of Jesus, the example of the apostles, and in union with the church. And 'base', because they are present since the beginning of the church with the first Christians, because they are formed by people who are on the bases of humanity and Christianity; they are poor people or they put themselves side by side with the poor.⁹

⁹ O que é isso? Para entender melhor o que são as comunidades de base. (2000). **Revista Sem Fronteiras, a Igreja do Brasil aberta ao Mundo**, 281. p. 25.

The literature about the CEBs is vast. I am using the **Revista Sem Fronteiras** 281 as it has been published as preparatory material for the tenth Gathering.

The article goes on to explain in short that they meet in church halls, community centres, in houses to pray and to reflect on the bible in relation to the difficulties and issues they are facing in their life and in their community. It continues to say that they are in general poor people. The CEBs are a phenomenon of the poor. The article in the magazine argues also that the first communities appeared at the beginning of the 1960s although there were earlier signs of the movement that despite being more limited in size and geography had the same spirit. It claims an old, more ancient origin for the CEBs, linking the CEBs with and to the movement of Jesus and of the Apostles: "they were of only one heart and one soul" (Acts 2. 42ff.).

The Combonian Magazine presents some general characteristics of the CEBs, that I summarize here. That the CEBs have: 1) a co-ordinator; 2) a programme of activities: worship, formation, parties, celebration of sacraments; etc.; 3) an organization of all the services: such as, assistance to the sick, catechism activities, liturgy, etc. Part of the elements involved in the CEBs are also that: 4) the bible is read in connection with life's struggles; 5) they seek to organize the wider community; 6) that they manifest their faith in terms of concrete commitments in terms of justice and solidarity.

All in all, the CEBs in their small and local character are the community space where day-by-day life's concerns are shared; where there is a privileged place given to the bible; where and when people supporting each other organize themselves towards social transformation; where differently from many circumstances in society and

many times in church in general, the participation of women and the leadership they provide and also the leading role of lay people in the missionary task of the church takes place.

The communities want to be: "presence and hope...; where ministry will mushroom...; school for citizenship...; space for renewal...; the space for beauty and art...; a place of welcome: where Black people, the Amerindians, the excluded minorities can find a welcome...; without reserve for brothers and sisters who carry in their hearts different forms of love and fear of God."¹⁰ It is only here that the description found in this article comes closer to the ecumenical dimension present in all the national gatherings and the inter-religious dimension that appeared so prominent in the last three national gatherings of the CEBs.

In the Combonian Magazine they have set up the ten commandments of the CEBs, which are:

1) to gather the poor; 2) to celebrate the struggles of life and faith; 3) to help to organize the people; 4) to fight for human rights; 5) to have the experience of sharing; 6) to demand one's own rights; 7) to study the bible linked with reality; 8) to denounce as well as to announce; 9) to be the yeast; 10) to journey together, taking responsibility for all forms of ministries.¹¹

¹⁰ O que é isso. (2000). **Revista Sem Fronteira**. p. 26.

¹¹ O que é isso. (2000). **Revista Sem Fronteira**. p. 25.

Despite being helpful, and faithful to the potential and in many cases the reality of what the CEBs are, the definition above shows how little the ecumenical, interdenominational and inter-religious nature of the CEBs is recognized and assumed as characteristic of the CEBs (see also 2.2.2). The omission of this side of the CEBs' life and ministry in this article is quite significant because it was written in a period when some of the tensions around this fact had given way to a more established practice of this nature in the national gatherings, as can be seen in Chapter 3 below, which gives a detailed description of the ecumenical and inter-religious practices of the CEBs.

Such an omission in the article in question might be symptomatic of a blind spot in the way the story of the CEBs is told and the way the theological reflection follows. Why should that be the case? The ecumenical character - within and beyond Christianity - of the CEBs is not a new feature of the CEBs. The opposite, it has grown systematically throughout the years and it has gained visibility in the national gatherings. It should have been clearly spelt out in this article published by the Combonian Magazine, especially as part of the preparation for the tenth Inter-ecclesial gathering. Not least because participants could be better informed and prepared for what was to come.

After this helpful albeit incomplete attempt to describe and define the CEBs, what is recognized in the articles of the Combonian Magazine is that "the CEBs are many

and they reflect diversified experiences."¹² The CEBs may be diverse but the CEBs' participants seem to have a sense of mission and identity and they try to express what they are all about and who they are in many ways. What follows is a song they sing making quite clear the wider dimension of their borders, their sense of belonging and of shared journey:

We are reborn people¹³

Chorus:

We are reborn people living in unity

We are people seed of a new nation! Ê, é!

We are reborn people living love

We are community, people of the Lord! Ê, é!

1. I'll call my brothers and sisters workers from
the factory, the country, the street traders and many more.
And together we will celebrate our confidence in
our struggle towards the hope of having a plot of land,
Bread and peace! Ê, e!

2. I'll call the Indians those who still resist,
the tribes that still insist on the right to live.
And together, reunited in the memory,
we will celebrate a victory that will still happen. Ê, é!

3. I'll call the Black people, brothers sisters in blood,
in destiny; their walk mirrors their redemption dance.
Hand in hand, in the *terreiros* (see List of Definitions) of
brother/sisterhood we will truly dance the samba whilst reason and
sensitivity come back. Ê, é!

¹² Lima, P. P. (2000) Eu nasci há dois mil anos atrás. **Revista Sem Fronteira**. p. 30.

¹³ Zé Vicente, "Somos Gente Nova." In *Secreatriado das CEBs para o 10 Intereclesial*. Equipe de Cantos. Área da Liturgia e Animação. **Livro de Cantos**. Number 38. p. 22.

The song affirms the CEBs' definition of who they are: their identity goes hand in hand with their faith and also with those who are engaged in the struggle. They say that their diversity is to be celebrated in unity and love whilst engaged in their specific struggle for justice. For example, verse three above is a direct criticism of the mainstream discriminatory cultural relationship with things Afro-Brazilian. When they say 'reason and sensitivity will be back', they are referring to the fact that at present views and reactions are formed by prejudice, racism and discrimination. In these next verses of the song the CEBs' sense of mission and identity is spelt out.

4. I'll call Oneide, Rosa, Ana Maria,
the women who night and day struggle and yet
Make love be born. Reunited on the altar of freedom
we will truly sing and will stamp out the pain. Ê, ê!

5. I'll call children and the young, musicians to help us,
we will sing along the way. Our songs will fill all the country,
Old folk will happily dance, and people who are crying will laugh
with joy. Ê, ê!

6. Unemployed, fisher folk, those despised and marginalised come
all and gather with us in the march towards a new society,
Whoever loves us indeed can come
because there is a place for all of you. Ê, ê!

Indeed in this song the CEBs express their ability to bring together different people, from many and varied walks of life and different backgrounds. They do this though with respect for their different identities slotting in like hinges, penetrating and uniting but retaining their own names and characters.

For example, the song sets in verse what was said earlier, that the CEBs want to be open without reserve to welcome brothers and sisters who carry in their hearts different forms of love and fear of God, the Indian/*Ava* (see List of Definitions) and the Afro-descendent, with their cultures and struggles, journeying together towards a new society. Women, young people, and the poor united.

The view to be defended in this work is that it is not feasible to understand the CEBs without paying attention to this great ecumenical and wider ecumenical view they have expressed for example in this song above. They allow interpenetration without imposing loss of identity. To ignore this sense of embracing, of slotting in when describing the CEBs is a gross misrepresentation. The verses of the song do not elaborate on or clarify how or in what way this unity with the different ones might be negotiated and made manifest. This issue shall keep us engaged to the end of this thesis.

After adding to the description of the CEBs that the Combonian Magazine gives the ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical characteristics, now let us move on. Following the methodology of description and also of seeking to reveal their own interpretation, I shall combine both these approaches below in an analysis of the CEBs that might help further to form a picture of what the CEBs are. It will be necessary to separate form from content as well as touch on the spirit of or the enthusiasm present in the CEBs. First of all let me consider the form in which they

meet, i.e., the small groups, then, I will engage with the content and finally with the spirit of the CEBs.

1.1.2. CEBs as Small Groups

As described above, the CEBs have a variety of activities and forms, but one thing they have in common is the fact that they are basically small groups gathering around worship and prayer, studying the bible, reflecting on their faith and also engaging with the difficulties of life and the politics to improve their living conditions. Beyond these activities they operate as a planning group for cohesion and action on social issues at local, regional and national level. What was not part of the definition above taken from the Combonian Magazine was the CEBs' ability to operate ecumenically, which seems a very important contribution to the Brazilian religious field to be left out. It is all based upon the energy and articulation of the small groups. There would be no national gatherings if the small groups did not exist. Furthermore, because they exist and have a network that is well organized and active then the CEBs are more than just a collection of dispersed small groups.

'CEBs - a new way of being Church', is a booklet published by the Executive Commission for the sixth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs in preparation for the gathering that happened in Goiânia, in the State of Goiás, in July 1986. This booklet is intended to be used as a resource for small groups. The fact that it has been used by so many small groups confirms that they constitute a movement in the church. The booklet became so popular with small groups that it had several reprints. The first edition

reached 158,000 copies with ten reprints. I am using the second edition, 1988. The structure of the publication is roughly a page with a description of something that has happened; then follows a page with considerations or questions regarding the event. It also includes a section on suggestions of related issues to be reflected upon and talked about in a small group. There is a page with a bible reading, a song and a prayer. This pattern is repeated.

'Aconteceu número 2' is a page in this small but successful publication. 'Aconteceu' means, 'it happened'. It is a page describing a particular experience in a country place called Santa Rita where several families lived. This 'Aconteceu' is a description of how a CEB operated as a small group and the impact it had on the locality. I will translate the description with some unavoidable adaptation:

Every weekend, there were lots of rows and fights... drinking and card games ended up in fights and even in deaths.

The little church in that locality opened only from time to time for the praying of the rosary that was led by *Dona Antônia*, with just over a dozen of old ladies and some children.

The little school in the village was not very good. It had only recently received electricity. There were no doctors, no health centre, there was very little to help people in their lives.

One day the family of *Senhor Raimundo* and *Dona Cida* moved to that forgotten village. They had been leaders of the CEB in the village nearest to where they used to live. They had taken part in several bible studies.

They started inviting the neighbours to come together once a week, to reflect on the bible and to work as a small group. Slowly, the small group became stronger and stronger as they learned to appreciate the word of God more and more.

Things started to change: people became friendlier, more cheerful, even the rows and fights became less frequent. On Sundays, all gathered to celebrate the Word, and eventually they even managed to find a priest who committed himself to celebrate Mass once a month with them.

Through the reflecting on the bible and talking about life they found out ways in which they could try and demand better conditions for the village. They formed a commission that organized petitions to the local and regional Government to demand electricity and better education.

As a consequence of that coming together now the rural workers of the village are organizing themselves into a trade union.

In this way, slowly the village of Santa Rita is changing for the better, through the force of the Word of God, which sheds light on the life of all.¹⁴

This description of a small group in that locality with the appreciation of its impact and force is a fair example of the vitality that the CEBs bring through their methodology of operating. The story illustrates in vivid words the effectiveness of their way of being church, in particular, in a locality where traditional forms of being church are not possible and perhaps less relevant. Gathered around the bible and the Word of God, the booklet suggests that things can change for all in the village.

This was obviously a new experience of being church in that small village. And the publication recognizes this newness in its title: 'CEB a new way of Being Church'.

The influence and new energy brought by the small group initiative is to be appreciated, although I question the claim of its newness. Naturally the force of the

¹⁴ Comissão Executiva do 6 Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1988) **CEB um Jeito Novo de Ser Igreja**. Goiás: SPAR. Second edition. p. 9.

small group methodology was new for that community in that particular place, but it is not new in the history of the church.

The strength of small groups in Christianity is well known and established. Although the CEBs tend to think of themselves as “a new way of being church”, many other groups have thought of themselves in this way too. This way of meeting and developing the faith can be found in other times, in different periods of history and in quite different manifestations of Christianity, and also in other parts of the world.

In the present day, there is the Alpha course in the UK, which is basically a small group kind of initiative.¹⁵ Alpha operates as house groups gathering around a meal and a programme of simple questions and answers to introduce people to the Christian faith. The Alpha course is thought of with a conservative mindset, therefore possibly diametrically opposed to the understanding of Christianity espoused by the CEBs. Alpha has been a success story in terms of numbers and renewal of some parishes in the UK.

Alpha grows and is becoming international but perhaps more widely spread is the movement of cell churches. These are small groups that make a point of not growing above 12 members in each cell. As soon as they reach that number they are supposed to send leaders to initiate a new cell. The emphasis of Alpha and of cell

¹⁵ Brookes, A. (2007) “The Method of Alpha.” In Andrew Brookes (ed.) **The Alpha Phenomenon, Theology, Praxis and Challenges for Mission and Church Today**. London: CTBI. p. 92-105.

groups is on numerical growth. This seems to be the secret of their success, that they do help churches to grow. Nonetheless, initiatives like these are not new in the history of the Christian faith.

For example, the English Evangelical movement of the 18th century, in particular Methodism was on the surface of it based on preaching services where the multitude gathered. However, the real power house of that religious movement was the small groups gathered for spiritual support, bible study, for reading and studying and to understand anew their faith in the face of the challenges their contemporary experience provided. John and Charles Wesley started the Holy Club in Oxford, which was a small group of fellowship and mission. Later, John distinguished himself as the leader of the movement because “he organized a connexion (of societies) which perpetuated his own name.”¹⁶ Methodism was, as Ernst Troeltsch put it, “as masterly in the art of organization as it is in the art of revivalism.”¹⁷ Based on a big movement of small groups they challenged the social concepts of their time, for example, of slavery, and of the role of women in church and society.

The Methodists, like the CEBs, also thought they created the small groups as they formed the Holy Club in Oxford and continued with them through the connexion. But

¹⁶ Rack, H. (1989) **Reasonable Enthusiast, John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism**. London: Epworth Press. p. 191.

¹⁷ Troeltsch, E. (re-print of translation of German original first published in 1932, 1992) **The social Teaching of the Christian Churches**. Volume 2. London: Westminster John Knox Press. p. 784.

in fact the German Puritans, the Moravians were already using this way of gathering the faithful many decades before they met and influenced the Wesley brothers.

The sense that something new was happening may well have had to do with the fact that the holy club started in Oxford before the Wesley brothers met the Moravians on their way to North America.¹⁸ In any case, their history shows that these small groups created new strength and brought a new energy to Christianity of the time. The small groups were also called religious societies and they were sprouting all over the place. This initiative still continues in some churches in the form of the so-called classes, i.e., house fellowship and small groups.

With respect to the newness or not of small groups a more recently published biography of Charles Wesley says:

There was nothing remotely new in this idea [of the Holy Club]. Over a century earlier two Lutheran ministers, Johann Arndt and Philip Jakob Spener, had become founders of a movement in Germany to encourage Christians to meet together for study, prayer and mutual support. Their followers, who were dubbed 'Pietists', advocated the creation of mutual-support groups as a means of promoting inner godliness and outer good works. Pietist-style religious societies had first appeared in London in the 1670s in reaction to the immorality prevalent in society after the Restoration of Charles II... as 'an effectual means for restoring our

¹⁸ For a chronology of the movement see, Rack H. **Reasonable Enthusiast**; and also, Hattersley, R. (2002) **A Brand from the Burning, the Life of John Wesley**. London: Little Brown Book.

decaying Christianity to its primitive life and vigour, and the support of our tottering and sinking Church.¹⁹

There were similar feelings in relation to the power of the small groups expressed by the CEBs that they could and can be a place of mutual support in Christian growth and social action and they can be an important methodology in helping the church to be renewed and strengthen its mission. The CEBs are certainly small groups and a network of them, however there is nothing new about this. And in particular, this is not the reason why they should be considered a new way of being church. I will argue later in this thesis that the CEBs' ecumenical dimension is where real newness of practice is to be found.

If one looks further back in history there was another group that operated very much as a small group influencing the church of the day with a new spirituality quite akin to the spirit of the CEBs. They were the Franciscans, very much committed to the poor and seeking to dedicate their whole life to follow Christ in obedience, chastity and poverty. This is an important connection with the content of the CEBs as small groups because the Franciscan movement represents the emphasis on "the preferential option for the poor", of a lay and participative church, all ideals dear to the CEBs.

The strength and the freshness small groups bring to the church was in particular felt in the Roman Church in Latin America in general and in Brazil in particular because

¹⁹ Best, G. (2006) **Charles Wesley, a Biography**. Peterborough: Epworth. p. 37.

of the emergence of the CEBs. Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan friar and one of the great thinkers of Liberation Theology, attested to this fact. He wrote "Ecclesio-Genesis – the Base Communities Reinvent the Church"²⁰ – this being one of his many books rethinking the church in the light of the CEBs' experiences. Boff suggests that the CEBs offered the church a new beginning, an ecclesio-genesis. His thesis in 'Ecclesio-genesis' is that the small group methodology with the participation it facilitates was the core reason why the CEBs marked a new beginning for the church.

They (CEBs) are sprung from basic, minimum elements like faith, the reading of the word and meditation on it, and mutual assistance in all human dimensions... they are a genuine church. Many functions, genuinely new ministries, appear in them – ministries of community coordination, of catechesis, of organizing the liturgy, of caring for the sick, of teaching people to read and write, of looking after the poor, and the like. All this is done in a deep spirit of communion, with a sense of joint responsibility and with an awareness of building and living actual church. The best conceptualization of this experience is in the frequently heard expression, "reinvention of the church". The church is beginning to be born at the grassroots."²¹

He develops his theology as follows: the small groups demanded a church able to recognize the ministry of all God's people. The *Quaestiones Disputate* II and III in the 'Ecclesio-genesis' deal with the issue of leadership. Boff argues theologically for recognition of the leadership of the ministry of lay people and of women. He presents the case of the lay coordinator as an extraordinary minister of the Lord's Supper, as well as the ministry of service and unity exercised by women in small groups. He

²⁰ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis, the Base Communities Reinvent the Church**. Translated from Portuguese. London: Colin.

²¹ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p. 23.

argues that the institutional church should recognize their ministries. In the case of women this is because “if a woman can be the principle of unity, as she is in so many communities, then theologically there is nothing to stand in the way of her empowerment, through ordination.”²²

I argue, on the other hand, that the newness of small groups, in particular in terms of the outcome as encouragement of the ministry of every believer, the ministry of all God’s people, harks back more to the Reformation movement and its theology rather than referring to a new genesis for the church, as Boff puts it.

What is much more challenging and new in the CEBs’ movement are their ecumenical and inter-religious practices. But that is missed or omitted by the great theologian. When he brought up the issue of syncretism in his book “Church, Charisma and Power”²³ the Vatican reaction to it revealed the difficulties in recognizing the ecumenical and inter-religious practices as the source, or another source of newness of the church in Brazil. When Leonardo Boff dared to suggest a theological reflection that took into account the issue of syncretism, the Vatican reacted and effectively expelled him. That threat may not explain completely why this characteristic of the CEBs is not properly addressed but it would go a long way towards it. Maybe, it is like this because of hopelessness of wider-than-Christianity ecumenism having any chance of being accepted by the institutional church. The

²² Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p. 95.

²³ Boff, L. (1994) **Igreja, Carisma e Poder, Ensaios de Eclesilogia Militante, Inclui Apêndice com os documentos do processo doutrinário movido pelo Vaticano contra o Autor**. São Paulo: Editora Ática.

fact is that the CEBs' practices remain confined to the shadows away from a proper theological reflection. Whilst some reflection on inter-religious relations is brought to light in Brazil, that is not coming out of the CEBs' ecumenism, but from European theologians' theoretical framework.²⁴

I would suggest that rather than an ecclesio-genesis because of a methodology of small group with the implications to ministry that come out of it, it is more likely that the CEBs represent a renewal of an ecumenical spirit in a political and religious sense. Not so much a reinvention of the church, but rather, a renewal of its spirit. What is the spirit that the CEBs represent?

1.1.3. The Spirit of the CEBs

The previous section gives a description and an evaluation of the form that the CEBs are best known for or characterized by, i.e., the small groups. This form might not be original to the CEBs but it is certainly a very powerful method of engaging people in the Christian life. Small groups and CEBs became almost synonymous words. However, to understand what the CEBs are it is necessary to look beyond form and try to describe their spirit.

There is a song that was sung at the tenth Inter-ecclesial Gathering called '*Igreja de Cristo*' (The Church of Christ) that spells out how the CEBs see the church and what the church is to be like:

²⁴ See for example, Teixeira, F. (1995) **Teologia das Religiões, Uma Visão Panorâmica**. São Paulo: Paulinas.

The Church of Christ

Chorus

We are here reunited,

This is because we have faith.

Singing we are going to describe

How the church of Christ is to be:

1. A missionary and participative church

That goes out from the four walls to where it is needed.

A church that welcomes marginalised brothers and sisters and helps them to be enlightened citizens.

2. A welcoming and merciful church, on the side of those who suffer on the margins of society.

An active church in the country as in the city and in the shanty towns, forming communities.

3. A church able to embrace people of all races, respectful of their cultures, leaven in the dough.

A church that stirs up the workers, that defends the rights of the weak not to be the underdogs.²⁵

As said before, the CEBs might not be a new experience of being church just because of the method the CEBs are using of small groups, notwithstanding the intimacy it provides, the strength and renewal of faith it encourages. Other movements used the same method at other times and places, as recognized above in the previous section (1.2.). Leonardo Boff, who has been one of theologians engaged in formulating in theological terms the practices of the CEBs through

²⁵ Souza, J. B., "Igreja de Cristo." In, Secreatriado das CEBs para o 10 Intereclesial. Equipe de Cantos. Área da Liturgia e Animação. **Livro de Cantos**. Number 159. p. 64.

Liberation Theology, who more recently writes on ecumenism, eco-theology and spirituality, argued that in fact in Latin America there was a time when the population of the forgotten places could meet as church only once or twice a year when the priest came to visit and then they met to celebrate mass. It was a church locked inside doors and gagged. But now with the CEBs these same people started to meet every week, once or more frequently, to read the bible, to celebrate their faith in the risen Christ and to engage with the struggle for social justice and inclusion, expressed in the words of the song above 'The Church of Christ'. Boff affirms in his book dealing with the ecclesial nature of the base Christian communities that, "we are confronted with a new concretization of church, without the presence of consecrated ministers and without the Eucharistic celebration."²⁶ He continues to explain that the CEBs present a new way of being Church, not one that is disdainful of the ordained ministries in the church but one that recognizes that ministers do not exist in sufficient numbers to attend to the Eucharistic needs of the communities. For him, "...the church abides in the people of God as they continue to come together, summoned by the word and discipleship of Jesus Christ. Something is new under the sun: a new church of Christ."²⁷ Boff is right, the spirit of the CEBs can be found in this new sense of participation and freedom to be church centred around the community rather than the priest, more egalitarian, smaller and intimate, open to all and engaged in the realities of the life of the people.

²⁶ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p.13.

²⁷ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p.13.

It is not surprising that in a church that previously could only operate within a strictly hierarchical model, with the Pope at the head, then the bishops, then the priests, the monks and nuns, then the people at the bottom of the pyramid, was taken aback. It must have felt like a revolution with the newness and participation that the CEBs brought to the life of the Roman Church. Boff's argument is that the CEBs helped the church to get back to the basics, to its reality of faith. 'We are here reunited. This is because we have faith', says the song above. As Boff puts it: "This should make us an egalitarian community, a communion of brothers and sisters, a church-body, church-community, a church people-of-God. A missionary and participative church. A church where the laity is actively responsible for the various ministries of the church, and truly part of the decision-making processes."²⁸ In this sense the Brazilian theologian is arguing that the CEBs are helping the church to be restored as the people of God. In doing so the CEBs, for him, "are helping the whole church to reinvent itself."²⁹

Now, after several decades of the CEBs operating like this, the fact that people gather in small groups around the bible and the struggles of life to pray and to share their journey with one another is no longer a novelty. What Boff recognizes as new and sets himself out to defend theologically, after a few decades has simply become the spirit in which they meet and the way in which they form the church. Whilst Boff engages vigorously in a theological defense of the ecclesial nature of the local and

²⁸ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. pp. 24, 27, 32.

²⁹ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p. 33.

small and its relation with the universal and catholic, the interesting point is relayed in the fact that he highlights in these processes the very spirit of the CEBs, and in doing so, allows us to grasp what the CEBs are, as I have tried to highlight above.

In this painstaking work of the renowned theologian, the argument about the newness of the CEBs is also put in context, as is their relationship with institutional forms. The CEBs, for the Franciscan theologian, exist in tension with the institutional church, and this is part of the eternal historical processes of solidification and renewal that happen between the spirit of solidarity and the domineering way it seeks to change. The CEBs represent the spirit of solidarity, of community. This is a spirit to be constantly created. The CEBs represent an inspiration inviting endless efforts to overcome barriers of communication and relationship, and to generate intimate, direct, trusting, informal, reciprocal, egalitarian contact and equivalency. This spirit is to be recreated and renewed by overcoming routine and rigid institutional forms.³⁰ This perspective from Boff treats the CEBs not so much as a new church but as an ecclesial effort in themselves that bring renewal to the wider church.

Boff sees the complexity of a social demand that the community spirit will seek to be guaranteed and reproduced, and that will imply institutional forms. Paradoxically these very institutional forms not only guarantee reproduction of the spirit of solidarity but they also militate against this very spirit. There is no solution for this dilemma.

³⁰ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. pp. 6-7.

The only mitigation for this, it seems, lies in the respectful relationship between both, the institutional church and the church community. I would say, here is the secret of the renewal in which every generation the church is dependent upon. Not necessarily a new spirit *per se*, but a renewed spirit.

The argument, in my view, should not be so much about the newness of the spirit and the experience of the CEBs as church or as a new birth of the church - ecclesio-genesis - but more about the recognition that the renewal of the communitarian spirit within the life of the church through the basic groups may well produce new fruits. It may well produce historically new realities. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church the CEBs' experience demands that the ministry of women may be affirmed institutionally as the priesthood of women (as Boff argues in Chapter 7 of Ecclesio-genesis), that the lay presidency of the Eucharist may be recognized institutionally (as Boff argues in Chapter 6).

I would not call this process an ecclesio-genesis. The famous protestant formula *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* seems more adequate to express the fact that the renewed church always needs to carry on being renewed. In this continuous movement, the historical outcomes of the renewal of the church can bring potentially new practices not yet seen on its journey. The argument that the CEBs - because of their spirit - are 'reinventing' the church does not seem to be a plausible reality even in the face of the fact that there are outcomes of the movement for the church that are new: the lay coordinator and the celebration of the Lord's Supper; the thorny

issue of women's priesthood. We ourselves will investigate how the CEBs demand these outcomes through the national gatherings in Chapter 4: about Christianity responding to different contexts. This spirit of renewal can live or die. The institutional church can suffer again and again from arthritis. The CEBs themselves can become blunt. At the moment, the spirit is still active. It can be seen in the data gathered by this research that beyond the relevant issues Boff has already pointed to, i.e., women's priesthood and lay presidency, there are signs that there is another new fruit coming out of the CEBs, and that has to do with ecumenism and wider ecumenism.

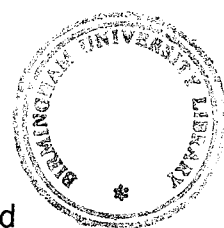
The CEBs are a form of being church. Their ecumenism is based on the fact that they are inspired by the spirit of solidarity, already pointed out by Boff above. They seek to implement it by way of brotherhood and sisterhood. This research will try to show that this spirit seeks to reconnect what is separate and seeks to reconcile what is split. It is the religious spirit, of *religare*, in its most positive light. The unity it seeks demands wideness and questions narrowness of mind. The dogmatism that a strict religious identity fosters can only be denied by an equally religious spirit firm in its ecumenical and beyond boundaries solidarity. In the case of the CEBs, religious identity feeds on the understanding of, identification with and service to the other. This spirit can be misunderstood and excluded by a more zealous institutional and religious attitude. It is in this tension that the CEBs were born, journey and have their being.

1.2. THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE CEBs

The description of the CEBs given in the preceding sections can be summed up in the following definition: they are a movement marked by a renewal of the communitarian spirit of the Gospel, and an understanding of salvation in wider-than-Christianity terms. They represent the side of Christianity that is actively engaged with forms of solidarity and efforts for change within the church and in the world. They have therefore an ecumenical spirit. This spirit has always been active in history and in the life of the church and is active again through these small ecclesial groups and in their networks. In them, form and spirit can hardly be separated, because the spirit of the CEBs is best expressed in the methodology they use of small groups and it gains significance as it is expressed in their national activities. The small groups allow solidarity, support and action to take place more readily, as it allows understanding and inculturation to sink into the way they celebrate and live their Christian faith.

This spirit though is expressed in a variety of small and distinct groups. Its implication for the life of the church is difficult to be evaluated if taken separately, small group by small group. This task of making sense of these small experiences for the wider church should be helped by exploring the national gatherings of CEBs, where they perform their plurality in unison and, at the same time, in a rainbow-like event. That is our task.

But before doing that it will be important to try and give an account of the CEBs' history and political make-up as well as a description of some of the elements that are present in the CEBs' way of being church and the CEBs' spirituality. In this exercise I shall strive to present a clear and distinct description. It is necessary, however, to recognize that form and content are intrinsically connected and that the themes that are important for the CEBs and some of the stories linked with the movement will certainly be present in the descriptions below, mixing form and content. The student of theology is not always after clarity and distinction; they are always after meaning, redemption, salvation, liberation, and participation. In this sense, what may be of crucial importance in trying to understand this specific movement in the church is to go a bit beyond definitions, historical roots or ideological bedrock, and incorporate in the study the debates trying to find and express the structures of meaning present in them as religious phenomena.³¹ This includes the stories of how people try to find principles that might guide the way they are and the things they do. For that it would be necessary to name and describe the stories, the themes that make them alive and vibrant, the symbols and rituals that represent their deepest yearnings. These would be present in any manifestation of the Church of the Poor, even though they may be present in veiled forms, or in fragmented or incomplete ways. It is our task to try to describe the CEBs and these elements in them. I would like to suggest that this task of identifying, describing and systematizing the structures of meaning within this religious and social movement is



³¹ I owe my use of the concept of "structures of meaning" and the idea of one being able to identify them to Mendonça, A. G. (2000) **Fenomenologia e Análise do Existir**. São Bernardo do Campo: Universidade Metodista de São Paulo. pp. 131-151. I am responsible for the translation of the phrase from Portuguese into English.

a piece of theological work and demands theological research. I hope that a theological approach will be present throughout this dissertation even when a more historical description predominates, as is the case in the next section.

1.2.1. Born in the Ecumenical Spirit

The recollection of foundational experiences plays an important part in maintaining or developing a sense of identity, especially for a family, a community, or a religion. Christians do this through the Eucharistic rite when they - in prayer and action - recall the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, and its role within the theology of creation and the history of salvation. This is the great prayer of thanksgiving in the liturgy of Christian worship and the breaking of bread and sharing of wine, when the act of remembrance takes place. This is also called anamnesis. The anamnesis plays its role in keeping memory alive. Through the act of remembrance the memory of Jesus is kept alive, its drama passed from one generation to the next. Doing that, a clear sense of identity is shared, shaped and actualized. Through telling the story, its beginnings and re-enacting those events, the identity and profile of a movement is created and re-created.

This is similar with the CEBs. They also through their anamnesis tell the story of the origins of their movement. In doing this, they reassert their identity and assure the continuation of their history. There is the famous train of the CEBs that features in publications and in the national gatherings boasting wagons, each one for a different national gathering (for more on train of the CEBs see 2.1.3). There are the long

distance walks/pilgrimages/demonstrations that mark important stages in their spiritual and political journey. There are the names of the people who marked the journey of the CEBs, their martyrs (see 3.3), their leaders, their theological advisors, etc. Keeping the memory alive plays an important role in affirming the identity of the movement. It affirms as well as creates identity. The anamnesis also reveals identity; it discloses the DNA of the movement.

DNA, short for deoxyribonucleic acid, is as the name suggests, “a nucleic acid that constitutes the genes in virtually all-living organisms... and is responsible for the transmission of genetic information from one generation to the next.”³² I would suggest that anamnesis does to a social movement what DNA does to a living organism. It allows the basic building blocks of identity to be stacked one on top of the other. An anamnesis seems different from just writing the history of a movement. It is to compose, recognize and reveal the DNA which can be compared to the genetic code of a movement. Anamnesis, the memory of the foundational events, is done amongst friends in search of what was significant in the past and can help the identity of a group to shine through.

Apart from the anamnesis that is made by the CEBs at their national gatherings and in other contexts, some friends gathered together to do anamnesis of the CEBs and it has, fortunately, been published in a rather special book about the DNA of the

³² **Illustrated Oxford Dictionary**, (1998) Oxford: Oxford University Press. Revised edition, 2003. p. 203.

CEBs. It suggests that it might all have started with a more proactive participation of the laity and with an ecumenical concern from its infancy. Let us look at this in more detail.

1.2.2. Historical Roots of Lay Participation

The history of the CEBs is relatively recent. It springs from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s and is especially linked with the church and social movement in the Northeast of Brazil. In a conversation about the historical roots of the CEBs, some of the significant people who were there and influenced the movement from the beginning and others who came on board later recorded their memory of its origins.

The book where these conversations are registered is called: *The Genetic Code of the CEBs*.³³ The conversation is informal and also reveals the complexity of the task of accounting for what is a movement within the life of the church. It is difficult to account for any social/religious movement, in particular, a movement that has grown out of so many different pastoral, missionary, political experiences and contexts. It is right though to acknowledge that these experiences and contexts were not isolated, and that, although slowly, they came to the point of expressing themselves in national gatherings, having a theology of international repercussion (Liberation Theology), an influence in the country's political life, and ripples in the other social movements for change (for example, the Landless People's Movement). I seek to

³³ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético das CEBs**. São Leopoldo: Oikos.

defend in this thesis that this movement has in addition implications still not completely explored in terms of its wider ecumenical practices.

Marcelo Barros, who is a Benedictine monk, and takes part in another movement within the CEBs called CEBI (which is concerned with promoting the popular method of reading the bible), had this to say about the CEBs' historical roots:

... perhaps, in this conversation, I am the only person from the Northeast of Brazil. As far as I am aware, the CEBs had several origins at the same time. It is not possible to say that they come from a particular place! But it is interesting that the places the CEBs come from are originally in the Northeast! I recall that in 1964 or 1965, so right at the end of the Second Vatican Council, there were already references to grassroots communities (*comunidades populares*). They were not called CEBs. They were called bible circles and grassroots communities.³⁴

Marcelo takes the origin of the CEBs back to before the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Were the CEBs the result of the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council or were they a movement born out of the needs and struggles of the people in their specific places and contexts? This question touches on the relationship between the movement with and within the Roman Catholic Church as an institutional church and all the complex dynamics that derive from that, (this has been already mentioned above in 1.1.3). From the beginning of the CEBs these tensions and complementary relations are apparent according to this

³⁴ Andrade W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 10.

conversation amongst friends recorded in the book in question; in particular, in the participation of the laity and its implications for the way the movement was perceived by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The key words that encompass the difficulties in the dynamics between the CEBs' movement and the church hierarchy were, and, maybe still are: the apostolic ministry of the laity.

Pedro Ribeiro, a lay man and sociologist who has supported and been very much involved in the CEBs, who also acted as the convenor in the conversations related in this book I am using, made the point that the CEBs share some of the similar social and theological DNA characteristics that could be found in 'Catholic Action'. 'Catholic Action' had branches for different forms of ministry, e.g., JEC - Catholic Young Students. 'Catholic Action' was active in some regions of Brazil towards the end of the 1950s up to 1967 when it became extinct in the face of growing pressure from the Military Dictatorship. I think the shared characteristics Pedro Ribeiro is talking about are: lay orientated as well as relating faith to the issues of the social and cultural environment.

Ivo Lesbaupin, another sociologist and university lecturer, remarked that what was debated was not so much the apostolic ministry of the laity but, more politically to the point, the 'participation of the laity in the apostolic ministry of the hierarchy of the church'. Pedro Ribeiro pointed out that in dealing with this thorny subject, Pius XII changed the term 'participation' to 'collaboration'.³⁵

³⁵ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 11.

That there was this change in the wording is unquestionable. There was indeed a change in the wording in reference to the apostolic ministry of the laity. The ministry of the laity is a baptismal conviction and it is not directly dependent on the bishops. It is not given by the bishops. It is something that you have. It is the same as the ministry of the bishops. It is not dependent on the Pope. (We are talking about the Roman Catholic Church). But, the fact is that Pius XII made this small change, the word he used doesn't matter, what he wanted to say was that the baptismal conviction was dependent on the bishops.³⁶

Oscar Beozzo, priest and coordinator of the CESEP - Ecumenical Centre of Service to Popular Education, a programme very much in tune with the movement of the CEBs - intervened in the conversation to say that the word was 'mandate'. For him, through this word, the hierarchy expressed the exclusivity and dependency any ministry lay or otherwise would have on the bishops in order to be exercised. 'Mandate' meant that apostolicity would come from the bishops.

We are dealing so far with the origin of the CEBs and with lay participation as the historical roots of the CEBs. The conversation related in this anamnesis shows that this issue of baptismal vows and apostolicity are still very much present in the life of the CEBs and present also in the Inter-ecclesial gatherings of the CEBs. The questions frequently asked are: how are the CEBs in communion with the church hierarchy? Are they in communion with the bishops? Are they in communion with the

³⁶ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 11.

Pope? And the political issue here is, which kind of communion do the CEBs have with the hierarchy and how is this word communion related to the word 'mandate'?

Within this debate Leonardo Boff - whose extensive theological work is of great importance for the CEBs and vice-versa - had a rather poignant story to tell.³⁷

Towards the end of the 1950s, facing a lack of Priests to attend to the churches, Dom Agnelo Rossi determined that radios, that could only receive the diocesan radio station, should be installed in each of the churches of the diocese so that people could follow the Mass and have a spiritual - via the waves - kind of communion, Holy Communion. Leonardo Boff says that after a while doing this, people turned the radio off, stopped listening to the Mass and started reflecting and discussing the Gospel themselves. They also organized the celebration, the singing and the Ministry of the Word. He says that: "that was the inaugurating rupture of the laity that marked the birth of the Church of the Poor, of the Base Ecclesial Communities."³⁸ That was in 1956, before the Second Vatican Council.

In Leonardo Boff's book about the CEBs as an ecclesio-genesis, quoted above (1.1.2 and 1.1.3), Boff had expanded this point of how the lay participation came about referring to and citing the CNBB's (the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil) Pastoral Plan of 1962-1965, the Emergency Plan (Plano de Emergência), where he tells of this experience with more precision:

³⁷ This is found in two places: Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p. 3. And, in, Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 12.

³⁸ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 12.

In 1956 Dom Agnelo Rossi initiated an evangelization movement, using lay catechists, for regions of Brazil not being reached by pastors. It all began with the lament of one humble old woman: "Christmas Eve, all three Protestant churches were lit up and full of people. We could hear them singing... And the Catholic Church, closed and dark!... Because we can't get a priest." A question hung in the air. If there are no priests, must everything grind to a halt? At this juncture Dom Agnelo... decided to train community coordinators "to do everything a lay person can do in God's church in current ecclesiastical discipline. At least, these catechists will gather the people... for religious instruction... daily prayer... for a 'Massless Sunday', or a 'priestless Mass'... and lead them spiritually and collectively in the same Mass that is being celebrated by the pastor in the distant Mother Church."³⁹

The description of those initial events in the CNBB's Pastoral Plan seems like more of a blessing from the bishops to lay ministry and to the formation of communities as a way of building the church up and making it a living church. It sounds more like a call for a relationship lay-ordained that is complementary rather than based on a superior or hierarchical relationship. Nothing like a new genesis for the church at all in the history of Christianity, Protestantism and other movements had experienced it before, but a beginning for the Church of the Poor, in lay participation.

The historical roots of the CEBs then are not only connected with geography or pastoral programmes in the life of the church. The points made above recognise the importance that the awakening of the laity had. This was only possible because of

³⁹ Boff, L. (1987) **Ecclesio-genesis**. p. 3.

the fact that the laity became conscious of their apostolic ministry. This development in terms of faith and Christian ministry, and also in terms of identity, has a foundational status in the history and the origins of the CEBs. This foundational element has a continuing role in the life of the CEBs, and has become part of their make up. This is what makes them what they are, an assertive movement in terms of their self-understanding and their baptismal vocation, as people of the Way, with a ministry in the life of the church and in the world. There is a bridge here with my concern in this work which is the ecumenism of the CEBs in terms of the Protestant emphasis on the ministry of the whole People of God. The CEBs' DNA of lay participation provides an openness to the identity of other Christian denominations that have the same emphasis.

Furthermore in this identity/DNA connection there is another ecumenical link and that is in the relationship with the bible. Oscar Beozzo, writer, theologian and historian, agrees and confirms what Boff said about the autonomy of the laity. But he also brings another argument that gives the laity in the CEBs, from its beginning, a strange dislocation in terms of their traditional role within Catholicism. He argues that the access that the laity had to the bible through the bible circles gave the CEBs a clear ecumenical edge, a proximity to their Protestant counterparts. This was the case from the beginning of the movement, and the emphasis on re-discovering the bible carries the seeds and hints of the ecumenism that will develop in remarkable

ways later. This ecumenical connection became even more explicit as it had echoes with the Taizé Community, the ecumenical religious community founded by Brother Roger in France after the Second World War. Beozzo says:

The CEBs have this in their DNA: the laity issue. The laity with more autonomy, more independence... It is the eruption of the Word read with autonomy. This comes from the Protestant Reformation, to have access to the Word of God. One event that contributed very much to this took place in 1965 when the monks from the Taizé Community delivered one million New Testaments for free to the bible circles. There were boxes arriving in the diocese with a red cover and small print New Testaments. They were distributed amongst the people, put in their hands. Dom Helder Camara was also involved in this work. Brother Michel Bergmann worked in this project.⁴⁰

The fact is that by 1965 the small groups, the bible circles, the Church of the Poor, basically the CEBs, were becoming a well tested pastoral strategy for the church and as such they were gaining enough attention to become part of a wider action in the proposed official Second Pastoral Plan of the bishops (Plano de Pastoral de Conjunto). The CNBB launched in 1965 the second Pastoral Plan, incorporating the 'new' pastoral initiative in the way of addressing the then perceived crisis of the church, taking a risk because it gave the CEBs, or that sort of initiative, a prominence that was, no doubt, an official blessing and recognition from the bishops and the hierarchy of the church.

⁴⁰ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 13.

Monsenhor Expedito of Natal, in the Northeast of Brazil, confirms the willingness of the bishops to give their blessing to the movement. He argues that that blessing was already there in the earlier 'Emergency Pastoral Plan' in 1962 (Plano de Emergência)

Oscar Beozzo carries on arguing that, "these two facts, one that the bible is put in the hands of the people and the other that this move is part of the pastoral project of the post-Conciliar Church, blessed by all the bishops, gave the CEBs in Brazil an official seal - which in fact did not happen in other countries -... that they were the kind of Church with the characteristics that the Council was encouraging: more lay orientated, more participative, more grassroots orientated. ['Popular' is the adjective used in Brazilian Portuguese to define this characteristic of the CEBs and is used in contrast to the term 'elitista']. These elements are there in the CNBB's Pastoral Plans (1962 and 1965) and also in the Joint Pastoral Plan (Plano de Pastoral de Conjunto) of 1965. This gave an official and national recognition to the new project."⁴¹ Oscar Beozzo will confirm a bit later in the conversation in the Book about the CEBs' DNA that the word CEBs is already in the 1965 Plan.

To go back to the original debate mentioned at the beginning of this section, which came first, the CEBs or the plans? Were the CEBs a movement already in place and the official bodies took them as an example and an inspiration to address the crisis

⁴¹ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 14.

of the Roman Catholic Church in that period of great secularization? Or were the CEBs a result of the bishops' initiative? Did the bishops set in motion a pastoral way of responding to the lethargy of the church in that period? Was it such a successful plan that it created a new movement in the life of the church and consequently a new impetus in the church in general? Were the CEBs the result of a mandate from the bishops or were they a conviction and initiative of the laity?

This is clearly in itself a political debate. Those taking part in this anamnesis and search for the CEBs' DNA seem to think that a more spontaneous origin is more likely to be the case, and that, then, just a bit later, the movement was incorporated into an official Pastoral Plan and given the backing of the institutional church.

The English reader can have access to a more structured and organized approach to the origins and history of the CEBs written by Andrew Dawson.⁴² Dawson places great emphasis on a four-stage periodization based on the crisis situation in the church and the official Pastoral Plans. He seems to think that the CEBs are an institutional product and that the official Plans accounts for the origin of the CEBs. Although attractive and convincingly presented, the approach that Dawson represents loses the subtlety of the ecclesial political dynamics involved in the uprising of the laity. Detailed analysis above shows that the rediscovery of the bible seems to have come from ecumenical sources, e.g., Taizé. Also the ability to read

⁴² Dawson, A. (1999) "The origins and character of the base ecclesial community: a Brazilian Perspective." In Rowland, C. (ed.) **The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp 109-128.

the reality first and in that the Word of God seems more to do with an educational approach (Paulo Freire) than an ecclesiastical one. The origin of the CEBs in the organizing of people around their faith to respond to social needs and political campaigning as showed above proves that the birth of the CEBs is owed more to a complex process rather than to a well thought through plan.

The question to be asked of Dawson is: could all of that renewal come from a well thought through Pastoral Plan written by the bishops? The CEBs' DNA, its genetic code, is more vividly described in the stories told in the anamnesis I have drawn from, it is certainly a less organized way of accounting for the CEBs' origins, but describing the essence of the movement in terms of an awakening of the laity and drawing from other ecclesiastical traditions seems to be closer to how things have happened. (I shall come back to Dawson's periodization later in Chapter 2).

In my view, the acid test for these discussions about the origin and nature of the CEBs remains the questions about the CNBB's apparent lack of reaction against the Vatican to protect Leonardo Boff who was being questioned on the very issue of the lay leadership and the hierarchical model of the church. In fact, defending the apostolic ministry of the laity, Boff came under severe attack from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. That led to a year of compulsory silence in 1985 and then the prohibition of Boff to teach. All of which led Boff to promote himself to the lay state, as he once put it. Such a reaction from the Vatican against the lay apostolic ministry suggests that the CEBs were not

the result of a Pastoral Plan by the bishops. And if it was the bishops' initiative, the polemic between the Vatican and Boff and the lack of the Brazilian Bishops to shield Boff begs the question of whether or not indeed the CNBB owned the Plans?⁴³

1.2.2. Political Bedrock

In dealing with the historical roots of the CEBs we need also to consider the political leaning of the inheritance that the CEBs were built upon. That becomes quite clear when one pays attention to the popular educational movement towards literacy, as best represented by the MEB - *Movimento de Educação de Base* led by the educationalist Paulo Freire. In the Amazon Basin area and in the Northeast of Brazil the small groups of MEB were the bases from where a wider social conscience was raised accompanied by political action. These MEB groups, again small in terms of the number of participants in each group but part of a bigger movement, helped people not only to learn how to read and write but how to read and understand the world around them and in so doing become a force for transformation.

Soon the results of this educational process were to be felt as a source of political and social force from the bottom up in the Brazilian political scene. The period was the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. The popular educational method used helped in the formation of rural trade unions and unionists, and of political activists. It also, as Oscar Beozzo points out, offered a kind of "seed bed" for

⁴³ The documents of that polemic are available in: Boff, L. (1994) **Igreja, Carisma e Poder, Ensaio de Eclesilogia Militante, Inclui Apêndice com os Documentos do Processo Doutrinário movido pelo Vaticano contra o Autor**. São Paulo: Editora Ática.

the CEBs. This was the case because the MEB empowered the laity to be more participative in the life of the church through literacy. Another influence from the MEB was the conscientization process, which led to the laity becoming much more aware of their political force in the church and in the community at large.

An anecdotal story told by Bishop Dom Luís Fernandes in the book about the CEBs'

DNA goes to show Paulo Freire and the MEB influence on the CEB's movement:

In *Colatina* a Pastoral Assistant worked with youth ministry. What happened was that they were assaulted by the military. They were taken prisoners with all their books and material. In the small library they had in the youth club there was a booklet... This was an introduction to Paulo Freire's Method. Few days before the arrest, I had visited their office and the girl was typing the cover for that booklet. The title was: 'The Central Idea in Paulo Freire's Method. Times were bad. I thought: 'Freire's Method?' It is not going to work. That was the reason why I said to her: 'Change the title to the Central Idea of the TFP (Tradition Family and Property).'⁴⁴

The adult educational movement led by Paulo Freire was not confined only to the rural areas, its political-educational activities were also to be found in urban areas and in particular on the poor outskirts of towns and cities. Part of this popular educational work was done in collaboration with university students. The JUC, Catholic University Youth (a branch of Catholic Action), supplied facilitators to run the MEB programme. In the Catholic Action there was something of the spirit of the worker priests movement that had been inspired by Jacques Loew, a French priest who became a dockworker at the beginning of 1940s starting a movement of worker

⁴⁴ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 143.

priests, priests with a vocation for lay living. Jacques had been in Brazil and managed to get a group going in São Paulo. There was a link between the university students and the labour priests' work. Leaders in this relationship were Domingos Barbé and Emanuel Retumba, recalled Tereza Cavalcanti⁴⁵ (a lecturer in theology and psychology and one of the advisors for the CEBs' National Commission). A whole social-religious movement was taking off with these urban and literacy programmes.

...people that participate in the CEBs might not be able to say it the way I am going to put it, but they live this in a conscious way, showing that it is not only a matter of assisting the poor individually, but it is above all a transformative presence and action that will change the basic institutions of our society in such a way that the conditions in which people become poor will cease, stop all together.⁴⁶

Paulo Freire was an active Christian, and MEB could not have been the success it was without drawing on the relationship with the church. It also fed back and inspired the church. In this context of educational, cultural, political and religious movement a method was taking root and being developed. The relationship between the MEB and the CEBs - like the sowing of a seed - instigated other connections in practical ways, in particular with the communities and their several groups. This openness to the wider community, in my view, continues to influence the CEBs' way of being. Openness to the community became more and more like a method for the CEBs. It

⁴⁵ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 17.

⁴⁶ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 95.

is lived out as the CEBs try to bring several strands of the communities together, Christian and certainly wider than that. This stems from the whole ethos of popular action and educational programmes.

Part of that method is the now famous *seeing-judging-acting* approach. This was inherited from the shared DNA of the Catholic Action and of the MEB. Seeing, judging, acting also constituted several dimensions of the way in which the CEBs are. In particular the method became more explicit from the 1970s onwards. The CEBs developed this further as a form of spirituality and as a way of expressing themselves. In this way they seek to make an analyses of the reality in which they are immersed, how they read the bible in that context, what the missionary plan of action is, and how they reflect on all of that in order to seek the transformation of the participants and of the context. Behind it there is a philosophy of education supporting the CEBs movement inherited from the MEB of Paulo Freire. It is quite political and not surprisingly controversial for the powers that be, ecclesial or otherwise. The CEBs' faith, in this way, spills over the borders of church and religion.

Confirming what was said above, Don Luis Fernandes, a retired Bishop and a North Easterner by origin, gives a testimony (already mentioned above) in this book of interviews that I have been using referring to the fact that he brought with him to the church the influence of the MEB, of the pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire. He tells of how that became a pastoral and missionary concern in his life and ministry. He also refers to the fact that it all happened a bit earlier than the Second Vatican

Council (1963-1965). He says that, he took part in the Council and was able to bring together the Council's ecclesial project of a participative and community oriented church with the North-Eastern influence he had from the MEB movement. When he refers to Monsenhor Expedito working in 'São Paulo do Potengi', in the State of Rio Grande do Norte, he says that Monsenhor Expedito had been working prophetically within the framework and pedagogy of the CEBs and within the new direction from the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁷ Don Luis tries to hold it together: the political and philosophical tendencies that the CEBs represent and the Roman Catholic Church's new directions found within the Second Vatican Council. But, as time goes by, and a more conservative leadership takes hold of the church it is clear that there is an uncomfortable ideological relationship at work.

That uncomfortable ideological relationship might relate to the CEBs' DNA represented by its political bedrock inherited from the MEB and Catholic Action. But it is in the CEBs' case more radicalized. There is something distinct about the CEBs that although related to Catholic Action (and its specific branches of JEC - Catholic Students Youth, JOC - Catholic Workers Youth, JUC - Catholic University Youth) is of a different dimension. Benedito Ferraro, who is a diocesan priest and has been one of the many advisors in several of the CEBs' gatherings, he is also part of the CEBs' National Commission and he puts it in this way:

The Catholic Action was more of an engagement of specialized people who were entering the struggle for the transformation of

⁴⁷ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. pp. 143-145.

society. The novelty with the CEBs is that the transformative dimension becomes a concern of the community as a whole, in such a way that Christians, and in particular, women, start participating in the trade union movement.... providing an opposition within the trade unions. In my region, the attempt to take over the trade unions in 1978 marked a definite left leaning for Christians including their then militancy in the main opposition party, the MDB (*Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*). There was a shift in quality because now the community engages in politics, in its various ways and forms, in the popular movements, in the trade union movement, in the political parties.⁴⁸

To bring all these influences together I would say that the CEBs have been a movement of the base, a grassroots movement, a religious movement quite openly political (not party political, but in terms of an educational method of political conscientization) within the church and in Brazilian society. The CEBs have been identified with a political tendency, with political movements for human rights and dignity, combating racism, etc. The CEBs are identified with social movements for change, for example the MST - *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* - the Landless Workers' Movement. They lean unequivocally towards the left.

The CEBs relate their faith to the plight of the oppressed and have a great concern for those who are displaced or persecuted, for the indigenous population as well as a concern about the redistribution of land. Add to that the fact that the CEBs are closely related to or are involved in encouraging the trade unions, the women's movement, etc. In the church they represent a demand for a more participative and a

⁴⁸ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 26.

more democratic structure, where the laity have a voice and a place not only as recipients of religious services but as those who make up the fabric of the church, and who are actively involved in the decision making process. Here is the freedom the CEBs have in exploring ways in which to relate to other popular dimensions of cultures and religions.

The CEBs have incorporated into their way of being an ability to relate to the wider community in constructive ways. They have developed a sensitivity to see, judge and act for transformation. Their approach to the churches and other organizations in society has been respectful, with the intention of building up relationships. There is a clear basis where dialogue and understanding, acting together, can be fostered. This basis is the foundation for the ecumenical and inter-religious practices the CEBs have been able to engage with. It was symptomatic of the ecumenical and wider concerns that under-girded the educational and theological mentality of the MEB and later of the CEBs. It was not a coincidence that Paulo Freire once exiled sought refuge and worked at the World Council of Churches, although being a committed Roman Catholic.

It is important to note that within the context of Brazilian culture, the economics of the country can easily be identified as racially, culturally and religiously divisive. The darker the skin becomes, the poorer the person is. Pushed to the margins of society and confined to the edges, the Afro and *Ava* populations develop their cultures and religions as forms of resistance. Therefore, inter-cultural and inter-religious initiatives

bring within them a political and ideological connotation because they work against the discriminatory nature of the social and economic set up. Inter-religious relations are therefore political.

1.2.4. CEBs, Faith and Social Transformation

My final point in this Chapter 1 is to stress the relationship between faith and the struggle for social transformation.

The metaphor of the CEBs' DNA, the genetic code of the CEBs, carries the key to understanding the CEBs as an ecclesial and social movement. The CEBs started off linked with the MEB of Paulo Freire. And it is still at their root and part of their identity, namely, the formation and education for social transformation. The theme of social transformation as well as ecclesiastical reform goes across the history of the CEBs. The DNA showed further that they perfected the ability to relate to other social and religious movements. These characteristics constitute a common element amongst the several base communities scattered around Brazil. The DNA characteristics were at the birth of the CEBs. They are also the motivation and justification for the many activities the CEBs sponsor, the national gatherings being one of them.

Ivo Lebauspin, the sociologist mentioned already in this Chapter taking part in the conversations on the genetic code of the CEBs (1.2.1), writes in another publication

about the CEBs on this very theme of social transformation and faith commitment.

He says:

The people [of the CEBs] gather to pray, to celebrate, to reflect on the relationship between the bible and their lives, and to partake in the sacraments... In the CEBs, people are encouraged to give voice to their ideas, to speak. They are poor, people without formal education... people more used to listening than to speaking. In the CEBs they gain a voice, and faith in themselves. The educational role [of the CEBs] is one of the most important dimensions of the creation and organization of the CEBs. We could say that the CEBs are the most extensive educational work for the popular classes - not made or led by the State - ever to happen in all these centuries in Brazil.⁴⁹

From their beginning right up to the present, people of the CEBs gathered together to pray and worship, but in an atmosphere where the priest who used to do everything for the community is either not present or has been trained in the MEB's methodology as an educational agent with a non-directive approach to education and group work. The CEBs' work is done in small groups where people can have their confidence restored; and have the ability to think and speak for themselves; and also are given the opportunity to organize themselves. It all started with that little bit more space and freedom. They took and take responsibility to lead meetings, to organize and lead worship. The educational process starts small in the local base community, to nurture the ability to participate in and in some cases to lead the

⁴⁹ Lesbaupin, I. (1997) "As Comunidades de Base e a Transformação Social." In Boff, C., Lesbaupin, I., de Oliveira, P. R. et al. **As Comunidades de Base em Questão**, São Paulo: Paulinas. pp. 50, 51, 53.

group. Then it might develop into doing the same job or performing the same role at a diocesan level, at a regional level, and even at a national level. When eventually the opportunity comes around, simple people from uneducated backgrounds show the most amazing ability to articulate faith in relation to political and social issues in front of big groups and assemblies.

This learning process of *concientization* of their value as people of faith and citizens of society with rights will lead the CEBs' members to act in concrete terms to demand social justice. To continue with Ivo Lesbaupin' views, "the CEBs are the origin and they are the strength of many of the social and grassroots movements."⁵⁰ This would certainly include local issues such as clean water or public transport. It might involve demands for land or resistance against uprooting people from land. It can involve trade union campaigns and other social causes. Lesbaupin gives a list of sociological research and summarizes their content which demonstrates the presence and participation of CEBs' members in the majority of grassroots social movements, and political parties, including the formation of the PT (Workers Party). This research goes back to the 1970s and continues until the 1990s when he is writing.⁵¹

The key to all of that social engagement, he says, is that "there is a mysticism at the root of the base communities. That mysticism is their faith, their religious belief. It is

⁵⁰ **Idem.** p. 55.

⁵¹ **Idem.** pp. 53-63.

from that faith that this political and social dimension comes and is developed in their struggles.”⁵² To get people involved in political and social struggles is not simple. It goes without mentioning the difficulties of keeping them engaged. The slow progress these processes are faced with require a source of energy that in the CEBs’ case is clearly linked with their religious faith. Enduring ups and downs, faith offers a vision of a future when eventually justice will prevail.

Meanwhile, religious faith offers the community a social fabric based on affection and relationships that sustain people on the journey. The issue of belonging and being part of the church exerts deep influence on the movement, because the activities initiated in the name of the church and under the auspices of the church are continued through the power of that social fabric offered by the church. On the other hand, because the CEBs’ DNA and its origins are rooted in a democratization process, they offer the church in Brazil as well as in the political life of the country at large a challenge and an opportunity for participation and transformation. This is simply because the CEBs are fruit of and have created a space to oppose “the elitism and authoritarianism characteristic of the Brazilian political culture.”⁵³ The CEBs’ flag is the participation of the popular classes in the political process of decision-making.

⁵² *Idem.* p. 67.

⁵³ *Idem.* p. 71.

This social fabric based on affection and relationships, which the CEBs benefited from and also have contributed to, might not have been an isolated experience in Brazil only. In the book exploring the genetic code of the CEBs, Leonardo Boff affirms: "In the whole world, from the 1960s onwards, be it in Europe or in the United States of America, as well as in Brazil, there was a return to small groups, to the communitarian spirit, to the spaces of liberty, and of subjectivity. The CEBs are the religious and ecclesial expression of that bigger movement within our more recent history."⁵⁴ That movement leads to a macro-ecumenism.

It is time to move on from a more generic discussion about the CEBs to the more specific expression of the CEBs which can be found in their national gatherings. It is in the context of the points made above that the national gatherings of the CEBs come about. These points are: the origins and the DNA of the CEBs; the ecumenical nature of the apostolic ministry of the laity and the rediscovery of the bible (see 1.2.1); the ideological/political stance the CEBs have taken (see 1.2.2) and of the deeply seated faithful engagement in social transformation (see 1.2.3). The national gatherings have become an expression of these roots. Through the national gatherings the CEBs have developed their identity and been given a high profile and a national platform for the very political proposals that they bring.

These transformative demands are to do with the political situation in Brazil, but also with that of the Roman Catholic Church, and with the ecumenical and macro

⁵⁴ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 63.

ecumenical dimensions that the gatherings have been an expression of, as we shall see later in this dissertation – Chapters 2 and 3.

The national gatherings have a religious and a political significance attached to them, not least because the CEBs are demanding and implementing through their actions that the church looks at and changes its views in relation to the recognition of lay ministry, women's ministry, the relationship with other churches and the Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous/*Avas* traditions. To see how this has been given concrete expression we will focus on the national gatherings of the CEBs.

CHAPTER 2

THE GROWING ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH NATURE OF THE CEBS' GATHERINGS

It is the purpose of this Chapter to show that the CEBS developed from their liberation perspective increasingly towards a pluralistic, ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical approach, adding wider ecumenism to their well-known spirituality of justice and liberation. This was only possible because they managed to retain a high level of autonomy from the hierarchy of the Church whilst remaining in communion with the bishops. Their autonomy is rooted in their origin and history as described in Chapter 1.

In this Chapter, I will propose a new and innovative periodization based on the ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practices of the CEBS. The periodization will take into account the national gatherings and the way they showed the growth in the CEBS' ability to relate to other Brazilian cultures and religions in a more permeable way, which is to say, allowing some interpenetration in worship and

in mission. All of this should help to make the case and demonstrate that the CEBs' gatherings grew increasingly ecumenical and with some noteworthy interfaith dimensions as the years went by.

In the sub-sections following the periodization, I will devote some space to a discussion of a series of scholars' views on the CEBs, pointing out that none of them regarded the ecumenical or inter-faith prominent among the concerns of the CEBs. In the light of this, I will try to characterize some of the reasons behind the move towards ecumenical and interfaith practices: their organic growth that granted them some independence from the hierarchy; their national dimension that exposed them to further diversity; and the themes they chose to concentrate on that reflected and helped to deepen their theological perspective. But first a new periodization.

2.1. A PERIODIZATION OF GROWING INTERFAITH RELATIONS AND THE JOURNEY TOWARDS A WIDER ECUMENISM

In this sub-section of Chapter 2, I would like (i) to describe the CEBs' national gatherings in detail as well as (ii) to propose a periodization for the eleven gatherings. The national gatherings are known also as Inter-ecclesials, i.e., a meeting of local churches (the political and theological significance of this name will be explained later in 2.2). I am taking into account for this periodization only the national gatherings and not the whole history of the CEBs, and I am paying special attention to the issues of ecumenical and inter-religious relations. The preparatory

material for the gatherings, later on called *Texto-Base* and the customary final Letter from each gathering to the People of God have both served as source of data for our research. If there is any claim of an official nature to any material produced by the CEBs and for the CEBs, the *Texto-Base* and the Letters have it.

Above all, and to affirm again our aim, it is to register and document the CEBs' growing diverse ecumenism and inter-cultural and inter-religious relations. In other words, to expose the fact that the CEBs added and changed their agenda through the years, adding to justice and liberation spirituality an interfaith concern and awareness that has allowed radical welcome of other religions in their celebrations.

I will refer to the comprehensive work of Faustino Luiz Couto Teixeira who wrote a mostly descriptive book on the CEBs' gatherings, *Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil*.⁵⁵ In it he also presented his periodization. He sets the political, social and ecclesiastical context, but disappointingly, without clear reasons, he bases his period divisions arbitrarily on the decades, i.e. the 1970s, 1980s and so on. In doing this, he fails to see and register the deeper meaning present in the journey of the CEBs towards plurality and inter-religious permeability, replacing it with the time marked by the passing of the years and decades.

Faustino Teixeira collected the documents from the Inter-ecclesial gatherings and described the processes involved in the gatherings' developments in a competent

⁵⁵ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil**, São Paulo: Paulinas.

manner. He seems to me though unable to harness or indeed harvest adequately the information he collected, failing to realize the significance of the facts that led to an ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practice at the national gatherings.

It is disappointing as this descriptive account was written just a year after the publication of his again descriptive and didactical *Teologia das Religiões*,⁵⁶ a book very much based on the European theological framework of inter-religious dialogue (see 2.2.2 for more on this). On the other hand, and on a more positive note, I am indebted to his extensive research and the information contained in his book *Os Encontros Eclesiais de CEBs no Brasil*.⁵⁷ His work is commendable also because of the useful appendix included in it. As far as I am able to assert, his work is only accessible in Portuguese.

I am indebted also to the work done by Andrew Dawson,⁵⁸ for his efforts to organize into a periodization the whole history of the CEBs and not just a partial periodization, as I am about to do. Meanwhile, in a more critical manner, I question the fact that he bases his approach almost entirely on the wider context against which the CEBs found themselves in the church and in society at large. He bases his approach on the political situation in Brazil, the years of dictatorship and the slow process of

⁵⁶ Teixeira, F. (1995) **Teologia das Religiões, uma Visão Panorâmica**. São Paulo: Paulinas.

⁵⁷ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**.

⁵⁸ Dawson, A. (1999) "The Origin and character of the Base Ecclesial Community: a Brazilian Perspective." In Rowland, C. **The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

returning to a democratic system. He also bases his periodization on the influence of the Second Vatican Council, on the Pastoral Plans of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB) and on the influence of the General Conference of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM), in particular at Medellín and at Puebla.

Our understanding is different from Dawson's in that the CEBs were, in our view, more organic, home grown, rather than planned from above, or from without as shall be explained further in the next sub-sections (see 2.2). The CEBs are obviously related to the wider context. Clearly the background against which they are operating can explain their pastoral actions. To that extent, I pay tribute to Dawson's work that draws heavily upon the relationship between the CEBs and the wider political/ecclesial context. Because of Dawson's work, I shall have the freedom to pay less attention to the political and social context and concentrate more on the gatherings themselves. In this resides my limitation, but hopefully in it also is my contribution. The political, economic and social context is obviously important. But, I consider the internal debates and processes even more important than the context when seeking to find explanations for and implications of the new, more inclusive and permeable, ecclesiastical and pastoral forms the CEBs represent.

The reader should be aware that the divisions in the periodization that follows are for studying purposes, in fact the gatherings are much more linked together with recurrent themes and a pattern in the programme. I will commit to three different

periods in the periodization proposed: social liberation, ecumenical practices, and inter-religious relations. Let us take each one of them in turn.

2.1.1. Social liberation - First to Fifth Gatherings, 1975 to 1983

This period from the first Gathering to the fifth Inter-ecclesial marks a heavy accent on the social liberation approach because of the concentration on issues of social and economic oppression and the struggle to overcome them. This will, certainly, not cease in other periods, but in this period it is a singular and distinctive emphasis of the national gatherings of CEBs. While ecumenical concerns and a wider agenda are present, social liberation issues are to the fore.

First, let us look at how the Inter-ecclesial gatherings came about. In this account, it came from the bottom up. The idea of a national gathering of CEBs came out of an informal conversation between Dom Luis Gonzaga Fernandes, the then assistant Bishop of Vitória, and Eduardo Hoornaert, a Belgian historian and a Roman Catholic committed to the Church of the Poor. Dom Luis says: "I was soaking in the water on one of the beaches in Espírito Santo with Eduardo talking about things of the church when the idea came to us: 'Why don't we have an encounter/gathering with other companions who are on a similar journey to ours?'"⁵⁹

⁵⁹ "Testemunho de D. Luís Fernandes, coadjuvado por Tereza Cogo Lodi, Cláudio Vereza, Pe Alberto Fontana e Ir. Eloísa Maria Rodrigues da Cunha." In Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético das CEBs**. São Leopoldo: Oikos. p. 156.

Dom Luis recalls that, from a simple beginning of pastoral work with the people who came from the interior to the capital of Espírito Santo State, they encouraged the bible circle, as well as the experience of liturgical renewal. They pushed those experiences, extending them to embrace the struggles to make the neighborhood a better place to live. They engaged in campaigning to improve the roads, to bring sanitation to poor areas, to improve housing, to get a local school... Because of this pastoral work, Vitória started to build up a reputation for that sort of approach. Some members of religious orders moved to Vitória attracted by the sort of work the diocese was developing.

It took ten years of pastoral work along these lines before the first Gathering of the CEBs happened. They ran holiday courses and Lent courses, for which they wrote teaching material. They developed a team to work on the outskirts of the city where the poor people lived. These teams did the animating of the communities, gave courses on how to reflect with the bible and the insight it brought into their situation. This material then developed into a monthly magazine called *Caminhada* ("Journeying"). The magazine was used in the Vitória area and also posted to dioceses that had a similar approach to being church in small groups, on the outskirts and in poor areas. They sent the magazines to dioceses such as Prelazia de São Felix of Araguaia, State of Goiás, and Crateús in the State of Acre, "and in

the blinking of an eye we had more requests from other places than from inside the diocese of Vitória itself.”⁶⁰

There was a booklet written by Frei Betto, a former young member of Catholic Action (JUC, JEC), and now famous as a journalist and former advisor to President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, registering the experience of 10 years of the work of liberating pedagogy (based on the philosophy of Paulo Freire) within the small communities and of the church in the midst of the poor in Vitória. It was written in a colloquial language presenting the pastoral work (*pistas pastorais*), called “*A Igreja que a gente quer*” (The church that we want). The process of producing the booklet involved gathering answers to the question from the small communities: “What is the church that we want to help to build like?” The small pieces of paper, some written in pencil, arrived and demanded to be sorted out and summarized. It was this material that was the source of Frei Betto’s writing. “It is at this moment that the idea of the Inter-ecclesial came to us, an opportunity to highlight the memory [of the experience we were having], and to contrast that with other experiences that we knew were mushrooming throughout the country.”⁶¹

In my memory there wasn’t any support from the CNBB in the 10 years of work previous to the first Gathering. On the very day that the first Inter-ecclesial encounter happened, then, there was some support, someone came from the CNBB. That was a sign that in the heads of some of our brothers higher up in the hierarchy there

⁶⁰ “Testemunho de D. Luís Fernandes, coadjuvado por Tereza Cogo Lodi, Cláudio Vereza, Pe Alberto Fontana e Ir. Feloísa Maria Rodrigues da Cunha.” In, Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético das CEBs**. São Leopoldo: Oikos. pp. 148-152.

⁶¹ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 154.

was sensitivity to the phenomenon that was popping up around the country. But in what we had lived in the previous ten years, I do not recall any support or presence of the CNBB in it. There was the greater context of the Vatican Council and the documents from the CNBB; obviously, all of that was impregnated with the great values that we were trying to work organically (*artesanamente*) in the communities... The whole thing was born from the bottom, and not from the top.⁶²

The first Inter-ecclesial took place in Vitória in January 1975. In terms of the preparation for this first Gathering there were ten reports describing the situation of the CEBs in different regions of Brazil. Sister Heloísa, a member of the pastoral team in Vitória says: "I remember that there was an atmosphere of great joy as we met and spoke the same language... that was when the expression 'defenseless flower' was coined, meaning the base communities as a defenseless flower, but they are still here."⁶³ Heloísa would say that instead of contrasting the experiences, it was indeed a sense that the journey was being shared. The name *Caminhada* (Journeying) for the Magazine could not be more appropriate. She recalls Dona Deildes, a participant from one of the communities, saying that "all of these initiatives, the PT [political party], the CUT [trade union], the groups of women, the struggle for better living conditions, all of these had the same mother and father, which was the journeying together."⁶⁴

⁶² Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 155.

⁶³ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 157.

⁶⁴ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 158.

The theme of the gathering confirms the feeling that the CEBs were coming into existence as a movement from the bottom up: "A church that is born of the people by the Spirit of God". Expressing that emphasis, the Letter from the gathering to the People of God says quite bluntly: "In obedience to the Gospel and to the cries of the people because of the reality lived by them, the CEBs have opted for the liberating evangelization, expressed in a clear option for the oppressed."⁶⁵

Following their declaration of faith and intention, they make some proposals in order to be faithful to their option: "That the People of God organize themselves into communities of faith and life, with autonomy and creativity, ... but also in communion with other communities and with the bishops. That they give value to the common priesthood of the faithful..., including their role in celebrating God's presence in the sacramental expressions of the faith. That they insist on the presence of the church in the world... Respecting and encouraging the different ministries that appear in the life of the communities."⁶⁶

In relation to the political realm they also set the agenda for the communities: "that the church takes part in people's struggle for liberation... proposing a society without barriers... that the process of liberation starts inside the ecclesial organization itself and that popular religiosity and culture be embraced."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Primeiro Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil**. São Paulo: Paulinas. p. 156.

⁶⁶ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 156.

⁶⁷ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 157.

Although this first Inter-ecclesial of the CEBs was quite concerned with the liberation task of the church as suggested in this periodization, the first Gathering, through the Letter, already manifested a positive sensitivity in relation to the theme of popular religiosity and spirituality. The evangelization that the church should be engaged in is a liberating exercise and brings life and respect to the people. This is in contrast to the evangelization exercised in the colonial and even in the more recent past. There is recognition of the value of the popular religion, because it is the bearer of people's 'misery' and in this sense it ought to be respected. They said in a report on the work in one of the small groups at that gathering that: "popular religion is a form that is not ours but it is of the 'other', and as such it ought to be respected. We are but a little stream of water in comparison with this real Amazonian river... We ought to respect what belongs to the other, without being invasive, conscious of the mystery of difference, essential for dialogue and for the revelation of the mystery of God".⁶⁸

These words, said in one of the reports from the first Gathering, anticipate concerns and the position of respect and dialogue to be taken more and more explicitly in subsequent gatherings and more radically in the third part of this periodization.

The second Gathering took place in Vitória again in 1976, just a year after the first. The theme was: "Church - the people who journey". They requested reports from the communities focusing on the journey and on the education for liberation. Around one

⁶⁸ "Relatório dos trabalhos." (1996) In Teixeira, F. **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 30.

hundred people took part in this second Gathering, from twenty-four dioceses and seventeen of the Brazilian States.⁶⁹

The exchange of experience and the immersion in the reality of the communities were the main characteristics of the sessions of the second Gathering. The sessions related to five main issues: land, political parties, trade union, life on the outskirts of towns and models of church. They affirmed: "All that is work and striving for the rights of the people is Gospel.... It is the strife of the poor and God is with the poor.... It is of the poor and has the strength of God."⁷⁰

Faithful to the commitment to social liberation and to be a church that learns with those who are in the front line of the struggle, the Letter from the second Inter-ecclesial of CEBs says that they had "... an encounter with the Lord in the person of the poor... We came to understand what the old tradition tells: the poor are the masters... instead of being evangelized, they actually evangelize the whole church."⁷¹

The strong emphasis on social and political issues was balanced with times of worship and prayer. The times of prayer and worship were expressions of freedom with the great simplicity of those who were taking part as representatives of the

⁶⁹ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. pp. 31-32.

⁷⁰ "Relatórios do Encontro." (1996) In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 35

⁷¹ Segundo Intereclesial. (1976) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 161.

communities. “One of the most moving moments of the second Gathering was the Eucharistic celebration, dedicated completely to the paschal mystery, actualized in the tragic killings that occurred in an indigenous settlement of Meruri, Mato Grosso. In that celebration the memory of the missionary Father Rodolfo and of the *Índio* Simão were alive”⁷² as equal martyrs of the church. Note the martyrdom status for both the Priest and the *Ava* (a *Guarani* word to name themselves, Indigenous people, see List of Definitions). This constitutes a clear indication of openness to a wider ecumenism.

The third Gathering took place in July 1978, in João Pessoa, State of Paraíba. The theme was: “Church, people who liberate themselves”. In the gathering itself, there were two hundred participants representing forty-seven dioceses from all over the country. There were also seventeen bishops, nine advisors, and eighteen pastoral agents present. And in terms of ecumenical representation there was one advisor and three other people from different Protestant traditions. The wider ecumenical link was represented by a *Cacique Xavante* (Chef of the *Xavante* Nation) and by the presence of international guests.

There was a significant emphasis on listening to the simple folk from the grassroots. As Dom José Maria Pires (also known as Dom Pelé for being an Afro-descendent himself) said in the opening ceremony of the event: “[Here are] folk from the ordinary people representing the church that is born of the ordinary people, suffering folk,

⁷² Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. pp. 35-36.

people who are alert, people of the church that journey towards liberation, joyful people, because you have hope.”⁷³

The popular participation was quite intense at that third Gathering. The bishops and advisors heard directly from the people about their passion, their economic exploitation, the political and cultural oppression they were suffering. The Letter from the gathering presenting the conclusions that they reached tells about their resolute commitment to the cause of social, political and economic liberation visible in statements such as: “we want the poor people to be always considered first, then the institutions (church, trade union, political party, etc.)...” Later the Letter has a religious judgment to announce: “all the oppression that comes upon us has its root in [social] sin: land in the hands of those who do not need it, minimum wages for factory workers that are not enough to make a living, with serious consequences: death, child malnutrition, illiteracy.”⁷⁴

In relation to the church they have this to say: “Demand that people from the base have a close participation with the bishop and also a bigger representation in the pastoral councils in the parish... Try to help so that the celebrations in the church show more of our life and our culture.”⁷⁵

⁷³ “Editorial - Sedoc 11.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 40.

⁷⁴ Third Intereclesial. (1978) “Conclusões do Encontro.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. pp. 164-165.

⁷⁵ Third Intereclesial. (1978) “Conclusões do Encontro.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. pp. 166-167.

This above shows the signs of a developing inclusive perspective in relation to at least culture. The concern for popular religion was already expressed. However, the fourth Gathering still falls within the first category of periodization, when social liberation concerns were uppermost.

The fourth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs met in Itaici, São Paulo State, in April 1981. They took as the theme for the meeting: "Church, oppressed people who organize themselves for liberation". There were extensive preparations including consultation with the base communities directly and with regional meetings. There were more than three hundred reports received.

There were more than three hundred participants. They came from seventy-one dioceses and from eighteen different States of Brazil; seventeen of them were bishops. During the days of that gathering they said: "We shared our experiences, exchanged ideas about our journey, we celebrated our faith, we renewed our commitment to God and to the oppressed people, and we reflected on our mission with the church that organizes itself for the liberation of the people."⁷⁶ There is here clarity of commitment to social liberation.

The last meeting to look at in this part of the periodization for which the characteristic is social liberation is the fifth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs.

⁷⁶ Quarto Intereclesial. (1981) "Carta de Itaici." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 168.

The fifth Gathering happened in Canindé, Ceará, in July 1983 with the theme: “United people, seeds of a new society”. There was a truly national dimension to it as the numbers had increased to five hundred people, and as they represented one hundred and thirty four dioceses from almost all the States of Brazil. Amongst them there were thirty bishops. The General Secretary of the CNBB was also present at that gathering. Also for the first time the organization of the meeting used the structure of the regions of the CNBB, and tying in with that, the criterion of participation was to be sent by one the seventeen CNBB regions. Each region would send twenty participants. The participants were to be chosen in pre-gatherings operating at a diocesan and regional level. This involvement of the CNBB came 15 years after Medellín and four years after the Bishops’ Conference in Puebla.

Taking the issues from the regional reports, the debates revealed five main causes of the problems of poverty and deprivation: lack of land in rural and urban areas; impoverishment of small farmers, unemployment, the drought in the Northeast part of Brazil, and hunger. There were also difficulties within the church. Conservative sectors of the church were out to oppose the CEBs. This included the intervention of the Vatican in 1982, restricting the creativity of the Latin-American way of celebrating the faith with the inculturation of the liturgy: “The Mass without Evil” (we shall come back to this in Chapter 3), and of the “Mass of the *Quilombos*”, which were masses drawing respectively on *Ava* mythology and Afro slave themes. In 1984 and 1985 the Vatican also reprimanded with rigour Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez.

The fifth Gathering happened in 1983 in the middle of this turmoil. They recognized the strife but also that “the numbers of CEBs grow every day, there are more bishops and pastoral agents supporting the CEBs, more authentic trade unions, many of these created with the initiative and support of Christians from the CEBs..., neighbourhood groups and associations... women, Indians and Black people are awakening and joining in the organized struggle and path to liberation... in all of this we see the signs of the Kingdom of God.”⁷⁷

It is in this context of struggle within the church, and more dramatically within society at large, that they start to talk about brothers and sisters that have been tortured, and in some cases killed, martyrs in the struggle towards justice, Indians, factory workers, and pastoral workers: “Seventeen of our number at the gathering have known the beatitude of persecution and imprisonment because of land conflict.”⁷⁸

In addition to the engagement with social transformation of this period there were also signs of the ecumenism that was to come in stronger terms in the next periods in our periodization. Ecumenical language and practices can be found here, as the Letter tells of what was learned during the Inter-ecclesial: “We found out in our exchange of experience that other Christian churches are committing themselves... to plant and water the tree of life; that other movements and many other

⁷⁷ Quinto Intereclesial. (1983) “Carta de Canindé.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, p. 175.

⁷⁸ Quinto Intereclesial. (1983) “Carta de Canindé.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 175.

companions, even without meditating on the Gospel, are equally struggling towards life for the people. The latter do it without knowledge of the will of Jesus, which is to bring life and life in its fullness. As can be seen in our experience, many desire liberation.”⁷⁹ The CEBs affirm that their engagement with social and political struggles comes from within their faith, “We Christians from the Base Ecclesial Communities want liberation within the faith, the liberation that is born out of the Gospel of the acceptance of the Kingdom of God... The main reason why we want transformation for society is because God wants it, Jesus Christ preached it, and because the Holy Spirit inspires us to strive for it.”⁸⁰

This strong sense of faith and engagement was translated into liturgy and prayer: “We had a beautiful celebration of God’s mercy and forgiveness... It was impressive when the women, the Black people, the rural workers, stood up and embraced each other as a sign of God’s grace. Then the bishops knelt at the front of the assembly and asked for forgiveness, and then they gave us forgiveness in the name of God and of the church. All embraced each other.”⁸¹

As can be seen above in the first five national gatherings of the CEBs there is concern for all people of diverse ethnicity, gender, status and cultural/religious background, not just those in the church, and as the number of participants showed

⁷⁹ Quinto Intereclesial. (1983) “Carta de Canindé.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 176.

⁸⁰ Quinto Intereclesial. (1983) “Carta de Canindé.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 176.

⁸¹ Quinto Intereclesial. (1983) “Carta de Canindé.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, p. 177.

also in the presence of non-Catholics and representatives of non-Christian traditions, ecumenical practices were hinted at and anticipated. But now in the next period, this becomes a more explicit emphasis and part and parcel of the Inter-ecclesial of CEBs.

2.1.2. Ecumenical Practices - Sixth to Eighth Gatherings, 1986 to 1992

The period from the first to the fifth National Gathering of CEBs was marked by an emphasis on a social liberation approach. The next period in the proposed periodization, from the sixth to the eighth Inter-ecclesial inclusive, has a characteristic which is its ecumenical concerns and practices. There were in the previous gatherings signs of these ecumenical intentions and practices, but now they increasingly take the central stage.

The sixth Inter-ecclesial Gathering of CEBs took place in Trindade, Goiás, in July 1986. The numbers at the gathering reveal an extraordinary growth in participants and scope of representation. One thousand and six hundred and forty-seven people took part, of which seven hundred and forty-two were representatives from the Base Communities. There were two hundred and three pastoral workers present, thirty-five Brazilian observers, fifty-six observers from other Latin American countries, seventeen visitors from other parts of the world, thirty theological advisors, ten people representing the *Ava* ethnic groups, sixteen representatives of the Protestant traditions, fifty one bishops, eight-six people attending as journalists with media and

documentation tasks, and a three hundred and eight-one-strong team of volunteers to serve the organizational needs of the gathering.

The sixth Gathering at Trindade marks the beginning of a phase of emphasis on ecumenical relations in more than one sense. Firstly, in the sixth Inter-ecclesial there is the recognition of the specific struggle for liberation of women, *Ava* and Afro people. Their struggle for liberation is the struggle of the poor. Secondly, in the sixth there is a specific commitment to hospitality to the Protestants. As the Letter from the gathering puts it – “it is a great satisfaction to receive the Protestant brothers and sisters”. This is the first point made as they register and welcome guests of honour, visitors from other countries etc. The paragraph of the Letter goes like this: “We feel particular satisfaction with the presence of our dear Protestant brothers and sisters in our midst, with the presence of the suffering people of other Latin American and Caribbean countries, and with the presence of people from Canada and Europe.”⁸² It is only after this acknowledgement that they then refer to their own, “with the presence of the president of the CNBB..., of the person responsible for the CEBs,... and of Cardenal Primaz of Holland..., and the great number of our bishops...”⁸³ The two dimensions mentioned above, i.e., the CEBs mentioning first ecumenical presence than their own, mark a clear ecumenical perspective in the sixth Gathering and the beginning of a new phase in our periodization.

⁸² Sexto Intereclesial. (1986) “Documento Final.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, pp. 180-181.

⁸³ Sexto Intereclesial. (1986) “Documento Final.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, p. 181.

But the list does not stop here, it goes on to honour the presence of “Dona Olinda, the Mother of Padre Josimo who was killed in the struggle, she brings to us the memory of the figure of the courageous Mother of Pains and of all the mothers of our martyrs.”⁸⁴ The veneration of the martyrs is also a growing element of the Inter-ecclesial gatherings (more on this later in 3.2.2).

The theme of the gathering was, “The People of God in search of the Promised Land.” It related to the growing concerns about the concentration of land ownership in Brazil in the hands of a few people, and the consequent migration to urban areas and other economic and social distortions that that process had brought about and still brings about.

In more specific terms they say the CEBs should support the struggle of the Indigenous people (Ava) for the demarcation of land and preservation of their cultures. Also the CEBs should take on as their own the struggle of the Black people for their rights, and against any discrimination. They protested against any form of slave work. And they drew attention to the importance of the participation of women in the struggle for a new society, combating all sorts of machismo, exploitation of women, and marginalization of single mothers. They valued the involvement and participation of the young people and children in the CEBs in the journey towards a

⁸⁴ Sexto Intereclesial. (1986) “Documento Final.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, p. 181.

Promised Land: "The CEBs are a rehearsal, an experiment of the Kingdom of God, they are the heart of the new society, a little plot in the Promised Land of God."⁸⁵

The theme of the gathering was developed and enriched, bringing another dimension of the life of the CEBs into play: the spirit of openness towards the different, the ecumenical spirit. In ecumenical terms, the Letter from Trindade uses an image that represents well this sense of being connected, being part of a network of churches and of other social/community initiatives and struggles. This image appeared already in the Letter of the first Gathering.

The struggles of the people are as fountains of water that spring from the ground, they then become a little stream going down the hill and eventually they change into a river. With the force of God and the union of the people the river will grow... there are several rivers in the popular movement.... The political project of the people will carry all the streams of water to the big river that will bring about changes in society...⁸⁶

The Gathering in Trindade, Goiás, marked also a change in the way the CEBs felt and spoke about themselves in relation to the church. They managed to articulate the theological matter of *ecclesio-genesis* of the 1970's in a more inclusive and different way. It is here at the sixth Inter-ecclesial that the phrase 'a new way of being Church' (*o jeito novo de ser Igreja*) is changed to 'a new way for the whole

⁸⁵ Sexto Intereclesial. (1986) "Documento Final." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 183.

⁸⁶ Sexto Intereclesial. (1986) "Documento Final." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 183-184.

church to be' (*o jeito novo de toda Igreja ser*). There was a whole theological and ecclesiological reflection that accompanied the process for this small but significant change. One can think of some parallels with the initiative in the UK of new expressions, or fresh expressions of church. Translating the experience in the UK into the experience in Brazil, at one point the CEBs thought of themselves as a new expression or a fresh expression of church, but from 1986 the CEBs started to talk in a more integrated manner, saying that they represented a new way for the whole church to aspire to be. The CEBs were a living manifestation of this new way. Maybe they would not put it so bluntly, but somehow there is a hint of this in the statement. Nonetheless it also speaks of an intention, a search for a relationship with the rest of the church. They were dealing with the paradox of being Roman Catholic, apostolic, meanwhile being a new expression of church.

The second mark in the ecumenical journey of the CEBs is the seventh Inter-ecclesial. That gathering was definitely proud of being ecumenical. The previous gathering marked a move to more explicit ecumenism because it included the struggle of *Ava* people, Afro-descendants and of women. Now, the seventh Inter-ecclesial had an explicit interdenominational ecumenical slant to it.

The seventh Inter-ecclesial of CEBs took place on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, in July 1989. It was a definite turning point in terms of ecumenical relations in and through the Inter-ecclesial gatherings. The numbers tell something about this ecumenical character: one thousand and eight hundred people took part in the event

coming from all over Brazil and from other Latin American countries, Europe, North America, Africa and Asia. Remarkably, one hundred and twenty were Protestants, from twelve different Protestant traditions, and also from the Anglican and from the Orthodox churches. Amongst these members of different denominations there were forty-three ministers, male and female, and five bishops. Obviously it did not obscure the presence of representatives from two hundred and twenty five Roman Catholic dioceses out of a total at the time of two hundred and fifty two Brazilian dioceses, with the presence of eight five of their bishops accompanying the elected representatives. There were also four Roman Catholic bishops from abroad. There were many priests and religious sisters and brothers. There were thirty Ava people representing several indigenous nations. The Letter from that gathering makes a special point of mentioning the presence of the Black people and of the role played by women in the gathering as a whole.⁸⁷

Ecumenism is about hospitality and the administration of the house (*oikos*) to attend the needs of all. Accordingly, more than a thousand families opened their houses to offer hospitality to the participants. The diocese of Duque de Caxias and São João do Meriti covers two different municipalities in the poor and violent outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Although the gathering was big, it was still a small presence if compared with the large and mostly poor population of around 2 million inhabitants in Duque de Caxias alone. They recorded that, "During the opening ecumenical celebration of the

⁸⁷ Sétimo Intereclesial. (1989) Carta de Duque de Caxias." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**, p. 190.

gathering there were exchanges of presents and symbols between the representatives from Latin America. This pact of brother/sisterhood makes alive the vision of Latin America as just one big nation.”⁸⁸ This opening celebration was presided over by Dom Mauro Morelli, the first bishop of the receiving diocese. Other bishops accompanied Dom Mauro in leading the opening ceremony.

Dom Mauro speaks with love about the Black people and embraces the African Bishop, asking for forgiveness because of the sins Brazil committed against Africans. He then mentions the presence of those from the Protestant and Orthodox traditions saying that they bring beauty to the gathering. He proceeds to greet other bishops scattered amongst the gathered crowd. He concludes by comparing the gathering of CEBs to the [early Ecumenical] Councils of the church, saying that in a few centuries, they will certainly say: ‘In that time, they called these Councils ‘Inter-ecclesial gatherings’.⁸⁹

Indeed, the feeling was of an Ecumenical Council Gathering as can be testified by the ‘*Celebração da Partilha*’ (Celebration of Sharing) that took place on one evening during the seventh Gathering in a public square in Central Caxias. It is said that the square was already full of people even before the delegates to the seventh Inter-ecclesial arrived. Dom Mauro, the local Bishop who was kidnapped by the military at one point in his episcopacy, was the bishop presiding over this celebration. In a remarkable ecumenical move, the ministry of the word was delivered by the Revd Zwinglio Motta of the United Presbyterian Church of Brazil (he raised the *Oikumene* flag with Dom Mauro Morelli, see picture on page 146), and more remarkably yet the

⁸⁸ Sétimo Intereclesial. (1989) Carta de Duque de Caxias.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 191.

⁸⁹ Arquidiocese de Goiânia. (1989) Celebração de Abertura. **Revista da Arquidiocese**. XXXII - 7/8/9. p. 249.

blessing over the gifts of bread and wine was said by a Brazilian Anglican Bishop with a Japanese name:

Bishop Sumiu Takatsu is summoned to bless the food. Before he does that, Dom Mauro gives to him the banner of *Oikumene* as well as Dom Mauro's own stole - in a gesture of someone who really believes deeply in the communion of the churches and in the construction of the unity which Jesus himself prayed for. The people applauded and gave a vibrant 'Alleluia', and spontaneously sang, 'Blessed the man and the woman who share and distribute bread!' The Anglican bishop blessed bread as well as other food that was distributed to the worshipping crowd, whilst they sung, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"⁹⁰

The seventh Gathering was without doubt a very ecumenical Inter-ecclesial of CEBs. However, it was only ecumenical within Christianity. Leonardo Boff, the theologian who had been silenced by the Vatican two years earlier, reflecting on the way ahead for the Inter-ecclesial of CEBs even as the seventh Gathering in Caxias was still happening, anticipated challenges in relation to the issues of inculturation, in particular in relation to the *Avas* and the *Afro* peoples and cultures. Let us see how these predicted difficulties might appear at the next national gathering, in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul. The fact was that, as Faustino recognizes, "In the seventh Gathering the challenge already present in Trindade of a bigger inculturation of the Eucharistic celebration remained not tackled."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Arquidiocese de Goiânia. (1989) Celebração da Partilha. **Revista da Arquidiocese**, XXXII - 7/8/9. p. 289.

⁹¹ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 100.

Let us see how these tensions develop and are played out in the last meeting in this session of our periodization which focuses on the ecumenical practices at the gatherings.

The eighth Gathering took place in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, in September 1992. It announced the CEBs' relentless moving forward in terms of ecumenical relations. It also marks the facing of an apparently impossible barrier to overcome, almost impermeable because of the complex history of Christianity in Brazil: the relationship with *Ava* traditional beliefs and with the Afro-Brazilian religions. At stake is the whole issue of inculturation and a wider relationship with oppressed ethnic minorities and their cultural traditions and religions. The eighth National Gathering of the CEBs, although announcing what was still to come in terms of wider ecumenism, still (but only just) fits firmly into this second period of the proposed periodization, of a time when the Inter-ecclesial of the CEBs was developing ecumenical relations within Christian denominations. Let me tell the story and explain the reasons for this classification.

The theme of the meeting was controversial. The theme was, "The People of God reborn of the oppressed cultures". The Letter from the eighth Gathering registers the presence of two thousand, two hundred and thirty eight delegates from all over Brazil, and eighty-eight people from other Latin American and Caribbean Countries. There were also thirty people from other Continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. There were one hundred and six participants from the Protestant churches; forty-three *Ava*

people, including one *Pajé* (religious leader and healing shaman); two *Pais de Santo* (*Babalorixás* – usually male Afro-Brazilian cult leaders of Angolan Congolese tradition) and one *Mãe de Santo* (*Yalorixá* – high priestesses of *Nagô Candomblé*),⁹² plus fifty theological advisors. There were an amazing number of bishops present – ninety-eight, as well as thirty Protestant Ministers male and female, and several priests and religious sisters and brothers. The gathering received a letter of support and encouragement from Pope John Paul II.⁹³

To facilitate the work of the gathering, the participants were divided into five plenaries. Each of these plenaries took a specific theme related to the general theme of the Inter-ecclesial. The plenaries were: São Sepé (a group for Avas and Ava issues), Comadre Aparecida (a group of Black people), Our Father Abraham (a group of migrants), Chico Mendes (a group for the workers) and the *Companheira Rosa* (a group of women). I shall develop and show the work of the groups in subsequent Chapters. For now, it is important just to register that within the ecumenical practices of the eighth Gathering in Santa Maria, something deeply uncomfortable happened.

⁹² “There is, however, one radical difference between the Yoruba-Dahoman and the Bantu “nations” (allowing for a few very rare exceptions). In Bahia (though not in Recife) the traditional Nagô sects are always under the authority of a priestess, the *yalorixá*, and the sodality of initiates consists exclusively of women. The Angola and Congo sects, on the other hand, are usually under the authority of a priest, the *babalorixá*, and the fraternity includes men as well as women, although women predominate. All indications are that the former “nations” tend toward a “matriarchy” ... and the latter toward a “patriarchy”. Bastide, R. (originally published in Paris, 1960, this edition 2007) translated by Helen Sebba **The African Religions of Brazil, toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations**. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 196.

⁹³ Oitavo Intereclesial. (1992) “Carta de Santa Maria.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 200.

There was a moment of great tension in the Inter-ecclesial when in one of the celebrations, at the time of the presentation of the bishops, and then of the Protestant ministers to the public, and despite the ecumenical nature of the event, somehow there was a judgment that it would not be proper to invite the *Pajé* and the *Babalorixás* and *Yalorixá* present in the gathering to come up onto the stage/altar as 'pastors' of their religions. It was felt that it would not be quite right to invite them to join together with other pastors. This move prompted a protest from one of the *Babalorixás* and from the *Pajé* who climbed onto the altar and took hold of the microphone to denounce this as an act of discrimination and as something very wrong and unacceptable.

All of this generated a crisis between the leadership of the Inter-ecclesial gathering and the hierarchy of the church. The local bishop opposed the wider-than-Christianity ecumenical attempt at the eighth Inter-ecclesial. It was expected by the participants that the leaders of the Afro-Brazilian religion and the Ava Shaman should share the altar with the bishops, but that expectation was rejected by the local Bishop and it did not go ahead. This shows that the CEBs had moved ahead in terms of their wider ecumenical and inclusive intention/nature. The CEBs would have been able to produce a more pluralistic moment in terms of welcoming leaders of different religions in their worship. But the full and explicit implementation of it would need to wait for the next gathering and a new phase in the history of the gatherings altogether.

That crisis in the eighth Inter-ecclesial brought changes that were a landmark in the life of the gatherings and plunged them into more explicit wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practices. Because of those changes, this marks the next phase in the periodization that is being proposed here.

2.1.3. Inter-Religious Relations - Ninth to Eleventh Gatherings, 1997 to 2005

The crisis between the organizers of the CEBs' Gathering and the bishop(s) in Santa Maria referred to at the end of the previous sub-section led to negotiations between the CEBs and the CNBB. Clodovis Boff, theologian and supporter of the CEBs, notes that "[the tenth Inter-ecclesial] was the first gathering within a profile defined by the dialogue CEBs-CNBB: it will be [Roman] Catholic, but with openness to ecumenism and to the inter-religious dialogue."⁹⁴ But before the tenth Gathering, the CEBs were already engaged in inter-religious practices. Let us start with the ninth Inter-ecclesial.

So they gathered for the ninth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs in São Luis do Maranhão in July 1997 with the objective of evaluating the development of the CEBs in the most recent years; in particular since the last national meeting in 1992. There was a good, long and effective preparation, with regional pre-meetings involving the participation of almost 90% of the dioceses of Brazil, with publication of a book as preparatory

⁹⁴ Boff, C. (1996) "Posfácio." In Teixeira, F. **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 141.

material.⁹⁵ A commission of six hundred and twenty three members spearheaded this Inter-ecclesial. It was presided over by Monsenhor Paulo Pontes and coordinated by Lucinete Cordeiro Machado, a Black woman. The participation of local people was quite extraordinary. About one thousand volunteers were constantly busy providing food, transportation, and communications. Nearly all the two thousand and eight hundred participants from other regions were lodged with local families. The event was self-financed. Almost half a million dollars were spent. The biggest part came from the dioceses as support for the CEBs.⁹⁶ There was also some financial support from partner organizations and churches abroad.

The make-up of the ninth Gathering was important: fifty-three Ava people, representing thirty-three Indian nations; a very high presence of Afro-descendents, although not counted; fifty-seven Roman Catholic bishops and one Anglican bishop (Rev'd Almir dos Santos). There were representatives of two hundred and forty Brazilian dioceses (the total number of Roman Catholic diocese in Brazil was at the time two hundred and fifty-five). There were sixty representatives of Protestant churches. There were at least nine non-Roman Catholic churches represented. 40% of the participants were affiliated to a political party. (less than 1% of the Brazilian population overall is affiliated to a political party). Rabbi Henry Sobel, president of

⁹⁵ Secretariado de CEBs para o 9 Encontro Interecclesial. (1996) **CEBs: Vida e Esperança nas Massas, Texto-Base**. São Paulo: Editora Salesiana Dom Bosco. For more information on the preparation for the IX Inter-ecclesial, see, José, J. O. (1996) "Apresentação." **CEBs: Vida e Esperança nas Massas, Texto-Base**. pp. 7-10. See also two news papers connected with preparations and with reporting daily the events at the Interecclesial. The papers are called: **Jornal A Caminho**, and **Nono Interecclesial de CEBs**.

⁹⁶ Secretariado de CEBs para o 9 Encontro Interecclesial. (1997) **Jornal A Caminho**, 17: pp 2 and 6-7.

the Israelite congregation in São Paulo and a national figure, participated in it for the first time – marking the emphasis on inter-religious dialogue. There were visitors from Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.⁹⁷

It was though a gathering without stars and erudite personalities. As is customary in the CEBs' gatherings, nearly all the coordinating work was in the hands of lay women and men. This included facilitation of the group discussions, presentation in plenaries, and sometimes interviews with the press. Members of the CEBs have a special capacity to articulate their experiences.

The theme of the gathering could not be more all-embracing with a touch of evangelical zeal: "CEBs - Life and Hope in the Masses". There were six working groups (they could not be called small groups because they were big) with themes trying to give ways in which the concept of mass society and the issues of relating to mass culture could be handled: CEBs and popular Catholicism; CEBs and mass culture; CEBs, excluded people and social movements; CEBs and Afro-Brazilian religions; CEBs and Pentecostalism; CEBs and the indigenous people's cultures.⁹⁸ Clearly the themes indicate the ecumenical and wider ecumenical nature of the debates, workshops, worship and seminars in each group named above.

⁹⁷ Nono Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1997) **Carta 'as Comunidades. São Luis do Maranhão, July 1997.**

⁹⁸ Nono Intereclesial. (1997) **Carta 'as Comunidades.**

The theme “CEBs and the Masses” was quite contradictory, in particular, considering the more alternative character of the CEBs and their aversion to massification. It raised the whole issue of how the small communities may be able to connect with and how they may act in relation to the masses. There was baggage that the CEBs carried from the past and that needed to be dealt with. The problems involved the idea of the CEBs as an avant-garde movement. How is it possible to overcome a slightly superior attitude towards the masses when a movement carries that sort of internal self-image? This was also emphasized by the political condemnation of the masses by the folk from the CEBs who thought of the masses as alienated and superstitious. There are obvious conflicts and contradictions here between a judgmental view of the masses and on the other hand a more open and positive attitude towards traditional and popular religions.

However, the way the preparations for the gathering went, through the preparatory material (*Texto-Base*), and the approach to the theme, was quite different. Instead of having a judgmental aura, the gathering turned out to be a practical declaration of a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism. It was a response to the reality of social, cultural and religious exclusion.

In the ninth Gathering there was recognition of the diverse richness of the popular cultures. There was also the courage to assume that - in the middle of the ordinary people, including those from the CEBs - there is plural practice in religious terms, and that that was to be valued and celebrated. Let us see all of these in more detail.

From the beginning of the ninth Gathering there was a sense of a big party, a celebration of an inclusive community of love and solidarity that was able to cut across several barriers and embrace the plural and diverse cultural and religious manifestation of the people of the CEBs. For example, the second celebration of the ninth Gathering led by four bishops, one of them being Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, was a full mass. Under the title “Celebration of the Martyrs”, the Holy Communion elements were brought to the altar in the hands of Black lay people, blessed and consecrated by the bishops and shared with almost three thousand people. Obviously the majority of these were Roman Catholics, but everybody knew there were others who were not Roman Catholics, yet regardless of that it was shared with everyone. The presiding Bishop said in defiance of some limits imposed upon inculturated liturgies: “Is there anyone who wished to but didn’t receive communion? Please lift up your hand, we will make sure you receive communion”. (more on this celebration on Chapter 3).

Marking a definite move towards a wider ecumenism, in the last celebration to conclude the ninth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs, there was a ritual of renewal of the vows of baptism led by women from the Afro-Brazilian religions. Jars of water were blessed in the name of the Holy Trinity by the Archbishop of São Luis, Dom Paulo Pontes, and then the water was sprinkled over and among the crowd from jars used by the Afro-Brazilian religions. The sprinkling was done with plants traditionally connected with good fortune, *galhos de arruda*. The Eucharist was celebrated in the

presence of almost sixty Roman Catholic bishops and an Anglican bishop. The Black women, led by a Black Roman Catholic priest, brought all the elements for about six thousand people. After consecrating the elements, the bishops and other lay ministers of the Eucharist went around distributing communion amongst the crowd. Again, everybody that wanted to receive, Roman Catholics, Protestants like me, or Avas and Afro-descendent people of different cultures, languages and religions, all received. This open table for all at Holy Communion represented and confirmed the inclusive and wider-than-Christianity ecumenism of the CEBs, encouraging community sharing across diversity and plurality. For the final blessing, at the end of the celebration, in the same inclusive spirit, there was a Black Afro-Brazilian priestess (*Mãe de Santo*), an Indian *Pagé*, a Roman Catholic Archbishop and a female Protestant Minister, each one of them said the blessing in their own way and in turn.

The above description demonstrates that, after the events in Santa Maria, when the pastors of other religions could not come up to the altar/stage (see previous subsection), a new chapter was opened for the CEBs' national gatherings at the ninth Gathering in São Luis in terms of cultural and inter-religious relations, as the Christian celebrations had participation and contribution from people of different religions. In this new openness, the CEBs were able to accommodate the influence and presence of other religions in the Christian worship they offered to God and in their prayers. This symbolic exchange of blessings shows considerable wider-than-denominational ecumenical permeability being exercised by the CEBs in relation to

influences from different cultural traditions and religions. We shall come back to this notion of permeability in Part 2 of this dissertation.

The inclusivity of the CEBs has its problems, no doubt. There was in the ninth Inter-ecclesial a significant presence of Black people and women. Almost 50% of the participants were female, but this was not represented among the advisors present. There were only five women to fifty-eight male advisors, although the coordinator was a Black woman, as mentioned above. But in general, the ninth Inter-ecclesial showed that there was an addition to social awareness of the CEBs in the commitment of the CEBs to make themselves permeable to the presence of different religions in their midst, seeking relationship, respecting and embracing differences. In other words, the ninth Inter-ecclesial showed that the CEBs' gatherings were growing in numbers; and that the ninth Gathering was reinforcing the CEBs' social and political agenda and also their intercultural and inter-religious ecumenical relationships.

The next stop for the train of the CEBs (an important image and logo of the CEBs) is at the turn of the Millennium. This is the second gathering in this part of the periodization when a more open wider-than-Christianity ecumenism is exercised. This is in keeping with this part of the periodization, the period that demonstrates an emphasis on inter-religious relations.

The tenth Inter-ecclesial of CEBs took place by design in Ihéus, Bahia, in July 2000, the place where the first Portuguese settlers/invaders arrived in 1500 CE (see 3.2). One of the aims for the tenth Gathering was to have an alternative commemoration of the 'discovery' of Brazil. The tenth Inter-ecclesial was to be a national event that called for another, different, five hundred years. The history of colonialism and new-colonialism was to be acknowledged (seen), its injustices named (judged), and corrected by calling for a future that was free from the sufferings and oppression of the past (act).

Despite some claims that the CEBs were losing their influence after ten years of the collapse of the Communist States/Marxism, the tenth Gathering proved to be a living manifestation of the vitality and presence of the CEBs in the country and their inclusive practices. The Inter-ecclesial gatherings had grown in numbers to reach the three thousand participants mark. In practice it meant that the preparations had to start as soon as the previous Gathering finished. The theme for the Inter-ecclesial was chosen already at the end of the previous gathering: "CEBs, people of God, 2000 years on the way".

The National Team, that is the principal policy-making body for Inter-ecclesial gatherings, was composed by two CEBs' people from each of the thirty two ecclesiastical (CNBB) regions of the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil, two Protestant representatives, one representative from the Indigenous Missionary

Council, one representative of the CNBB, the local Bishop and advisors.⁹⁹ As part of the preparatory process there was the publication of a two hundred and forty page book with 11 articles written by theological advisors.¹⁰⁰

There was also the setting up of the National Secretariat in Ihéus, and the Executive Secretariat that had to do with all the local preparations, and communication. They produced the Bulletin: *A Caminho do 10 Inter-ecclesial*. There were also ten areas of service and its teams, with one thousand, one hundred and twenty-eight volunteers to attend to their needs regarding liturgy, food and hospitality, well-being and health, infrastructure and general administration. The gathering had big celebrations in public spaces in Ihéus, including the beach, bringing all participants together. It had six main groups of around five hundred people meeting in sports facilities. Then, the groups were subdivided into five sub-plenaries of one hundred each, and then into ten smaller groups. It meant that the organization of the gathering allowed for big celebrations, big groups for keynote speakers, smaller groups for debate, and smaller groups where everybody could be heard.

The statistics for the tenth Gathering were as follows: two thousand, three hundred and ninety-seven delegates sent by the communities. This time, more than a half of them were women: one thousand, two hundred and sixty nine women and one thousand and one hundred and twenty-eight men. Of the three hundred and nine

⁹⁹ Teixeira, F. (unpublished text) (no date) **O Resgate e a Afirmação de um Sonho: O X Encontro Interecclesial de CEBs.**

¹⁰⁰ Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Encontro Interecclesial. (1999) **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base.** Paulo Afonso: Fonte Viva.

Brazilian Bishops, sixty-three were present. Of the two hundred and sixty-seven Brazilian dioceses, two hundred and thirty-one were represented. There were representatives of a further eight Christian churches and, as the Letter puts it, “brothers and sisters from other religions, especially from amongst the Indigenous people and the Black community.”¹⁰¹ Seventy-three from Protestant Churches, fifty-eight Ava people from twenty-seven different indigenous peoples; also there were guests and representatives from communities in fifteen countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, from other countries of Europe and Africa, plus media people, artists and facilitators. All of these groups gave a total of the three thousand and thirty-six participants.¹⁰²

Despite this diversity, the Letter to the communities still communicates in a language and manner quite particular to the culture of Bahia. The language had been shaped by influences from the influx of Afro-descendents as a result of the slave trade of previous centuries. For example, the second paragraph of the Letter uses the word *axé*: “We felt the force of *axé* in so many demonstrations of kindness from families, from communities...”¹⁰³ *Axé* (see List of Definitions) being a word borrowed from the Afro-Brazilian religions, makes its way now into the final document of the tenth Gathering sent out to the Base Communities. This reflects well the whole pluralistic and diverse atmosphere and approach of the tenth Gathering.

¹⁰¹ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta ‘as Comunidades, Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar. Ilhéus, 2000.**

¹⁰² Décimo Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta ‘as Comunidades.**

¹⁰³ Décimo Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta ‘as Comunidades.**

The use of language shows the point made by my proposed periodization, which is that the Inter-ecclesial gatherings to be ecumenical within and beyond Christianity. This was the case since the beginning, but in particular from the sixth and the ninth Gatherings respectively more ecumenical and more wider ecumenical. It is in this last period from the ninth Gathering onwards that ecumenical and interfaith openness has grown in intensity and also in the ability to welcome and embrace the Ava and Afro-Brazilian traditions, allowing some penetration of elements from them. This has been evident in terms of the numbers at the tenth Gathering, where there was a bigger presence and also the recognition of that presence, as the Letter puts it, of “brothers and sisters from other religions”, already mentioned above. The following are but a few of the Ava nations represented in Ihéus: *Canoe, Guajajara, Guarani, Kaimbe, Kaingang, Pataxo, Terena, Tupi, Tupinamba, Tupinikin, Xucuru-Kariri*. And from the Afro-Brazilian community there were present three *Babalorixás* and five *Yalorixás*. This openness of spirit towards inter-religious relations was shown also by the honour of naming one of the community spaces, the food square, after one of the most famous of Bahia’s *Mãe de Santo: Meninha do Gantois*, and one of the sports gymnasiums with the name of an Amerindian: *Chicão Xucuru*.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ The data here and above comes from: “O 10 Intereclesial das CEBs, O que é Intereclesial.” Also from: “O Tema.” Also from: “Histórico dos Intereclesiais.” All this articles are to be found in the web site: http://www.ongba.org.br/memorial/10_cebs. More material is found also in O Décimo em Estatística, A avaliação do Décimo. (2000) **Revista, A Caminho Especial, 10 Intereclesial das CEBs, 2000.**

These are not simple and half-hearted signs. This is a very culturally and religiously sensitive move to take, and it points to the spirit that in the last three national gatherings the CEBs have been achieved. This initiative - almost aggressive - relates to how the CEBs also see themselves: "We grow in the defense of human rights, in the building up of citizenship, in the struggle for agrarian reform, in valuing indigenous peoples, Black people, women, children, young people, the disabled people and the elderly."¹⁰⁵

Now we can test this periodization in geographical-cultural terms as the last of the gatherings moves from the north and north-east to central Brazil to a more conservative and traditional area, Minas Gerais. Let us see if the emphasis on inter-religious relations remains, if the wider perspective and pluralistic approach survives the move from Bahia to Minas Gerais. We will revisit the eleventh Gathering later in the next sub-section to describe the day-by-day events in a gathering (see 2.2.2). Here, we will register the eleventh Gathering's attitude in relation to other denominations and religions.

The National Secretariat of CEBs for the eleventh Inter-ecclesial had, amongst many others, the task of serving as a bridge of communication between the national level and the local arrangements. During the gestation of the eleventh Gathering, the Secretariat commended the following objectives to be pursued by all involved in the preparations for it, notice particularly the third objective:

¹⁰⁵ Décimo Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades.**

- to strengthen the mystical and the organizational side of the communities during the preparation period for the Inter-ecclesial to take place from 13th-19th July 2005.
- to celebrate and encourage the journey of the CEBs in Brazil and in Latin America.
- to nurture and stir up ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue from the bottom up, that it may extend from the level of celebration to that [depth] of reflection, from its presence in the Inter-ecclesial to the [grassroots] work for justice and peace.¹⁰⁶

There are other objectives named after the third, but it is noticeable that ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue appear high up in the list of objectives and priorities to be achieved as they journey towards the eleventh Gathering in Minas Gerais and the thirtieth anniversary of the national Inter-ecclesial of CEBs. It is worthy of note also that this priority comes in third place in the list of aims whilst the one concerning unemployment and hunger, and other themes more traditionally linked with the journey of the Church of the Poor in Brazil and Latin America, appear later in the list. This is the point of our periodization that in the last three Inter-ecclesials, the CEBs have taken issues of culture and religious inclusion more to the fore of their concern and ministry. In this way the CEBs added to their social justice agenda a concern for religious and cultural inclusion. In this latter item they have been able to approach it very radically in the last three national gatherings. It also shows that they wanted to make sure the emphasis from the last two Inter-ecclesials continued in Minas Gerais.

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.cebsuai.org.br.luzes11cebs.htm>

Were the objectives achieved and the aims fulfilled? I shall try and show some indicators that should answer this question.

During the eleventh Gathering, Ava peoples from approximately eight different Ava nations gathered to raise their cry for land and the demarcation of their reservations. In an interview for *A Caminho*, a publication of the CEBs, a representative of the Avas said: "They were bringing this problem to join the CEBs from all over Brazil and paraded on the streets of Ipatinga". They also said that they came "seeking in the CEBs the solidarity they never found in the FUNAI (the Governmental body to regulate the relationship with their Peoples)." ¹⁰⁷

The Ava-Brazilians participating in the Inter-ecclesial of the CEBs wrote a statement denouncing the constant violations of their rights which, in particular, at this time were represented by the attacks against the *Kaiowá Guarani* of Mato Grosso do Sul. Tens of deaths occurred in the first part of that year 2005; there was the cruel assassination of Dorival Benites; and many of them were tortured in the month before the eleventh Gathering. "They also denounced the death of many of the children of the Ava peoples through malnutrition and hunger. They expressed shock about the many suicides that had occurred amongst them, in particular amongst the young. They joined their voices with the *Kaiowá Guarani* Assembly - *Aty Guasu* -

¹⁰⁷ Índio Pataxó denuncia grave situação da sua aldeia. **A Caminho do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs**. Edição Especial. Diocese de Itabira, 22nd July 2005. p 3. Also available on web site <http://www.cebs12.org.br/CEBs11>

demanding urgent action in punishing those responsible for the killings and in guaranteeing the demarcation of their land.”¹⁰⁸

Conscious of the plight of the Ava people and other segments of society, the CEBs reflected on the social, racial, economic-educational discrimination that society at large imposes on the poor and other marginal groups. The neo-liberal system was identified as the cause and the logic of the exclusion society imposes. In the face of this reality of social and racial exclusion the CEBs affirmed that, “another world is possible.”¹⁰⁹ These words represent a typical attitude of the CEBs, harnessing energy and hope to denounce the unfit state of the present reality, and to proclaim in faith the possibility of creating a new and better situation.

They pointed to the importance of Jesus’ life as a reference for the communities, they considered how the dimensions of exodus, prophetism, wisdom and apocalypse are intensely present in Jesus’ words and actions. The Inter-ecclesial newspaper *Caminhada* offers a comment: “Such dimensions of Jesus’ life relate to present experiences, in particular, the diversity found in the area of spirituality.”¹¹⁰ This goes with the objectives set by the Secretariat for the eleventh Gathering mentioned above.

¹⁰⁸ Pelo fim da violência contra os Kaiowá Guarani e demarcação de suas terras. (2005) **A Caminho do 11 Intereclesial**. Edição Especial. 23rd July 2005. p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ Espiritualidade Libertadora. (2005) **A Caminho do 11 Intereclesial**. Edição Especial. 23rd July 2005. p 4.

¹¹⁰ Espiritualidade Libertadora. (2005) **A Caminho do 11 Intereclesial**. Edição Especial. 23rd July 2005. p 4.

There was a Tent of/for ecumenism. Naturally, taking part in the Tent the majority of people were Roman Catholics with the presence of representatives from the CONIC (National Council of Christian Churches) as well as other Protestant people including two female Methodist ministers, an Anglican priest, and a priestess from an Afro-Brazilian Religion.

People in the Tent of ecumenism spoke of their conviction that there is only one God, and of their faith and hope in the partnership between, and participation together of different Christians. They referred with joy to the Lent campaigns and their influence in the life of the nation, now for the last five years being run ecumenically. They spoke also of very personal experiences of inter-denominational marriage of close relatives. They also recognized the difficulties in forming one people. The advisor to the Tent spoke about the importance of being open to the other; of the progress made with political and social action that is more ecumenical than ever now; of the ecumenical and multi-religious advances in the teaching of religious education in schools. *It was further said that the first step in ecumenical relations is the ability to hear; then to enter into dialogue; to pray together; and then to act to transform and change things for the better.*¹¹¹

Showing maturity in this area of the life of the movement, the Tent recommended that the CEBs: (i) make an effort to communicate the importance of the ecumenical

¹¹¹ Most of the information here and to follow in this part about the Ecumenical Tent comes from: Tenda do Ecumenismo, (2005) **A Caminho do 11 Intereclesial**. Edição Especial. 23rd July 2005. p. 7.

dialogue and joint action; (ii) grow in offering continual formation for ecumenism, producing teaching material, meetings, and in particular looking at the bible and spreading the popular method of reading the bible; (iii) take part in ecumenical initiatives in the area of prayer and spirituality; (iv) take part in all ministries within social engagement in favour of the grassroots struggles for justice, and alleviate the plight of the poor. They called for this to be done in conjunction with people of other denominations and other religions.

Now, in this more deeply seated wider ecumenical way of doing things, the Tent finished its work by saying together the ecumenical form of the Lord's Prayer followed by a blessing given by some of the women: one of the Ministers, the Priestess of the Afro-Brazilian religion, and two lay Roman Catholic women.

Let us move on to the Letter from the eleventh Gathering to the Churches and Communities. The Letter points out that a record three thousand, eight hundred and six participants were present in the eleventh Gathering in Ipatinga. A break down of this numbers shows that of the participants, three thousand, two hundred and nineteen were delegates from different dioceses from all over Brazil, one hundred and twelve were theological advisors. There are also distinctive numbers showing the growing inclusion of different ethnic and religious groups. There were eighty-nine Amerindians and two hundred special guests of different churches, including seventy guests from other countries. These special guests had a pre-conference and amongst them there were the team from the Continental (Latin American and

Caribbean) expression of the CEBs' Movement. The break down of the figures for the eleventh Gathering shows also that approximately three thousand were lay, four hundred and twenty were members of religious orders, and only three hundred and eighty of them were priests. There were fifty bishops present, including two bishops from the Anglican Church.¹¹²

The figures show a definite ecumenical part in this last gathering in Minas Gerais. There were people from eleven different Christian denominations; twenty-three were Ministers male and female. There was also a wider ecumenical presence with the Ava participants, representing of thirty-two different Amerindian nations, without counting people from Afro-Brazilian cultures and religions. This is not new in the gatherings. On the contrary, it shows a definite wider ecumenical trend and characteristic of the Inter-ecclesial gatherings.

It is important also to register that for the opening events of the eleventh Gathering people turned up in their thousands from the local communities and parishes, adding to the numbers for the big open air religious celebrations and cultural festivals. This was just a sign of the strong link with the local churches and communities as they were the source of hospitality, hosting participants in two thousand different households in Ipatinga and near by towns.¹¹³

¹¹² Décimo Primeiro Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta das CEBs do 11 Intereclesial ao Povo de Deus. Ipatinga, 2005.**

<http://www.cebs12.org.br/CEBS11/cartafinal.html>

¹¹³ All of this is well register in the Letter from the Gathering issued to all God's people: Décimo Primeiro Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta das CEBs do 11**

As would be expected, the organization of such events demands grassroots involvement and structured work. There is a National Committee of thirty-two representatives. There are several other committees and groups in each region and diocese. Beyond that, there is also the organization of the gathering itself, so that every thing is in place, from participants being hosted by families from the parishes in the city, to the organization of massive liturgical events.¹¹⁴

The Letter from the Inter-ecclesial to the People of God shows this commitment of the gathering to ecumenical and wider ecumenical relations. They say that they welcomed “representatives of thirty-two Indigenous peoples and those from other Afro-religions and cultures.”¹¹⁵ (This is as representatives, and it does not include the eighty different Ava-Nations that came to join in the procession of the CEBs mentioned earlier above). They say: “we re-affirm the spirituality that is immersed in the life of the poor, coined by the experience of God in it, seeking the liberation of the people, of history and of the whole creation.”¹¹⁶ They say that “They see the proximity of the Afro and Ava cultural traditions and religions to the spirit of Jesus and the early Christian communities.”¹¹⁷ Here it is in explicit theological terms an openness to a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism. That is to say that the CEBs are

Intereclesial ao Povo de Deus. Ipatinga, 2005.

<http://www.cebs12.org.br/CEBS11/cartafinal.html>

¹¹⁴ Pe. Edgard (2000) Eu vou pra Bahia, eu vou. **Revista Sem Fronteiras, a Igreja do Brasil aberta ao Mundo**, 281. pp. 23-24.

¹¹⁵ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 3.

¹¹⁶ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 12.

¹¹⁷ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 11.

seeking relationship with and opportunities to exchange spiritual values with other traditions because of their view of the Gospel and of Jesus.

There is a sense of a common struggle, shared by different peoples. In Minas Gerais, the CEBs gathered in their eleventh Inter-ecclesial heard and gave voice to the cry of the *Pataxó* people as the cry of many places and peoples elsewhere for land: “We need the land, to live on the land, to work for justice and for peace.”¹¹⁸ And they asked for the blessings from God on their journey, using the Afro “Axé” and the *Ava* “Awerê”.¹¹⁹

This in itself demonstrates the spirit in which the CEBs gathered, able to be themselves, bringing out of the closet and placing in the light of the day the way they live their faith, bringing together a strong commitment to Christ, Christianity and church and meanwhile drawing from and accommodating elements from other traditions and religious allegiances. This seems to suggest that there is the development of a hermeneutical tool of pluralism and inclusion that allowed this sort of approach to happen. This is what we shall try to explain later with the concept of permeability and interpenetration.

¹¹⁸ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 14.

¹¹⁹ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 16.

They lived for a few days what the hymn for the eleventh Gathering says: "Drums of the Black people/ flute of the Ava people/ They call for this party/ Of faith and solidarity."¹²⁰

The issue will always remain though, as the CEBs themselves put it, of how the ecumenical commitment moves from celebration, beautiful and vibrant liturgies, from wishful thinking to effective social reality. It is not different from the issues the ecumenical and inter-religious movement face elsewhere in the world: the difficult issues of unity in diversity, identity and difference, and practical engagement. However, there is something important to be learned from the CEBs' practices, which is that they have taken a step further on the ecumenical path that allowed them to share the sacraments, including the table of the Lord with Christians from other denominations and people of other faiths, and at times have incorporated elements from other religious traditions without losing their passion and enthusiasm for their own faith.

2.2. THE INTER-ECCLESIAL GATHERINGS: JUSTICE AND LIBERATION SPIRITUALITY PLUS INTERFAITH AWARENESS

In the next sub-sections I shall explore some of the reasons why the CEBs developed their spirituality from one of justice, and added an inclusive interfaith

¹²⁰ Costa. Julieta A. **Hino do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs**. verso 8.
<http://www.cebs.org.br/CEBS11/novopenerei.html>

approach. We have already showed the CEBs organic growth (Chapter 1); now we turn to the themes that helped them; and also we shall see in more detail the day-by-day life of a gathering of CEBs. But all of these will be part of an argument that the ecumenical and inter-faith dimensions of the CEBs have not been recognized and reflected upon adequately by the theological community.

2.2.1. Undercover National Gatherings, Politics and Dreams

In this sub-section I will try to demonstrate the subtlety of the CEBs' ecclesiastical politics that allowed them to remain within the structure of the church but also to keep some independence. These might partially explain their more open and inclusive attitude towards other denominations and other religions.

Inter-ecclesial is not a direct, simple and transparent name. Inter-ecclesial is a disguised name for a national gathering. But, why not call it a National Gathering? It is evident that the gathering of CEBs has everything to be considered a national event because of the breadth they have in terms of numbers, locations, representation from the dioceses, themes, political significance, ecumenical relations, and by the influence they have on the way the church in Brazil is journeying.

Despite that, the name claims to denote something different from what it is. If it gave the impression of being considered a national gathering it would have implications for its relationship with the Brazilian Conference of Bishops, CNBB, and

consequently with the Vatican. Dom Luis Fernandes, a retired bishop from the north-east of Brazil, recalls the choice of name and the reason for it in an interview with Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, the sociologist known as Pedrinho, the bishop said:

Dom Luis: ... Not to be seen as an attempt to go above or run away from the CNBB, we systematically tried to avoid the expression 'National Gathering'. We tried to find an expression that was less pretentious, almost neutral. Just a gathering amongst sister churches to exchange experiences...

Pedro: About the use of words like 'pastoral, 'Inter-ecclesial', they are new names to indicate something completely new. I remember you saying that they were Inter-ecclesial gatherings and not national gatherings of CEBs because a movement might have a national gathering. But, CEBs are not a movement. CEBs are church, and they are local church. So they need to meet as church.

Dom Luis: ... lots of the words we adopted in all these years have been through a theological filter but also through a political one.¹²¹

Besides the obvious characteristics of the CEBs' gatherings as inter-church gatherings, the real political and ecclesiastical difficulty of having a gathering of national expression named as such was its status before the Conference of Bishops and consequently before the Vatican. This was presumably because the processes involved in bringing about a gathering of CEBs would need to go through the motions and negotiations at CNBB level; in keeping the CNBB at arm's length, the CEBs were trying to avoid that political complication. The CEBs put in place a political

¹²¹ Testemunho de D. Luís Fernandes. In, Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético das CEBs**. p. 166.

device for guaranteeing autonomy, meanwhile keeping the link with the bishops. Covering up the national character of their gathering and presenting it as a local diocese arrangement was a paradoxical measure to try and preserve a link with the national structure of the church.

The disguise is simple. It is the idea of a meeting of churches. This also allowed them to claim for the CEBs an ecclesiastical nature. So, a name was chosen accordingly, Inter-ecclesial. This name meant that the CEBs' national gathering, despite its national character, was something quite different. It was a national gathering in a local diocese. The CEBs gathered by invitation of the local Roman Catholic Diocese and not directly under the umbrella of the CNBB. The political ecclesiastical concept behind the gatherings is that they are both an inter-church encounter and a local church event, hosted by a particular diocese, by invitation of the local bishop.

This convoluted way of conceptualizing is expressed and maintained in many ways. For example, it is the local bishop who writes the letter of invitation. This letter is always the first text opening the preparatory material published for the gathering. The bishop as the bishop of the host diocese plays an important role in the opening and closing celebrations of the gatherings, and maybe more importantly, it is the local diocese that co-ordinates the preparations for the event, although liaising closely with the CEBs' national coordinating team. There is a national secretariat and

a local secretariat. The local secretariat is constituted according to the location for the gathering.

So the first assertion about the CEBs' gatherings is that it is a national gathering. However, that it is a national gathering under cover of a local diocese, and that is for a reason. This political manouver is to allow the CEBs to be linked with the CNBB, and meanwhile to retain great autonomy. It is this autonomy that has allowed the CEBs' gatherings to develop the ecumenical and wider ecumenical practices they have throughout the years. This development comes as response to ideological changes, in particular the addition of pluralism to the socialist ideological background of the CEBs as showed in the periodization above.

Moving from the national to the ecclesial characteristic of the CEBs' gatherings, politics becomes more and more evident as the CEBs press on to make their dream a reality in the life of the church as a whole. That explains their *avant-guard* actions at the gatherings, but also gives them a sense of purpose and energy to keep pressing on with changes.

The under cover national meetings of the CEBs are openly considered to be inter-church meetings. Despite its unusual Greek name - in particular for events involving poor and uneducated people - they became and are well known as Inter-ecclesial gatherings of CEBs. They are also referred to sometimes as just Inter-ecclesials.

They are considered to be an important part of the journey of the CEBs. The CEBs'

memory as related by the Letter from the tenth Gathering that happened in 2000 shows this importance: "We remembered, also, the importance of the organizations which have helped our journey. We single-out the Inter-Church meetings. They mark twenty-five years [at that time] of journeying. Our famous 'CEBs' train' is growing longer and longer. There are already ten coaches [eleven coaches now]. Each one of them carries a huge amount of history of the journey."¹²²

The Inter-church meetings are a time for reflecting on the journey, on issues, strategies and methodology, and they are also a time for celebration. Their disguised name as church-encounter beyond being a political strategy is used because that is what they are. Inter-ecclesial is not a misnomer because they are indeed a church gathering:

Around the table of the Word and the Eucharist, our celebrations are always very creative, linked to the reality of the suffering people, enabling the link between faith and life. For us the celebrations are fundamental moments for reinforcing our faith in the God of life, for gathering strength for the journey, increasing our conviction in the following of Jesus. The bible told, sung, acted out and celebrated, so often ecumenically, is an important tool for our work and the source of inspiration for our mysticism in militancy.¹²³

Bishop Luis Fernandes referred to words adopted as having passed through a theological and a political filter. I have just tried to explain these two dimensions of

¹²² Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 9.

¹²³ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 10.

the name used for the national gatherings. But that is not all that is political in the Inter-ecclesial of CEBs.

One way of understanding the reluctance of the CEBs to be under the direct oversight of the CNBB is that they represent an opinion about and a direction in which the church should be going, they try and anticipate the future, they want to be the hope for the church. These gatherings are the place where the people of the CEBs nurture their dreams for the future of the church. For example, in the quotation above, they say they read the bible ecumenically. For the CEBs, dreams and politics go hand in hand. If the CEBs consider themselves as one way of being church, they still reserve the right to express their dreams for the church as a whole: "One of the great missions of the CEBs is the recovering of the dream, of being a dreamer."¹²⁴ And also for the future of society. For the latter they dream "equality in all dimensions, with abundant life, with justice and peace, without discrimination of class, of gender, or ethnicity, and giving value to the person as an individual. These were all presented as the great dream to be realized"¹²⁵ as expressed by the tenth Gathering in 2000. For the church they represent a dream of an ecumenical and wider ecumenical Christianity.

So a second assertion is to say that the national gatherings have grown in the direction of inclusion. They are developing towards ecumenical and wider

¹²⁴ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 17.

¹²⁵ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 18.

ecumenical practices as was demonstrated in our periodization (see 2.1). The inclusion they are living is a way of doing things, but it is more than just a methodology. It is a hermeneutical tool. It represents a world-view. It gives meaning and direction to the CEBs. Inclusion is a principle against which the whole of society can be tested. This principle holds in check the economy as well as the church and the CEBs themselves. For the CEBs, Inclusion represents a growing aspect of the CEBs. It has given them new energy and enthusiasm. Inclusion applies to many areas of the life of the church. They have this to say to the church:

“We have a dream of a participative church, all ministerial, united in its respect for the diversity, a missionary church. A mother church, welcoming, poor, committed to the cause of the excluded and open to new challenges. The CEBs feel deeply the fact that they are almost all of the time deprived of the Eucharistic table in their Sunday celebrations, and they ask the church to rethink, urgently, the issue of ministries. They dream also of a church where power will be shared, opening space for the participation of women in all instances of decision-making and of service.”¹²⁶

This last paragraph was cited again in its entirety in the Letter from the eleventh Gathering. The CEBs are able to be critical of themselves when this openness and participation is not achieved in their own context: “Within the church and the CEBs themselves we have noticed that there can be exclusion in direct contrast with the project of Jesus.”¹²⁷ This is reaffirmed again and again not as a breaking point with the church but as an expectation of what that church may be, and the changes called

¹²⁶ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta ‘as Comunidades**. paragraph 19.

¹²⁷ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 9.

for by the CEBs for a wider-than-Christianity inclusion and openness in the church. The participation they are asking for, the recognition of women's ministry and place in the church, as well as the way power is exercised is certainly the CEBs' dream. But their dream goes further to the area of inculturation, and a relationship of respect and dialogue with Afro-descendent and Amerindians (*Ava*) as shown in 2.1.3 above.

These dreams are overtly political and ecclesiastical statements. They are a conversation from within the church itself. The dreams also touch society. They speak about "going against the flow in a society where wealth is accumulated in the hands of few, where power is centralized, where knowledge is privatized."¹²⁸ In the same sentence of the Letter from the tenth Gathering, they move from talking about society to talking about the church: "the CEBs dream of a church where all the leadership witness by their practices a new way of relating to one another in church (*convivência Eclesial*) based on sharing, on participation and on communion."¹²⁹

With this connection between self-criticism and leading by example, they say they are prepared to face up to the challenge to change the CEBs first and to make changes in the church, and that they are ready to make some of the dreams mentioned above a reality, and they hope this will show the way for society in general. Sharing, participation and communion is the spelling out of what inclusion involves.

¹²⁸ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 20.

¹²⁹ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 20.

We want to make reality some of our dreams in relation to the church. This will happen through the study and celebration of the word of God; through courses in theology for lay people; popular mission; through the involvement of the people in different pastoral areas and services, and more controversially through the participation of women in different ministries and inculturated liturgies. In society the dream is becoming more concrete through the participation in social and popular struggles, in the struggle for agrarian reform with the force of movements such as the Landless Rural Workers, in the struggle for respecting the dignity of Black people, of women, of Indigenous peoples.¹³⁰

They clearly dream about relating to Black people and Indigenous peoples in a more inclusive way. It does not mean that the CEBs have surrendered their Christian identity. There are characteristics that can demonstrate the Christian and church credentials of the CEBs' gatherings. For example, the devotion to the bible is noticeable; there is a full-hearted defense of the importance of worship; there is also the commitment to the social and political agenda of the oppressed, inspired by a view of Jesus as poor and Liberator.

The very inclusive nature of the CEBs represents a change in the way the church relates in particular to other faiths and cultures. The CEBs call it a dream but, in fact, with their all-embracing celebrations, inculturated liturgies which are ecumenical, and in more recent gatherings incorporate elements from Ava and Afro-Brazilian religions, they operate as an inclusive church.

¹³⁰ Décimo Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades**. paragraph 25.

Their national character contributes greatly to their message, in terms of spreading it as a proposal for the church as a whole. Their claim of ecclesiastical belonging and status gives them a mission and a purpose. But this is not quite recognized as we shall see in the next sub-section.

There are four spheres in which the CEBs' ecumenical and interfaith practices are not recognized. It is important to point to these omissions. There is a clear task ahead for the theological community interested in understanding the CEBs' movement and its contribution to the church. The CEBs consider theology a second step. They see that action comes first, then the theological reflection helps to re-shape action. It is in this second step that we identify some omissions and the need for a critical and organizing theological framework in the area of inter-religious relations based on the CEBs' national gatherings' practices. I will devote some space to discuss a series of scholars' views on the CEBs. None of them regards the CEBs' ecumenism and inter-faith relations as prominent enough to be at the fore of their theological work. I will strive to prove otherwise, i.e., that the ecumenical and inter-faith relations are fundamental to the way the CEBs are developing.

2.2.2. The Ecumenical and Interfaith Character of the Inter-ecclesial Gatherings, the Tip of the Iceberg – Four Spheres

The theological/political filter that guided the nomenclature used for the national gatherings detailed by Bishop Luis Fernandes in the previous sub-section perhaps might explain also what I detect to be the tacit dimension of the interdenominational

and inter-religious engagement of the CEBs. It is tacit because although it is an integral part of the CEBs' gatherings, it is not reflected appropriately in theological academic work about the CEBs. Is this a political filter or is it an oversight and an omission?

The issue here is that the CEBs from the beginning had a wider understanding of the Gospel than just for church or Christians. They took the Gospel in its social and economic implications. That was also demonstrated as an ecumenical concern. As the ecumenical concern grows, a wider ecumenical dimension increasingly finds expression in the gatherings. But this has not been acknowledged enough either by the history and analyses of the CEBs' movement or by the theological work that accompanies the CEBs' practices.

The first sphere of omission about the growing ecumenical and interfaith nature of the CEBs has to do with the silence or ambiguity about the wider ecumenical practices of the CEBs as exemplified in one of the preparatory materials for the tenth Gathering, the Combonian Magazine in a number dedicated to that CEBs' gathering, that we have already used in Chapter 1 (see 1.1). That Magazine had a distribution much beyond the participants of the gatherings. So it is an important work.

The Combonian Magazine¹³¹ mentioned the wider ecumenism of the CEBs minimally and not as part of the article defining what the CEBs are (see 1.1). Another article in the Magazine states that: “Afro militant people in the church, Black and White, lay and ordained, do not limit themselves to denounce racism only, or to slot into the liturgy Afro-Brazilian forms and cultural expressions... Through out the country mushroom initiatives which journey on the path of serious and deep dialogue with religions of Afro-origin.”¹³² This is too important to be left without further treatment. Not to have engaged with this remark and describe it better and analyse it properly seems an oversight, to say the least, as the Magazine sets itself the task of being part of the preparation for those who were to attend the meeting in *Bahia*. One could conclude that some participants would be ill prepared to be faced with quite challenging scenes of inter-religious exchange if the only source of preparation they had access to was that special edition of that religious Magazine.

That minimal treatment contrasts with the *Texto-Base*, which is the official preparatory material for participants of the gathering, although it has a smaller circulation than the Combonian Magazine. The *Texto-Base* for the tenth Gathering took the theme of inter-religious dialogue openly (we shall come back to this also later in Chapter 4). The text says: “[The] inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue is a way of being community. It is however still a dream to be made reality. The experiences lived so far encourage us to continue seeking that way of experiencing,

¹³¹ O que é isso? Para entender melhor o que são as comunidades de base. (2000). **Revista Sem Fronteiras, a Igreja do Brasil aberta ao Mundo**. 281. p. 25.

¹³² Lima, P. P. (2000) Eu nasci há dois mil anos atrás. **Revista Sem Fronteiras**. p. 27.

sharing and celebrating God, going beyond the denominational and religious barriers.”¹³³ This might not have gone all the way to explain what was to come at the tenth Gathering, but it set the task ahead in terms of relationship with Afro cultures and religions, explicitly expressed: to go beyond religious barriers.

The gatherings of the CEBs have become a kind of symbol for the CEBs’ life and ministry. This includes also the gatherings as a symbol for ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practices. The gatherings are an expression of the CEBs; as they are also an instrument to offer leadership to the movement. The ambiguity of the Combonian Magazine sticks out if compared with the evidence that there is something significant happening in reference to ecumenical and wider ecumenical matters in the CEBs gatherings, as I will continue to show below and also in Part 2.

A history of the CEBs national gatherings can be a testimony of the growing ecumenical and interfaith nature of the CEBs. This history is long and detailed but significant to register and bring this character of the CEBs gathering to light against any omissions.

With their last meeting in Minas Gerais in 2005 and the eleventh of the national Gatherings, the CEBs commemorated thirty years of what is known as the ‘Train of the CEBs’. The ‘Train of the CEBs’ is a logo of the so-called Inter-ecclesial

¹³³ Regina, S. (1999) “Comunidade in diálogo na causa Afro-brasileira.” In **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 Anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base**. Paulo Afonso: Editora Fonte Viva. p. 220.

gatherings; each wagon tells the story of one of the meetings, the last wagon being the one in Ipatinga in Minas Gerais. The previous gathering happened in Ilhéus, Bahia, in July 2000. With an irregular pattern of intervals between the gatherings the 'Train of the CEBs' takes their history back to 1975 when the very first Gathering took place in Vitória.

The participation in that first Inter-ecclesial was relatively small (seventy delegates) including some bishops and some advisors. From this first wagon, the very beginning of the national gatherings, the Letter to the communities summarizing the conclusions of the event already points to a clear wider perspective. The letter says in paragraph 1.3 "that we should insist in the presence of the church in the world, promoting the well being of the wider human community."¹³⁴ It continues to affirm that the ecclesial community "has to be open to collaborate with other people and groups through service to the construction of a more brother/sisterly and just world."¹³⁵

Even beyond that previous point they assert in wider ecumenical terms that the "popular religiosity ought to be respected and affirmed, valuing its gestures and signs... as important in the liberation process."¹³⁶ This indicates clearly from the very first Inter-ecclesial a tolerant approach to different religiosity that will grow throughout

¹³⁴ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 156.

¹³⁵ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 156.

¹³⁶ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 157.

the development of the so-called 'Train of the CEBs'. Their analyses go deeper into a request that the church surpasses any exploitation of popular religiosity, that both the church culture and the popular religiosity be submitted to a critical revision in the light of the Gospel. They suggest that the values of protest and prophetic denunciation present in the popular culture be discovered and esteemed. In this same direction of tolerance to difference, they also demand that people should not be restricted in finding new forms and contents for their spiritual life.¹³⁷

It cannot be denied that was a truly open and inviting beginning, albeit small, promising ecumenical and wider ecumenical developments for future gatherings. The second Inter-ecclesial followed suit in terms of its ecumenism; it took place in Vitória in Espírito Santo State, in 1976. The Letter from that gathering refers to representatives from churches of Christ, in plural. There were representatives from other churches in Brazil and from churches in Mexico, Chile, Belgium, Peru, Germany and Austria.¹³⁸

At the next gathering, the third, they had two hundred people in João Pessoa, Paraíba. By the fourth Gathering, in 1981, the national character of it was starting to be demonstrated: for example in the preparation for this fourth Meeting there were "three hundred reports provided by communities covering nineteen different regions of Brazil... there were also pre-meetings of the CEBs at a regional level where the

¹³⁷ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 157.

¹³⁸ Segundo Intereclesial. (1976) "Conclusões do Encontro." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 160.

reports were discussed”.¹³⁹ In the gathering itself there were two hundred and eight participants. In the Letter from Itaici, where the fourth Inter-ecclesial took place, there is an explicit reference to the growing ecumenical spirit:

We notice that despite so much suffering and death, the communities are growing inclusive in numbers. Encouraged by the word of God that calls us, we are lifting up our heads, uniting more and more to respond to God’s calling. We have discovered that we do not struggle alone. There are many brothers and sisters who, together with us, are on the same journey. They are from other Christian churches who, like us, have committed themselves to the struggle because of their faith in Jesus Christ. There are also other brothers and sisters of good will who put themselves on the side of the oppressed because of their love for life and for people.¹⁴⁰

This affirmation from the fourth Gathering that there are “... other brothers and sisters of good will...” is a simple but direct statement of the ecumenism and wider ecumenism of the CEBs. This is a significant statement and would not have been uttered otherwise. It is more than a rhetorical gesture because it indicates a real openness to non-Catholics who join the struggle; and beyond that it indicates openness to those of non-faith or of different faiths if they too join the struggle for liberation.

The fifth Gathering took place in Canindé, Ceará State in 1983. Five hundred people took part in it. From here on the numbers of participants rocketed.

¹³⁹ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 53.

¹⁴⁰ Quarto Intereclesial. (1981) “Carta de Itaici.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 169.

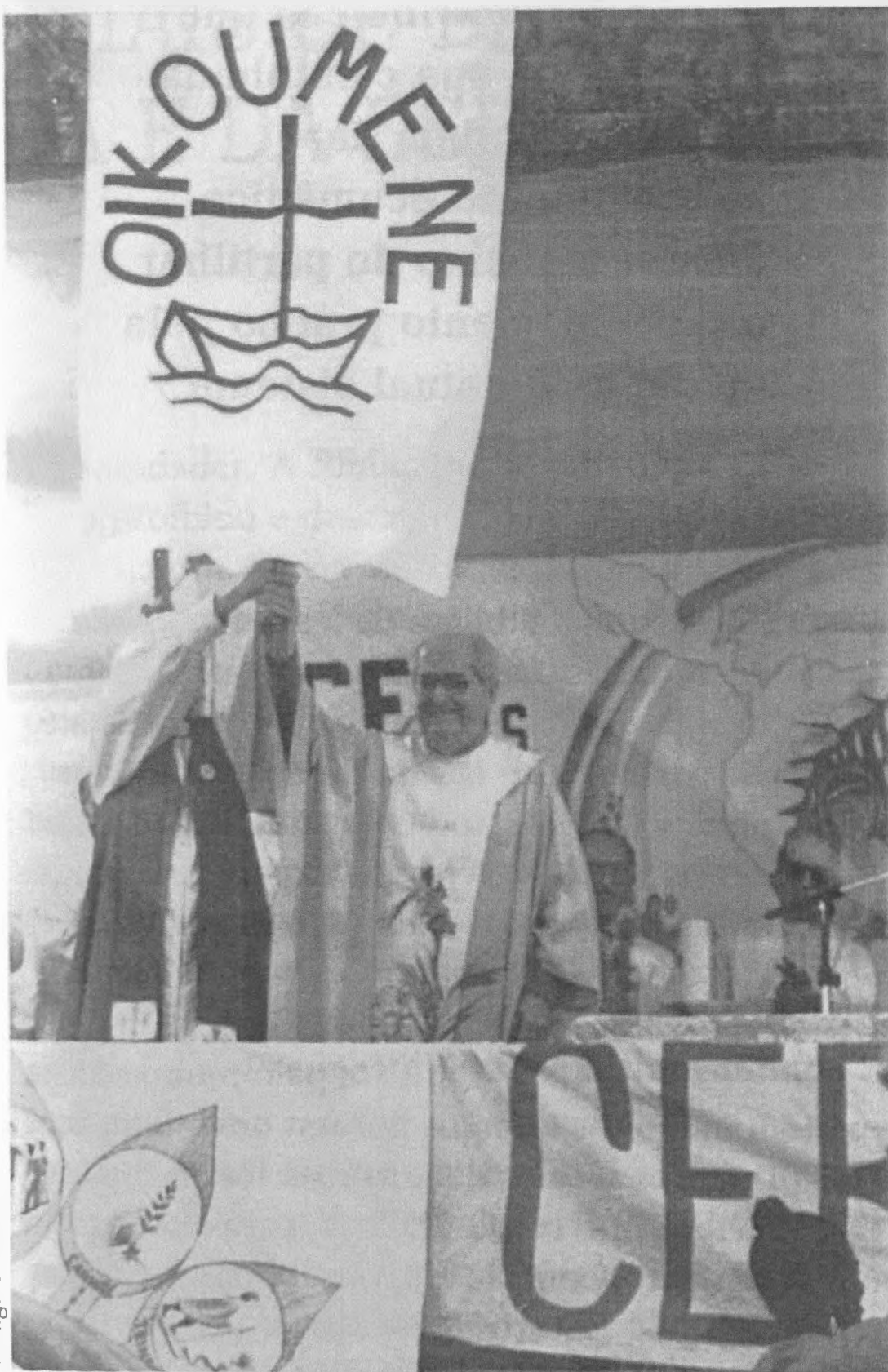
A turning point in the success of the gatherings was still to come with the sixth Inter-ecclesial, in Goiás (1986), which amounted to one thousand, six hundred and forty seven people, three times more than the previous one. There were other reasons why the sixth Gathering was a benchmark on the journey of the Train of CEBs' gatherings. Those reasons had to do with the fact that they were able to make the struggle for liberation more specific in terms of the struggle of the marginalized groups, along the lines of ethnicity, gender and social/education status. For the *Avas*, for the Afro-descendants and women, as well as, for workers in general, the CEBs became even more focused in their intent to seek liberation of their oppression and affirmation of their identity. This has already been explored in the periodization above.

The Train of the CEBs kept adding a wagon at a time, and increasing the number of passengers. For the seventh Gathering, they met in Duque de Caxias, in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro in 1989.

Protestants had been present at the Inter-ecclesial since the first Gathering in 1975. Later on, at the sixth Gathering, in 1986, there were twenty Protestants from different denominations. On that occasion, not only were they an integral part of the meeting, but beyond that they had the opportunity to lead one of the liturgical sessions of the gathering. But the seventh Gathering represented a definite move towards a more expressive Protestant participation and contribution in the gatherings. There were around one hundred and twenty Protestant participants, from twelve different

denominations and fifteen different States of Brazil. In Duque de Caxias, the local Bishop, Dom Mauro Morelli lifted up the "*Oikoumene*" flag at the altar. Beside him the other person holding the flag was a Presbyterian Minister (see photo below). The presence and input from the Protestants received such recognition that from there onwards the gatherings have had Protestant representatives on the organizing national commission.¹⁴¹ This is yet stronger evidence of the importance and acceptance of Protestants by the CEBs, now being part of the national body that responds for the organization of the gatherings.

¹⁴¹ Um pouco da história da participação de evangélicos nos Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs. (1996) **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença, CEBs: Vida e Esperança nas Massas uma contribuição dos Evangélicos ao 9 Encontro Intereclesial das CEBs.** pp. 8-9.



A Protestant participant at the seventh Gathering, Maria da Fé Viana reflects that the ecumenism of the CEBs influenced her life in several ways including: “My decision to assert - for myself - that I am an Afro-descendent and also to leave behind the idea of the denominational exclusivity.”¹⁴² She continues to say that what has touched her most in her ecumenical experience is, “the hospitality of the [Roman] Catholic families, the study groups and the friendships that I made.”¹⁴³ Then she also says about a particular experience that makes her feel proud: “Now that I am fifty years old, I took part in a beauty calendar to celebrate ‘blackness’. This was in response to the invitation of a Priest and a Nun.”¹⁴⁴ Maria da Fé talks also about the multi-faith aspect: “it gives me pleasure also to see the Popular Education Course having teachers from diverse religious backgrounds.”¹⁴⁵ She adds that, “her specific concern is with Afro-Brazilian religions.”¹⁴⁶ This sort of testimony of participants like Maria da Fé brings the ecumenical and inter-faith aspects of the CEBs’ gatherings to the fore.

A tour around the train of the CEBs reveals that the themes connect the gatherings to one another as the train of the CEBs goes forward. As the train keeps moving, ecumenism - a feature of the CEBs’ gatherings - becomes more and more overtly professed and practiced. Considering the traditional hostility between Protestant

¹⁴² Maria da Fé. (1996) Entrevista. **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença, CEBs: Vida e Esperança nas Massas uma contribuição dos Evangélicos ao 9 Encontro Intereclesial das CEBs.** p. 23.

¹⁴³ Maria da Fé. (1996) Entrevista. **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença.** p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ Maria da Fé. (1996) Entrevista. **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença.** p. 23.

¹⁴⁵ Maria da Fé. (1996) Entrevista. **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença.** p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Maria da Fé. (1996) Entrevista. **Suplemento Especial de Tempo e Presença.** p. 23.

Churches and Roman Catholicism in Brazil, ecumenism wide or not is a remarkable characteristic of the CEBs. The CEBs' participants placed great importance on ecumenical and wider ecumenical aspect of the CEBs, as exemplified by Maria da Fé.

"CEBs, God's People, journeying towards liberation", was the theme of the seventh Gathering, an explicitly ecumenical gathering. But maybe the most obvious theme for the issues to be engaged with in this dissertation was the theme of the eighth Gathering, "CEBs, God's people, born out of oppressed cultures". The preparatory material for the eighth gathering remarks in almost militant manner: "The CEBs overcome confessional prejudices. They unite themselves to the churches and other cults in the struggle for the rights of the poor. Doing that the CEBs recognize other brothers and sisters entering in dialogue and prayer with them."¹⁴⁷ As can be observed and is openly affirmed by the *Texto-Base* the theme was conducive to a wider approach to ecumenism and to "overcome confessional prejudices" against other "churches and cults". The eighth Inter-ecclesial stands as a symbol of the determination of the CEBs to assert their agenda to overcome confessional prejudices of the church (see 2.1.3).

The ninth Gathering in 1997 came out strong with its inter-religious celebrations (see 2.1.3). Heitor Frisotti, a priest working in Bahia, wrote to invite participants to move away "from a mentality that saw other religions as a threat for the Faith and

¹⁴⁷ Equipe Central do Oitavo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1991) **Culturas Oprimidas e a Evangelização na América Latina, Texto-Base**. Santa Maria: Gráfica Pallotti. p. 15.

something of the devil,"¹⁴⁸ to overcome the blindness and silence, and to enter into dialogue with people of different religions. He says: "It is possible, slowly, to find out that all that supports the people from the *Terreiros* is a conviction that God, through the *Orixás*, has not abandoned that people. Their old stories, their traditions, their legends and songs speak of that continuous presence of God."¹⁴⁹ He carries on to say that through the ministry of the priestesses "interpreting the *buzios* (reading sea shells), the will of God can be known, and through the consultation with the *Orixás* the Axé can be reinforced, i.e., [the Axé which is] the force and the grace of God."¹⁵⁰ In his text, he really stirs up the CEBs towards a more open engagement with inter-religious relations.

The theme and the dates for the tenth Gathering were voted on during the ninth Gathering. The Millennium and the five hundred years of the arrival of the Portuguese played an important role in the decision about the date and place of the tenth. As the Coordinator of the tenth Gathering remembers: "... the federal government had a project ready to commemorate officially the five hundred years. The CEBs wanted to celebrate the event in quite a different manner, from the perspective of the Amerindians, Black people and ordinary folk."¹⁵¹ They wanted to

¹⁴⁸ Frisotti, H. (1996) "CEBs and Religiões Afro-Brasileiras." *In 9 Encontro Intereclesial, CEBs: Vida e Esperança nas Massas, Texto-Base*. São Paulo: Editora Salesiana Dom Bosco. p. 39.

¹⁴⁹ Frisotti, H. (1996) "CEBs and Religiões Afro-Brasileiras." *In 9 Intereclesial, Texto-Base*. pp. 39 and 43.

¹⁵⁰ Frisotti, H. (1996) "CEBs and Religiões Afro-Brasileiras." *In 9 Intereclesial, Texto-Base*. p. 43.

¹⁵¹ Pe. Edgard (2000) Eu vou pra Bahia, eu vou. *Revista Sem Fronteiras, a Igreja do Brasil aberta ao Mundo*, 281. p. 23.

be a sign that not everybody agreed with the general mood of celebration for the five hundred years of colonialism.

The anniversary of five hundred years of the arrival of the Portuguese was to be reflected upon critically. Consequently, it was decided that the tenth Gathering would be in Southern Bahia. Moreover, the critical engagement with five hundred years of history was reinforced by the active participation of fifty-eight Amerindians, representing twenty-seven different *Ava-Brazilian* nations. In Ilhéus, Bahia, the Afro-Brazilian influence was very much present (for more see 3.1.1). This inclusive approach was spelt out in the preparatory material. The introduction of it was written by Padre José Oscar Beozzo, the Coordinator of the CESEP, who says: "The CEBs propose a jubilee of justice and hope for the poor and excluded, and a dialogue of ecumenical cooperation enlarged to the borders of other religions and of to all the men and women of good will."¹⁵² Although the text falls short again of describing what was to come in Ilhéus in terms of the exuberance of the gathering's inter-religious celebrations, and although it falls short also of discussing what it meant in terms of touching the borders of other religions, it still spelt out clearly what their intention and their aims were.

The CEBs wanted to be a symbol to church and nation. Their visibility maybe far exceeds their actual statistical presence. Perhaps the novelty of their ecumenical and wider ecumenical discourse and practice and the strength of their organizational

¹⁵² Beozzo, O. (1999) "Introdução." In **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 Anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base**. Fonte Paulo Afonso: Viva, p. 9.

skills and structure might, however, justify their high profile. The CEBs try and make the church move forwards as Padre Edgard, the Coordinator for the tenth Gathering remarks:

How many we are, is not the most important thing. If in the past we had pretensions to be the whole or the majority of the church, today we believe that the CEBs represent one of the answers, always contemporary, to the socio-religious reality. We try to be a 'provocation' to the church and to the world... the interesting thing is to realize that although we are a small percentage of the church, maybe 5%, these people are entirely engaged in the ecclesial, social and even political processes.¹⁵³

Therefore, in his view, CEBs are of a simple nature, CEBs are church: a way of being church, and a proposal of a particular way for the church, as a whole, to be. They are a church with a wider and inclusive perspective. They are open and embracing differences. They represent a faith in the God of all. Their life and work though could be helped by a theological reflection undertaken by a bigger theological community. And their message would be more widespread if it was not ignored.

The eleventh Gathering was anticipated in a song infused with ecumenical spirit:

Commitment with the excluded people... to change our history
Our most deep desire is ecumenical communion...
Spirituality of liberation, witnessing and prayer, sharing and
solidarity
Builds up embrace and welcome...

¹⁵³ Pe. Edgard (2000) Eu vou pra Bahia, Eu vou. **Revista Sem Fronteiras, a Igreja do Brasil aberta ao Mundo**, 281. p. 24.

Drums of the Black people/ flute of the Ava-people/ They call for
this party/ Of faith and solidarity.¹⁵⁴

After this long description of 'the train' of the CEBs, we identified signs of growth in ecumenical and wider ecumenical concerns, initiatives and presence. This is offered to the whole church even if not well represented in the theological work about the CEBs.

The second sphere of omission or ambiguity has to do with identity. The identity of the CEBs has not only being shaped by their social and political leaning towards social justice as we have seen so far. The CEBs have been growing increasingly ecumenical and inter-faith in their approach. An omission of these important characteristics can have quite significant implications in the progress the CEBs are making and their contribution to the church and to the theological debate. Leaving this without tackling could have serious implications for the CEBs too. The danger lies in the CEBs losing their critical reflection.

Andrew Dawson overlooks the ecumenical and inter-religious aspect of the movement. Dawson also sees the CEBs as a product of an institutional plan rather than an organically grown movement. He sees the CEBs as being a product very much inspired and guided by the bishops through the Pastoral Plans of the CNBB

¹⁵⁴ Costa. Julieta A. **Hino do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs**, verses 1, 3, 7, 8, <http://www.cebs.org.br/CEBS11/novopenerei.html>

and in some cases reinforced by the supportive Conferences of Medellín and Puebla.¹⁵⁵ He sees in the CEBs a movement that slowly but steadily loses its political edge, becoming more spiritualized precisely because of pressure coming from a more conservative wave in the Vatican.¹⁵⁶ Our findings in this research disagree with his conclusions. Firstly, we have found the CEBs to be much more organic than planned from above. Secondly, this organic character gives the CEBs a more independent attitude, open to inculturation and to some exchange and permeability with other cultures and religions. What Dawson misses is the new wine the CEBs represent for the institutional church in terms of their concern for interfaith relations and their plural and inclusive practices.

The CEBs' ecumenism and inter-faith practices grow out of their experience in this sense from what/who they are, out of the relations and situations that happened at a grassroots level. These then take other dimensions with the national gathering of the CEBs as explained above (see 2.2.1). However the CEBs' identity remained connected with a grassroots level, where their identity and ecumenical features were/are forged.

Jether Ramalho, a Minister of the Congregational Church and a well-known ecumenist in Brazil, gives his testimony with warmth about the ecumenical identity of

¹⁵⁵ Dawson, A. (1999) "The origins and character of the base ecclesial community: a Brazilian Perspective." In Rowland, C. (ed.), **The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 114 and 115.

¹⁵⁶ Dawson, A. (1999) "The origins." In Rowland, C. (ed.), **The Cambridge Companion**. p. 123.

the CEBs. This testimony is in the book about the CEBs' DNA mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, 1.2:

When I started being with the CEBs, some images and experiences were very present. The relationship with the bible, the opportunity of being together without a prominent hierarchy suggested a similarity with the Protestant communities. My affinity with the CEBs was very natural... The ecumenical element has been a constant part of my life. I thought: "the CEBs are a sign that the Spirit of God works in places and forms that are different from my own experience and life". I went to the second Inter-ecclesial meeting and since then have had the opportunity to take part in all the other Inter-ecclesial gatherings.¹⁵⁷

Jether says along with his local ecumenical links with the CEBs that he has been taking part in all the Inter-ecclesial gatherings since the second one. This is very relevant as it demonstrates through the story of at least one Protestant participant that the ecumenical relations have been thought about, sought and implemented from the very early stages of the national gathering. The ecumenical concern of the organizers of the national gathering manifests in my view the whole approach of the CEBs' movement, its political bedrock and its theological understanding. It is clear from his testimony also that the CEBs made a Protestant pastor feel welcome. This is to say their way of being and the dynamics in their meetings are permeable to the presence of someone from a different Christian denomination. Welcome is important for sure, but Jether goes beyond that to feel 'affinity' within them. He spells out what in the CEBs identity/way of being that made him feel like that: their relationship with the bible and the freedom of a more lay-oriented group.

¹⁵⁷ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 34.

Furthermore, this Minister from the Protestant tradition testifies to the importance of his relationship with the CEBs at a more local level:

I spent three years of my ministry in Baixada Fluminense, in the region of Duque de Caxias, São João do Meriti. In that region my experience relating to the CEBs was much more concrete and organic. The church that manifests itself through the Spirit marked my life. In that way, I understood not only the origin of CEBs but also their inspiration and their deep-roots.¹⁵⁸

The testimony of this Congregationalist Minister continues by exploring the character of the CEBs' ecumenism. He talks about a popular ecumenism, in the sense of an ecumenism of the grassroots: "This was the realization that some elements of the concerns of the people could be treated ecumenically. We started thinking that beyond the official ecumenism, the ecclesiastical and institutional ecumenism, there was another form of ecumenism."¹⁵⁹ He means that this is the popular ecumenism that grows up around issues like combating hunger, clean water, education, health, etc. Jether says: "There was a realization that there were other companions on the journey."¹⁶⁰

He wrote an article that appeared in the preparatory material for the fifth Inter-ecclesial Gathering of CEBs and he was also invited to address the Gathering on this very theme: "The atmosphere of a feast. It was in front of a crowd of many thousands, like a demonstration. I said on that occasion that there are problems that

¹⁵⁸ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 34.

¹⁵⁹ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. pp. 40 and 41.

¹⁶⁰ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 41.

are bigger than the ecclesiastical issues.”¹⁶¹ Clearly, the expression of the CEBs’ ecumenism at the national gatherings is rooted in the identity forged in local practices. This can be seen here how from a local shared ecumenical journey Jether becomes an ecumenical advisor and contributor to the national gatherings.

To further this argument that part of the explanation for the CEBs’ growing wider ecumenism can be found in the life and way of being of the local base communities the remarks of Thereza Cavalcante are worth a long quotation. She is a lecturer at the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro, and one the advisors to the National Commission for Inter-ecclesial gatherings of CEBs:

In Rio there is a problem with violence... we have an ecumenical group visiting prisons... I have never seen such an incredible ecumenism as I’ve seen in this group.... There are people from several Protestant Churches... There everybody is united, including people from the Afro Religions... You see someone from the *Candomblé* call the missionary from the Pentecostal Church a sister/brother... The person from the Afro Religion says: “I am discriminated against in the prison because I cannot lead worship, they prohibited me from bringing my *Atabaque* [African drum]...” She faces real discrimination... Then, this is a new ecumenism that is surfacing in the face of the difficulties. With this sensitivity the churches offer a ministry of service. There is a creativity that is generating ecumenical services. That creativity expands like an explosion in the Inter-ecclesial gatherings, because each time there is more and more to be shown... Now the sensitivity for this ecumenism comes really from the grassroots.¹⁶²

As pointed out by Tereza, this ecumenical and wider ecumenical way of engaging with mission will explode, burst into celebration at the Inter-ecclesial gatherings. It is

¹⁶¹ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 41.

¹⁶² Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. pp. 100 and 101.

however rooted in the missionary and pastoral work of the CEBs. To recognize it and to give it the attention and theological reflection it deserves would be very important for the growth and development of this increasing plural practices of the CEBs.

To recognize them and to work theologically with it would be also a way of facing the contradictions present in the life of the CEBs. Not all is harmonious and well integrated practices. Not everybody is convinced by such a view expressed by Tereza Cavalcanti above. There is a less enthusiastic view of the ecumenical and wider ecumenical relations. Not everybody sees them in that hopeful and harmonious way. For example, Solange Rodrigues, a sociologist working for an ecumenical NGO called ISER accompanying the CEBs since 1986, has her reservations about the ecumenicity of the CEBs. She says that she has seen some leaders of the base communities “incorporating the discourse of the holy war, combating other religious experiences, a great permeability to the charismatic discourse.”¹⁶³ She expresses concerns that the Charismatic renewal style influences the base communities, bringing real difficulties in developing ecumenical relations. It is important to register this other side of the argument because it shows the difficulties and divisiveness this way of being church brings. Whilst I do not want to dwell on them, one should not underestimate the difficulties.

¹⁶³ Andrade, W. C. (org.) (2005) **O Código Genético**. p. 106.

The third sphere of omission I want to raise has to do with a populist/journalistic interpretation of the CEBs. That interpretation seems not to realize that the CEBs have indeed moved with the times, tempering the ideology they had embraced before with present issues of difference. In this way it misses the CEBs' contemporary contribution to Christianity.

The CEBs' contributions have been more than inculturation. They have entered a level of interpenetration with traditional religions and cultures that is further than inculturation. A lack of critical theological engagement with this contribution of the CEBs means a loss in both directions: the CEBs miss the second step of their work, namely, the theological reflection, and the theological community misses the contribution the CEBs have in terms of the new dimensions their ecumenism and wider ecumenism bring.

An author who falls short of paying sufficient attention to the ecumenical and wider ecumenical dimension of the CEBs is Margaret Hebblethwaite. Her journalistic *Introduction to the Base Communities* allows many voices from participants and theologians to be heard. She lists and explains recurrent themes, and gives a panoramic view of the CEBs and Liberation Theology. While ecumenism appears in the words of individuals who speak about it, ecumenism does not become an item in its own right in her book. In one recollection from the seventh Inter-ecclesial gathering, a participant says: "The most important and creative liturgies of this Assembly were ecumenical, including the three and three-quarter-hour opening

ceremony, attended by five thousand people.”¹⁶⁴ Despite this, she fails to make this a topic and develop it.

Although she talks about the work of the catechists among the Aymaras, about inculturation and the urgent need to affirm the culture of the peoples, she says that these are illustrations of a very different approach to evangelization that “embraces inculturation, dialogue and option for the poor, as well as proclamation of the Gospel.”¹⁶⁵ But this does not lead to a reflection or emphasis on what is a growing concern for the CEBs, their inclusive approach, their concern for difference, and the ecumenical and inter-religious character of their gatherings. Her analyses stay at the stage of the socialist leaning, disregarding the importance of other developments within the CEBs’ movement.

In one of the most promising reflections in her book about this matter of difference, Hebblethwaite says: “To insist on a European inculturation of Christianity is a form of imperialism. Sometimes liberation theologians talk of ‘incarnation’ in this sense, stressing that God became flesh in a particular historical reality and culture.”¹⁶⁶ This remark shows some awareness and concern for dialogue with other cultures and maybe religions. But that is not expanded. Our preoccupation is to make this concern for dialogue and the CEBs’ practices in this area explicit.

¹⁶⁴ Hebblethwaite, M. (1994) **Base Communities, an Introduction**. Mahwah: Paulist Press. p. 73.

¹⁶⁵ Hebblethwaite, M. (1994) **Base Communities**. p. 115.

¹⁶⁶ Hebblethwaite, M. (1994) **Base Communities**. p. 154.

Therefore, I shall attempt to describe, in the CEBs' own words, how their prayer and social engagement has taken them to a more inclusive and plural practice of Christianity. I would like to show in the more recent national gatherings of the CEBs, the eleventh, how respect for difference and inclusion actually happened, how in the celebratory spirit of the eleventh Gathering other dimensions of the spirituality of the people were incorporated by the CEBs. And, in particular, showing how their methodology of seeing, judging, acting and celebrating - is helping them to embrace a wider spirituality.

The Inter-ecclesial gatherings of CEBs are basically composed of two elements: reflection and celebration. The atmosphere of the Inter-ecclesial is of great joy and celebration. There is the simple arrangement for hospitality and food. There is the noise and the fun of people meeting and engaging with one another. There are the show-like opening, cultural, and closing celebrations. Even the reflective work is also quite upbeat: the speaker introduces the theme, soon they split into smaller groups, and discussion enriches the theme with sharing and debate. They feed back into the plenary and later after all smaller groups have spoken an advisor summarizes it all. As the session is happening, there are teams of animators, to introduce a song, to call people together with music, dance and poetry. This atmosphere is conducive to deep sharing of experience. The work enables understanding, and links/connections tend to happen. All of this invites some permeability and exchange.

The days start with prayers and worship in the different groups divided by theme.

These are creative liturgies with a rich variety of symbols linked to the cultural social and political struggles of the particular group, maybe Afro-descendent issues, maybe a group for Ava-Brazilian issues, or a group for social and political matters - agrarian reform etc. The prayers are vibrant, with lively music and movement, with presentation of gifts and symbols, story telling and sharing of experiences. They are very colourful and moving. They are also emerging from their own lives, out of their experiences and their cultural background.

Despite this celebrative atmosphere they still manage to produce rich and disciplined theological work throughout the day. And, coherent with the methodology of seeing, judging, acting and celebrating, the eleventh Gathering was dedicated each day to one of the methodological approaches, i.e., seeing, judging, acting.

On the first day, the Letter from the eleventh Gathering reports that they “peeled [their] eyes to see the reality of exclusion in its many different expressions: social, economic, political, ethnic, cultural and religious.”¹⁶⁷ The Brazilian social context justifies relating the reference to ethnic and religious discrimination to concrete issues around discrimination against the Afro-descendants and the Ava-indigenous people. The Letter says that in many situations “people are left by the side of the road of life, how they are forced to the margins of society, in particular women, the elderly, the unemployed, the migrants, the homeless people, the prisoners, people

¹⁶⁷ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 08.

living with disability, the landless workers, those vulnerably housed, those who fall prey to drugs, the victims of sexual discrimination, amongst many others.”¹⁶⁸ The Letter carries on to say that “society as a whole is characterized by divisions, authoritarianism, corruption and exclusion that many times are found even in the churches themselves.”¹⁶⁹ In a self-critical statement they are prepared to recognize what they see in themselves first: “Although the CEBs are rooted in the word of God, in the project of the risen Christ, in the church’s teachings and documents, and although the CEBs are recognized as a new and old way of being church, we realize that within the CEBs themselves and in the church as a whole there exists exclusion, and that stands in contradiction to the project of Jesus.”¹⁷⁰ They go further, to commit themselves to change this situation, recognizing the need for conversion, and the need to reconcile theory and practice in their daily lives in the light of the word of God.¹⁷¹ Exclusion is seen as sin. And if it is committed by the CEBs, it requires repentance and change.

Even what could be seen as a simple process of observing, of trying to see reality for what it is, shows that the CEBs have the ability to be articulate and to recognize in themselves their limitations. Also this exercise of seeing things for what they are becomes a political/prophetic activity, simply because of what they have to say about the church they observe and belong to: “We believe in the prophetic vocation of the CEBs, bringing their contribution to the church so that its structures may become

¹⁶⁸ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 08.

¹⁶⁹ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 08.

¹⁷⁰ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 09.

¹⁷¹ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 09.

more circular, collegial, welcoming, inclusive...”¹⁷² They carry on by saying that “as we proposed at the tenth Inter-ecclesial in Ilhéus: ‘We dream of a participatory church, all ministerial, united with respect to diversity, missionary, a mother church, welcoming, defending the poor and excluded, open to the new challenges of being a church where power should be shared more evenly, opening space for the participation of women at all its levels of service and of decision making.’”¹⁷³ This is a calling for inclusion and participation.

On the second day of the eleventh Gathering they engaged in checking-judging what they have seen and described with reference to the bible or “in the light of the word of God... Jesus of Nazareth, moved by the Spirit, who identified himself with the reality of his people. The spirituality of liberation bit into his heart. The simplicity of the communion with the Father was part of his everyday life, in contemplation of the whole of nature, looking after the excluded of his time. In the book of Exodus there is prophetic courage. There is resistance in the apocalyptic tradition, the hope that does not fade away in the face of crisis and the contradictions of history. All of that ran also in Jesus’ veins.”¹⁷⁴

Special attention must be paid to what is to come next in the Letter and for the unexpected statement found in their own words and how they might help us to grasp the shape and texture of the CEBs: “We have perceived that the spirituality of Jesus,

¹⁷² Décimo Primeiro Interecclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 10.

¹⁷³ Décimo Primeiro Interecclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 10.

¹⁷⁴ Décimo Primeiro Interecclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 11.

lived also by the early Christian communities, bears much proximity to the experience of God that animates the Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous communities.”¹⁷⁵

There is here an ecumenical and wider ecumenical theology at work, a way of looking at Jesus and his spirituality that is inclusive of Afro and Ava traditions, and more, a way that co-relates them. The hermeneutical tool is pluralistic as they recognize the same spirituality of Jesus and the early Christian communities as the spirituality of the Afro and Ava communities. The CEBs want to reflect the same spirit that was in Jesus and in the early Christian communities. The CEBs give a high status to the spirituality of the traditional Afro and Ava faiths because the CEBs link the Ava/Afro spirituality with that of Jesus and the early Christian community. This is more than just inculturation, contradicting what Margaret Hebblethwaite suggested. They are saying that they are open to other religions and cultures because they find that to be close to Jesus.

Still drawing upon the bible, they will re-affirm what one would expect the CEBs to affirm, “that spirituality is to be found woven into the life of the poor, with the sign of the presence of God, seeking the liberation of the person, liberation in history and liberation for the whole of creation!”¹⁷⁶

In the same section in which they record their way of putting reality under the light of the word of God and allowing reality to be judged by it, they declare that they

¹⁷⁵ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 11.

¹⁷⁶ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 12.

are conscious of their commitment to the transformation of Brazil, re-affirming their support for the project that we dream of for our country, the project that we helped to build, destined to include brothers and sisters without chance and without a voice. The present economic model is intolerable. It subordinates our country to financial capital and destroys the structure of the country and society. We demand the re-establishment of transparency and ethical behaviour in the political and social spheres. We commit ourselves to continue to join forces with the popular movements, trade unions and other institutions in civil society and to work to change the present situation, a movement for a New Brazil.¹⁷⁷

Using hermeneutical tools of inclusion and pluralism, in reference to the Exodus passage, they say, “as people of the Way, we heard the cries of many Peoples in our country particularly expressed in the prophetic words of the Pataxó people: ‘We need land, to live in it, to work with the soil, and to work in peace and with justice’ (Zinha, Pataxó, Bahia).”¹⁷⁸

The above shows that CEBs have kept their commitment to the poor, but they have moved beyond a simple identification of the oppressed as economically oppressed. They have kept their commitment to the economic liberation of the poor as shown in the previous quotation and they have also extended their commitment to a wider understanding of oppression into areas of gender, ethnicity, disability, culture and religion. They have been able to connect that commitment with biblical tradition, with Jesus and the early church.

¹⁷⁷ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 13.

¹⁷⁸ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 14.

On the third day of the eleventh Gathering the methodology was about acting. They say they felt the presence of God amongst them in the sharing of experiences, in the richness of knowledge, in the acknowledgement of the struggles of the people for a better life and fairer conditions of living. They said that in all of this they felt their hope renewed. As a response to this encounter with people's stories and experiences they say they "committed themselves anew to concrete causes, in the light of the spirituality of liberation and of the following of Jesus, that calls us to struggle for a better world where all will be included. This commitment to the excluded ones identifies ourselves with Jesus and brings us together in brotherhood and sisterhood respecting differences."¹⁷⁹ The commitment to respect difference is confirmed again. This has been achieved after a long journey of three decades (if only the Inter-ecclesial gatherings are considered) arriving at the eleventh Gathering to a spirituality of justice and to a pluralistic Christianity.

It seems that respect for difference is held in tension with the celebration of their own spirituality and tradition, because if the gatherings are times for the CEBs to renew their commitment to the struggle of liberation they are also times of prayer and corporate worship. The people of the CEBs, represented in the national gathering, found great strength in coming together and celebrating their faith in a God who journeys with them. They nurtured their commitment as they remembered those who have given their lives in the struggle, their martyrs. In Minas Gerais in 2005, they set aside a whole afternoon for prayers. The North Brazilian Region of CEBs was

¹⁷⁹ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 15.

responsible for leading that afternoon of prayer. They described it in the CEBs' Letter to the people of God as a time when "we came closer to mother Earth, to water, to the greenness and we also made present the memory of the martyrs. We carried high the Candle of the Nazarene and of the Mother Mary, our Lady, constant companion of the CEBs on the journey."¹⁸⁰

It is expected that in the CEBs' gatherings there will also be a time dedicated to present different cultural traditions of different areas and regions where the communities come from. "On the night of the full Moon... the cultural presentations were moving. The theme of Black people was led by the *Família Alcântara* and the *Banda Forró no Escuro* (*Forró*¹⁸¹ in the Dark) performed by the Band whose members, as the name suggests, are visually impaired."¹⁸² A cultural presentation on the theme of Afro/Black culture by a visually impaired band reveals the extent in which the CEBs are taking their inclusive approach seriously.

To show the spirit in which they met and departed, the Letter ends with a sending out message: "We depart taking the hope of the Kingdom of God with us to all and for all. The mission continues. Singing, we learn to distil joy out of suffering... mixing together life and faith... We call upon the blessing of the Trinity, the best community.

¹⁸⁰ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 16.

¹⁸¹ *Forró* is a form of dance to a Northeastern rhythm.

¹⁸² Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) **Carta ao Povo de Deus**. paragraph 16.

Amen! Axé! Awerê! Alleluia!”¹⁸³ The words *Axé* and *Awerê* come respectively from the Afro and Ava traditions, here incorporated into the Trinitarian blessing.

I hope to have shown with this long description of the last Gathering that the CEBs indeed have related to the Ava and Afro traditions in a most open and permeable manner.

And last but not least, a fourth sphere of omission. This has happened at a high theological level. At that level the experience of the CEBs can make a long-lasting difference for the history of Christianity. Their practice deserves a high caliber theological and spiritual understanding that could enter in dialogue with the history of Christianity and with the systematic thinking of doctrinal, liturgical and pastoral matters. This last omission has perhaps the longest and deepest implication of all, i.e., the failure to present the CEBs’ plural and permeable practices in the context of the catholic and universal truth of the church.

I call attention to this omission in the work of someone very close to the CEBs. In his famous book *Church, Charisma and Power*,¹⁸⁴ Leonardo Boff, the former Franciscan Friar, deals with several aspects that are of fundamental significance for the CEBs. He defends theoretically the ecclesiology of the CEBs with a fine logic and argues in

¹⁸³ Décimo Primeiro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2005) *Carta ao Povo de Deus*. paragraph 16.

¹⁸⁴ Boff, L. (1994) *Igreja, Carisma e Poder, Ensaios de Eclesilogia Militante, Inclui Apêndice com os documentos do processo doutrinário movido pelo Vaticano contra o Autor*. São Paulo: Editora Ática.

favour of a church that is full of the gifts of the Spirit and rich in its many ministries. Behind these highly elaborate arguments there is a form of being church very much dependent on the leadership of lay people, and a church able to be responsive to the distinctive contexts where it finds itself. He also puts forward arguments to prove and show that Christianity and more specifically Roman Catholicism are and have to be syncretistic, if indeed they are to be true to their claim of universality.¹⁸⁵ This point is close to our concern in this research. While Boff hints at the ecumenical character of the CEBs, he fails to give it proper importance.¹⁸⁶

A similar view could be expressed about Faustino Teixeira's book, *Theology of Religions*.¹⁸⁷ Here the author is completely dependent on the theoretical framework developed in Europe around the inter-religious relations: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Again, this can be classified as a symptomatic text of an ecumenical and wider ecumenical concern in the CEBs. From his interest on the European theory of inter-religious dialogue one derives that the Church of the Poor in Brazil and Latin America must be facing an important challenge in terms of relating to other religions. Does he assume that everybody knows that the context is pluralistic, that there are traditional religions and that there are new religious movements? It is disappointing that apart from a brief mention in the Preface written by João Batista Libânio to the

¹⁸⁵ Boff, L. (1994) **Igreja, Carisma e Poder**. p. 169 to 171.

¹⁸⁶ Yet he says: "The Afro-descendents have the right to be Christians within the interior of their significative universe... Syncretism appears not only as inevitable but as a positive concrete historical form of God reaching out and saving humanity". Boff, L. (1994) **Igreja, Carisma e Poder**. p. 171. (my translation)

¹⁸⁷ Teixeira, F. (1995) **Teologia das Religiões, Uma Visão Panorâmica**. São Paulo: Paulinas.

challenging reality of pluralism, the CEBs' response to it is not made explicit throughout Faustino's work.

I will give an example of how theological work can shape the history of the church. It is from Chapter 6 of the Confessions of Saint Augustine. His mother used to bring food to the shrines of the martyrs and saints at the church in Milan. This seems to be a slotting into the prayers cultural practices from Africa where she and her son came from related to the respect and veneration of the ancestors. Bishop Ambrose prohibited her from doing so, and Augustine registered it in his famous Confessions.¹⁸⁸ And for centuries a less permeable Christianity has tried, in the manner of Ambrose, to cast out such cultural practices. The CEBs could open a new phase in the life of the church in terms of acceptance and permeability to such religious and cultural traditions. But this new phase is dependent on the work of the theologians in response to the CEBs ecumenism of permeability. They have done it

¹⁸⁸ "When my mother brought to the shrines of the saints some provision of cakes, bread, and wine, according to the custom in Africa, and was forbidden by the door-keeper to carry them in; as soon as she understood that the Bishop had so ordained, she did piously and obediently submit, so that I myself did wonder to see her brought with such ease to condemn her own custom rather than to question the present prohibition... As soon as, therefore, she found out that this custom was prohibited by that most excellent preacher and holy prelate Ambrose, ... because that manner of celebrating the dead resemble the superstition of the gentiles, she most willingly abstain from the same. And instead of a basket filled with the fruits of the earth, she learned to carry her heart full of more pure desires to the tombs of the martyrs; that she might bestow upon the poor what she was able, and that the communion of the body of our Lord might be rightly celebrated where, in the imitation of his Passion, those martyrs had been sacrificed and crowned. But yet it seems to me, O Lord, and this is the thought of my heart hereof in thy sight, that my mother would not perhaps have yielded so easily to the putting away of her custom, if she had been prohibited by any other whom she had not loved so well as Ambrose..." Saint Augustine. **The Confessions of Saint Augustine**. Translation of Sir T. Matthew, first printed 1923, third edition (1960). London: Fontana Books. pp 137-138.

with the political reading of the Gospel. It needs to be done now with the ecumenism of permeability the CEBs are practicing (see Chapter 3).

What we see in all of these works is the tip of an iceberg, because in the works above in the four spheres of omission, the CEBs' ecumenical and interfaith nature seems to lie hidden. We are still waiting for a fifth sphere or stage, as it were, when the present process of ecumenical and inter-religious relations the CEBs have embarked on will be appropriately reflected upon; this should consequently reveal the limits of its current state, perhaps redefine its terms and certainly argue its case in the forum of the church at large.¹⁸⁹

As has become clear in this chapter, the Inter-ecclesial Gatherings of CEBs are church gatherings and gatherings of small church communities. It has also a national role that it plays with some autonomy, negotiated in a deliberate and assertive manner although in a political and slightly oblique way. These national gatherings of CEBs have had a symbolic and animating effect on the movement of CEBs, proposing directions, and influencing the relationship with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁸⁹ Similar argument was used by Carlos Mesters in relation to the reappropriation of the bible by the people of the CEBs. Here I use it in relation to the ecumenism of the CEBs. See, Mesters, C. (1989) **Defenseless Flower, A New Reading of the Bible**. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations. p. 102.

To summarize the argument so far: the CEBs have come a long way, deepening their political approach to the Christian faith towards a pluralistic understanding of it. They have, since the 1950s and 1960s, strengthened their commitment to social and economic transformation by adding an inclusive dimension. The economic and social struggles are extended into cultural and religious areas. Permeability becomes increasingly important for the CEBs. The ecumenism within Christianity grows further to embrace cultural and religious traditions of Afro and *Ava* origins. This is the future to which the CEBs point the church. They are trying to implement it by example, at least in the context of the national gatherings of the CEBs. They started small with a Protestant delegation. That showed the world-view was there already. They progressed to include representatives of the Protestant Churches in their organizational structures. As the hermeneutical tool of inclusion kept being used and sharpened they started to invite delegations of other religions to be present and to have an active role in the Inter-ecclesial gatherings. They managed to include people of different religion in the Eucharistic celebration. Developing in this way, the CEBs made their spirituality of justice and liberation more pluralistic, more sophisticated and more in tune with developments in the recent history of the world. They came to the point of incorporating dimensions of Afro and *Ava* traditions and religions in their worship at the national gatherings. We found some explanation for these developments in the national dimension of the gatherings; in their independence from the hierarchy; and in the themes they took. We hope, if we have not done it yet, to support with further evidence the strong and permeable ecumenical character of the CEBs and convincingly correct the omissions of the scholars mentioned above.

The CEBs from their beginning have understood the Christian mission in wider terms, liberation for those in poverty and oppression, justice in the country as a whole, solidarity within the continent, salvation for the world. In this wider agenda a narrow denominational or exclusivist religious view is cast out, a more inclusive practice developed. (The inclusive social agenda has been demonstrated already with the CEBs' political bedrock and emphasis on social transformation, see 1.2.2 and 1.2.3. A more inclusive religious practice was pointed out in our Periodization earlier in this Chapter 2.1). Evidence of this practice will be dealt with in the next Part of the dissertation. Let us see if we can show this inclusive practice in the hope that some explanation for the ecumenical and wider-than-Christianity ecumenical character visible in the gatherings may be tested. It is not yet the fifth sphere, but I hope it will start pointing towards it.

PART 2

STRICTO SENSU AND LATO SENSU

THE TWO KINDS OF ECUMENISM OF THE CEBS

INTRODUCTION

In Part 1 of this thesis the origins, the history and the nature of the CEBs were explored. That exploration was based on the memories (*anamnesis*) of representative figures from the CEBs. They were able to reveal, and to a certain extent affirm the ecumenism of the CEBs in its *stricto* and *lato sensu*, that is to say, in its micro and macro dimension. That exercise disclosed the ecumenical DNA of the CEBs: the apostolic ministry of the laity, the rediscovery of the bible, and the ideological/political stance the CEBs have taken.

So far this was predictable, but the story of the CEBs also revealed an ecumenical and wider ecumenical tendency present at the roots of the CEBs. In essence our research has shown that, if political liberation has been an integral part of the CEBs from its origin, so has been ecumenism. The national gatherings are an expression of the ecumenical DNA of the CEBs. They have given a high profile to and a national platform for the very political and ecumenical proposals that the CEBs represent.

I proposed an innovative Periodization for the CEBs based on the national gatherings (see 2.1.). The Periodization shows that the CEBs grew increasingly ecumenical and interfaith as the years went by. The national character of their gatherings; their relative autonomy from the hierarchy; and the themes they took facilitated the growth in ecumenical and interfaith stance. The CEBs added to their spirituality of justice/liberation interfaith concerns, awareness, and practices. We also made the point that the national gatherings became a symbol for the CEBs, leading from the front. Our Periodization showed how the ecumenical aspect was present from the beginning of the CEBs and how it grew more and more when the CEBs were able to accommodate in their gatherings influences from other religions within their celebrations.

Our point in Part 1 has been that ecumenism within Christianity and beyond has been an integral part of the CEBs' movement, albeit in a progressive manner as suggested in the Periodization (2.1). The CEBs' ecumenical character is present from their roots, in particular in the link with the *Movimento de Base* (MEB) of Paulo Freire. The CEBs consequently developed a political and wider than just heavenly view of salvation. This gives the CEBs an ability to take issues beyond their main denomination and religion. An expression of their ecumenical concern is the fact that from the very first national gathering they were able to bring ecumenical

representatives; and, in later gatherings, they were able to bring representatives of different cultures and religions.

This fundamental dimension of the CEBs' DNA, namely, the *stricto* and *lato* ecumenism seems to have escaped the historical and theological accounts. Some scholars have overlooked it. They have not paid enough attention to the ecumenical practices of the CEBs. I suggested that the CEBs rather than being an ecclesio-genesis represent simply a step forward in ecumenical practices for the church. Not so much a reinvention of the church, but rather, a shift in the church's ecumenism, both within and beyond Christianity; within because they incorporated people from other denominations in the Eucharistic celebrations, and beyond because the CEBs permitted some significant permeability with Afro and Ava traditions and religions, visible in their celebrations.

Having recognized and registered the ecumenical and inter-religious activities of the CEBs, now in Part 2 I will try to address the omission of the scholars and propose some terms in which to understand and classify the ecumenism found in the CEBs. More specifically, I propose that the kind of ecumenism of the CEBs is (i) of permeability as well as full of enthusiasm, and it is (ii) an ecumenism of mysticism as well as of prophetic engagement. Although these characteristics can be considered in theological ways as either/or features¹⁹⁰, - i.e. permeable to other influences or full

¹⁹⁰ For example, Paul Tillich compared the mysticism of Martin Buber with the demands of a more political and prophetic engagement. He came to the conclusion that for Buber they

of enthusiasm, either spiritually rich or politically engaged -, I would like to work with the possibility of them being concomitant and complementary characteristics of the CEBs' spirituality. This discussion will appear in the next two chapters. Whilst the main subjects of permeability to Afro, *Ava*, and popular religion will be treated in Chapter 3, the mysticism present in their prophetic and political understanding will be treated in Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, the reader will crave for more than just symbolic gestures shown in liturgy. Hopefully towards the end of Chapter 3 and then in Chapter 4 this will be addressed.

Together with the aims above, in Part 2 there are also questions and concerns that will guide the approach taken: Which kind of ecumenism do the CEBs promote? Is there a particular spirituality that allowed that ecumenism to come more and more to the fore? What implications are there for the fact that the CEBs allowed at moments in their gatherings considerable penetration from other denominations and other religions? Does that ecumenism affirm their identity and faith or does it threaten or hinder their identity and faith? Answering these questions will hopefully help to show some sociological and theological dimensions of the universal approach of the CEBs to ecumenical relations.

were an either/or decision. In Tillich's view, Buber's mysticism prevented him from being able to take a more definite and militant political position. Tillich took it as a limitation of mysticism in general. He advocated a religious experience that would combine, both, spirituality and politics, theology and culture. See, Tillich, P. (1959) **Theology of Culture**. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 188-199.

CHAPTER 3

ECUMENISM OF PERMEABILITY AND INTERPENETRATION: A SHIFT

3.1. PERMEABILITY: THE CEBs' CHARACTERISTIC OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

When the CEBs come together in their Inter-ecclesial gatherings, they form a mass event of thousands, as has already been described in Part 1, Chapter 2. The worship, the celebrations - as they call them - are a kind of explosion of religious enthusiasm as well as an expression of their political militancy. These celebrations contain ecumenical elements in the *stricto and lato sensu* that challenge the traditional limits of Christian or Roman Catholic worship. In this section, I will describe my own experience of them. These are the celebrations that happened at the ninth and tenth Gatherings, 1997 and 2000 respectively. This description will show the shift and also the contributions the CEBs are making in terms of the permeability as interpenetration between religions, demonstrating a particular take on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. This is a significant shift for the CEBs.

In these celebrations in their gatherings the boundaries of denomination and religion get opened to allow considerable permeability. Let us see how that happened first in relation to Afro religions, secondly in relation to *Ava* traditions and then in relation to the permeability to popular religion.

3.1.1. Permeability and the Afro-Brazilian Religions

Great political effort has been made by the CEBs to remain in communion with the bishops. This is because of their intention of being an increasingly more inclusive gathering but still preserving their ecclesial identity. The relationship between bishops and CEBs has been a fine piece of theological work with good politics (see 2.2.1). This political effort allowed religious (further than denominational) inclusivity to take the main stage in the last three Inter-ecclesial gatherings. The *milieu* of the national gatherings made the celebrations permeable to the cultural and religious traditions of the *Avas* and of Afro origins. As remarked by *The Tablet* just after the tenth Gathering, the journey from the eighth Gathering to the tenth, although turbulent, was one of successful negotiations.¹⁹¹ Talking about the inclusive nature of the celebrations at the tenth Gathering *The Tablet* argues: "You would not have thought that eight years ago the refusal of Catholic Bishops to let the non-Christian representatives join in the blessing had caused a crisis in relations between CEBs and bishops."¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ McDonagh, F. (22/7/2000) Celebration in Brazil. **The Tablet**, p. 982.

¹⁹² McDonagh, F. (22/7/2000) Celebration in Brazil. **The Tablet**, p. 982.

The situation between the organizers and the local hierarchy had been tense. News of a last minute cancellation of the ninth Gathering had unsettled the situation quite dramatically. The sister who was the local coordinator of the ninth Gathering was said to be struggling, beset by political complications; but for a participant like me things seemed quite well organized and all seemed well. I knew or could imagine that behind the scenes tension and political difficulties were likely to be the case. I also knew that all was well and running well but against all the odds.

Things had not been good since the end of the eighth Gathering of CEBs, in Santa Maria, in the far South of Brazil. On that occasion the last Celebration did not happen as planned. The local bishop was not happy to allow it to go ahead in the way it was planned (see 2.1.2 for more, and on the post-eighth conflict see Chapter 5).

Inculturation, cultural diversity, popular religion and folk dimensions of faith were at the centre of the conflict between the hierarchy and the CEBs. This is expressed by Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro, a Methodist minister, representative of the Protestants in the National Coordinating Group (*Ampliada Nacional*):

The Ninth Inter-ecclesial was prepared amidst many tensions. Since the last (*sic*) Gathering [in Santa Maria - RS.] (1992), sections of the Catholic hierarchy have put many obstacles in the way of the leadership of the CEBs. The strong emphasis on politics, the increased awareness of the situation of women in the church, particularly in relation to questions about ministry, the full ecumenical participation, liturgies that include symbols and people from Afro-Brazilian religions, the democratic forms of decision

taking, these were all present in the meeting, but they were neither sincerely nor particularly desired by some groups of the bishops. They were fruit of the strength of the communities.¹⁹³

Moving away from the limitations imposed at the eighth Inter-ecclesial Gathering, there were two celebrations at the ninth Gathering in São Luis in 1997 that marked a shift and a step forward in the ecumenical stance of the CEBs at the Inter-ecclesials. They were respectively the mid-gathering and the final celebrations.

At the ninth Gathering, the mid-gathering celebration was led by Dom Pedro Casaldáliga. The theme of the celebration was martyrdom. Names of martyrs were said as a massive cross was brought into the middle of the basketball stadium. The sound of nails being hammered into the wood was followed by the names of martyrs, and more than sixty names were read. After each name the words: "present with us in our journey" were repeated. "Now", said the bishop, "tell us the names of the martyrs in your locality, in your church, in your community that haven't been referred to yet". The sound of names went echoing across the benches of the stadium. Then a deep silence followed. The bishop said: "The crucified Christ is with us. Jesus is with us. All the martyrs of the way are with us".

The mass was celebrated. It was meant to be served only down in the playing area of the stadium. The gates between the two parts of the stadium - the playing area and the terraces - were firmly closed. Inside the playing area were the presiding

¹⁹³ Ribeiro, C. O. (1997) **The New Life of the Basic Communities of Brazil**. Translated but unpublished paper.

Bishop and people of his Diocese, São Felix do Araguaia. Something unexpected happened, though. What was meant to be a restricted celebration of the Eucharist, under the presidency of a bishop, - with his temporary displaced Diocese, within their particular charisma of political and communitarian emphasis of the sacrifices entailed in the life and struggles of their people and, in their view, in communion with the sacrifice of Christ, of the saints, and of the martyrs - went beyond the strict limits set beforehand.

The gates separating the basketball area from the terraces were opened. In a metaphorical way, one could say that there was energy in the air that was centrifugal. The Holy Communion was taken outwards and became an experience of unity, a diverse church united in one body. The lay ministers of the Eucharist simply went far beyond the restriction of the playing area, and Holy Communion was shared in small pieces of bread and a small quantity of wine. The Eucharist was served for all and shared with all regardless of denominational or religious allegiances. There was no doctrinal explanation to justify such an inclusive act.

Metaphorically, there was a centripetal force from the collective act of worship. A force that made people move inwardly, bringing them into communion with one another, despite difference in their denominational or religious or cultural background. But the local bishop of São Luis do Maranhão left the stadium in a temper when he saw what was happening. He was sitting a few metres away from me, in the middle of the terraces. He did not seem very happy with this

'undisciplined' Eucharistic extravaganza. Strangely enough, a few days later, he was leading the final act of worship of the ninth Gathering (15th July 1997) and the celebration could not have been more inclusive.

The Celebration of the Martyrs was a kind of taster for what was to come at the final celebration a few days later. Something had happened to our local bishop as well as to the other bishops present at that Gathering, those who might have opposed the sort of permeability we are trying to describe. The metaphorical forces, centrifugal and centripetal, brought permeability to the whole gathering in a manner that was not possible in Santa Maria at the eighth Inter-ecclesial. At the closing celebration for the ninth Gathering the Afro-Brazilian Priestesses had made it to the altar. They were welcomed by the sixty-seven Roman Catholic Bishops, by the Anglican Bishop, Rev. Almir dos Santos, and by several Protestant Ministers already at the altar.

This shift included not only their presence at the altar but a liturgical role to play.

Water from the *Candomblé* jars was sprinkled onto the crowd with the branch used for religious blessing in the Afro-Brazilian tradition, *arruda*, as already mentioned at 2.1.2. This was just after the renewal of the vows of baptism, when words of commitment to the poor and their liberation were said. The water was thrown by women and men wearing the costumes of the *terreiro* the place of worship of the Afro-Brazilian religions. This was a significant move and a shift from obscurity and exclusion to the light of the day and to a place of prominence, this should not be underestimated because for centuries the Afro religions co-existed with Roman

Catholicism in Brazil without being allowed to be recognized, leave alone being celebrated.

The Eucharist was concelebrated as all bishops and ministers raised their hands towards the bread and wine. The participants of the ninth Gathering and also other parishes came together to join in the great final celebration of that meeting in São Luis do Maranhão. The elements were distributed to a crowd of something between seven and ten thousand people.

These were the two celebrations at the ninth Gathering that definitively marked a step forward in the ecumenical stance of the CEBs at their Inter-ecclesials. They were public statements of intent and they represented a shift, demarcating new ways of acceptance and growth in the wider ecumenism of the CEBs.

Between the closing celebration of the ninth Gathering in Maranhão and the tenth Inter-ecclesial in Bahia at the turning of the Millennium the inclusivity of a shared altar became established. In Bahia the CEBs picked up where they had left off three years before. Already at the opening celebration of the tenth Gathering in Ilhéus Bahia there was a great moment of deep penetration and permeability to Afro-Brazilian religion, when the local bishop accompanied by the bishop who was at that time the president of the powerful Brazilian Bishops' National Conference (CNBB) stepped aside on the altar/stage to make way for several Afro-Brazilian priestesses

(*Mães de Santo*) to lead the *Candomblé* style prayers of invocation and adoration.

(see photos on the next page)



(Photos taken by Peter Cotton one of the members of an ecumenical group of visitors to the tenth Gathering that I led)

The women priestesses (*Mães de Santo*) came up to the altar carrying their plates full of incense as offerings. Little difference could be seen between the incense as offerings to their deities and the incense in the context of Christian worship. They danced to the sound of Afro-Brazilian drums (25 *atabaques*) as they censed the whole altar. The white smoke with the white dresses and turbans of Afro-Brazilian Muslim origin - typical of the Bahia region - contrasted with the black colour of their skin and with the particular way the sacred *Candomblé* dance goes. Words were said connecting the incense/smoke from the Afro-Brazilian religions' sacred plates with the crowd's prayers and referring to them as mixed together and as symbolically being raised upwards towards God, receiving applause from the crowd of worshippers. As it was led by the *Mães de Santo*, at that moment, God was being sought in the guise, gestures and dances characteristic of the worship of *Oxalá*, *Shango*, *Iansã* and of all the *Orixás*. But now in a Christian and Roman Catholic gathering, presided over by bishops. That was a moment of great permeability.

It was a breakthrough and a definite shift. Maybe not a surprise anymore as the ninth Gathering had paved the way. This was quite distinctive, in particular considering the way relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the popular religions in Brazil have historically been marked by repression, racism and domination. This break with the past was balanced with other aspects, as it was set in a context of a long journey of conviviality, experienced in that opening celebration. The permeability allowed here is not completely different from the conviviality that has been witnessed

throughout many years and centuries between the Christian Faith and the Brazilian cultures, particularly with the Afro-Brazilian religions. It is different because here it is in broad daylight, as it were, and also portrayed in an atmosphere of respect that gives value and honour to them.

The history of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and Afro-religions has been one of intense permeability yet marked, on the one hand, by repression, and on the other, by resistance. There has been great interweaving with exchange of symbols and sacred names. The names, images and rites have remained Roman Catholic, but with distinct Afro-Brazilian content and meanings.¹⁹⁴ The Roman Catholic Saints can be clearly identified in popular religion and referred to by different names from the Afro-Brazilian religions.

The good news found in the CEBs' ecumenism is that this permeability is given prominence and a religious status of acceptance. It is celebrated. In that opening ceremony it was placed on the altar in a sacred act of adoration. This impressive and daring act of penetration, demonstrating an ecumenism of permeability is registered by the reporting in the official documentation material of the CEBs' gathering itself, as in the description that follows:

¹⁹⁴ For a comprehensive table of co-relation between Roman Catholic Saints and their equivalent names in *Candomblé*, see, Bastide, R. (originally published in Paris, 1960, this edition 2007) translated by Helen Sebba **The African Religions of Brazil, toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations**. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. pp 264-267; for cultural divisions between *Gêgê* Houses and one *Nagô* House also linking with Roman Catholic hagiography see p. 270; and for a table with *Umbanda* lines and Catholic figures, also including phalanxes or legions of Catholic Saints, see pp 323-324.

... The atmosphere was welcoming to the three thousand and one hundred participants of the tenth Gathering of the CEBs. There were twenty-five *atabaques* (drums commonly used and associated with *Candomblé* ceremonies) reminding us of the 25 years of Inter-ecclesial meetings. The space was for many cultures, remarkably colourful, demonstrating the shades of the three races (meaning: Black, White, Red).

A group of people from Bahia perfumed the air with incense, and voices acclaimed the four elements of life, the ancestors, the *Orixás*. The poor were represented in the shape of the fisherman, of the washerwoman, of the prostitute and of the excluded. A cry for justice echoed repudiating the exclusion and exploitation of the impoverished. They prayed for peace.¹⁹⁵

This description above of the opening celebration by the CEBs themselves shows a pattern of theological discourse and a structure for an ecumenical model as follows:

(i) **Welcome.** It starts with a wider ecumenical celebration of the diversity of cultures, colours, races; in it there is an acclamation of nature and ancestors and the popular deities of protection and justice for the poor in the words: "The atmosphere was welcoming, twenty-five *atabaques*... The space was for many cultures, remarkably colourful, demonstrating the shades of the three races... ancestors, *Orixás*".

¹⁹⁵ X Intereclesial de CEBs. Área de Documentação. (2000) Uma linda celebração festiva abriu o 10 Intereclesial. **Axego. Achegando - memória e caminhada - sonho - compromisso Boletim Informativo "A Caminho"**. (7th July 2000).

(ii) **Commonality.** The wording shows the identification with the poor. This is a more specific theme of Christianity because of the identification of God, God-self in Christ with the poor and suffering ones. There is here a point of encounter because this would not be alien to Afro-Brazilian religions, as the Afro-Brazilian religions offer religious symbolism to help the marginalized cope with and to question the social and economic reality of oppression. This is obviously within the dignity and power of religious imagination: "the poor were represented in the figures of...".

(iii) **The Struggle.** Furthermore the opening ceremony showed agreement to collude against the dominion of economic exclusion: "... repudiating the exclusion and exploitation of the impoverished".

(iv) **The *Shalom*.** And finally, in the reporting there was a more universal message, found in many religions: the prayer for peace. In the case and emphasis of the CEBs peace is understood as the result of justice: "They prayed for peace".

This offers a model of an ecumenism of permeability: allowing difference to be welcomed, seeking commonality, based on the struggles, and building the *Shalom*. It is also a testimony to the kind of ecumenism the CEBs are promoting. It is also celebratory, plural and deep in its spirituality. There was no excuse asked or remorse shown for the liturgy of welcome being full of *Candomblé* elements. No problem with the fact that they were women leading the prayer-dance. No problem with music, drums, religious vestments, gestures all being from the *Candomblé* Religion. And

again, as in the ninth Gathering, there was no doctrinal elaboration on these either, but maybe that was not the time for that sort of discourse.

The ceremony continued. There was more dancing, welcoming the representatives of the different regions of Brazil and from abroad. They brought flags from each State. There were other symbols, more music. There was bread from Bahia to be shared by all. The local bishop, who is the representative of the diocese that hosts the Inter-ecclesial, received a piece of bread from the hands of a young female Protestant minister in an evocative gesture that brought to mind a liturgical breaking of bread. He had been part of the National Committee that oversaw the preparation for the Gathering, so I can only understand that he was altogether in agreement with such an ecumenical move to receive bread from the hands of a woman ordained in another Christian tradition. Only permeability made the symbolic exchange possible. This is what we have observed in the context of a national gathering of CEBs. They had worked for it. It had been an intentional and worked out move of the CEBs to be permeable to the Protestant presence and the Afro-Brazilian religions' influence in their gatherings.

There were even more expressions of welcome, showing the interpenetration of different traditions and religions in the CEBs' gathering:

The *Ialorixá* Carmosina invoked the *Orixás*. She welcomed all.
The Minister Vera Christina made her words the words of Joshua:
'God is the one who gives us courage to make the utopia of the

Kingdom happen'. The *Pajé* Rufino reminded us that God is great for his people... the Bishops Dom Mauro and Dom Chemello greeted the participants, and Father Edgar, the coordinator, brought the words of the prophet Dom Helder Camara, who was present animating in spirit our Gathering.¹⁹⁶

On the stage, for the blessings at the end of the opening celebration of the tenth Gathering, there stood on the stage/altar, before the assembly of the CEBs, the Protestant Minister (a woman), an *Ava Pajé* (woman, not Rufino at this stage), a *Candomblé* Priestess and the local Roman Catholic Bishop. They had their hands joined and lifted them as they said a joint prayer asking for God's presence with the poor in their journey.

This opening ceremony at the tenth Gathering shows the depth of the CEBs' ecumenism of interpenetration, permeability and enthusiasm. There is certainly much that can be learnt and extracted from this multitude of symbolic exchange, from the diversity of religious language, from the multi-religious gestures and colours. Our research has shown, as demonstrated above in the description of the inclusive liturgies, that the very nature of the CEBs' ecumenism has grown towards these moments of intense inter-religious penetration, generating a furore of symbolic fertility. This is the source of the religious enthusiasm. But our research has also found a lack of explicit theological articulation on the implications of such penetration, its relationship with tradition, its meaning for the present, and how it

¹⁹⁶ X Intereclesial de CEBs. Área de Documentação. (2000) Uma linda celebração festiva abriu o 10 Intereclesial. **Axego. Achegando - memória e caminhada - sonho - compromisso Boletim Informativo "A Caminho"**. (7th July 2000).

might reshape the understanding and form of Christianity in and for the context of the CEBs themselves. I have described ecumenical interfaith gestures in the liturgies of the gatherings, but I haven't yet shown they are supported by reflection or work carried out between the gatherings. The extent of the penetration of the symbolic gestures suggests that these relationships between the church and other faiths have been built up along the way. This will need to wait for Chapter 4 and 5.

3.1.2. Permeability and the Ava Tradition

Let us continue to show the level of permeability exercised in the gatherings, now being permeable to the indigenous myth of Land without Evil in a Christian Mass.

Reactions to the permeability found in that first day opening celebrations of the tenth Gathering in Ilhéus (see previous sub-section) were still being expected as they launched themselves into another inculturated liturgy. That was the Land Without Evil Mass. It was being celebrated on the second day of the tenth Gathering 12th of July 2000.

"Wait! There is no need to rush. Bread and wine will come nearer to you". One had to get used to it. There would be enough for everybody. No questions asked about doctrine, faith background. No questions asked at all. A piece of bread dipped in wine for everybody present: Roman Catholics, Protestants, participants of Afro-Brazilian religions (*Candomblé*, *Umbanda*) and other cultural manifestations (*Congadas*, etc.). In a multitude of around three thousand people, the sense of

fraternal and sisterly communion could not pass unnoticed. Joy and sorrow, sadness and strength were expressed in a celebration of common history and struggle.

"Was it a real Eucharist?" One could ask because of the adapted way in which it was celebrated, and also because they were claiming the sacred Christian symbols for purposes related to penitence and protest against the sacrifice of Amerindians,¹⁹⁷ the desecration of their land, their culture and languages, and in fact the sacrifice of their very lives.

The mass was used to protest against the passion and sacrifice of the Ava Peoples, but also to express their dreams of liberation. As with any Eucharist, the connections with the Passion and the Cross were explicit. They made reference to a link between the Cross of Christ and the sacrifice of the Indigenous people, the Cross of Christ and the Cross of the Ava Peoples. And then the proclamation of freedom, courage, and life in the reference to a Land without Evil, compared to paradise regained, this being expressed by an indigenous myth of a form of paradise.

Although it was a Christian celebration, the atmosphere was loose: no church building, but an altar; led by ordinary lay folk, but under the apostolic presidency of a

¹⁹⁷ Ava People, as they name themselves in Tupi-Guarani language, although there would be records of around 170 to 200 other languages spoken in Brazil, commonly divided into four great groups, 'Tupi' covers from North to South of Brazil, then the 'Ge'; the 'Carib'; and the 'Arauaque'. Caldeira, J. (1997) **Viagem pela história do Brasil**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. p.8. Also used as reference for Guarani terms and legends, see: Ibanhes, B. with illustrations of Márcia Szeliga, **Kyvy Mirim, O Índio Mago e a legenda do Pé de Tarumã**. Curitiba: no editors, no date.

bishop (Dom Pedro Casaldáliga). This was not a one off event. It is part of the programme of the gatherings that the mid gathering celebration will be an inculturated Eucharistic celebration. As would be expected of the celebration half way through the gathering, it would be no ordinary liturgy. In this case, a *Terra sem Males* (the Land without Evil) Mass.

The Land without Evil is the apocalyptic teleology expressed in an *Ava* myth: the expectations and hopes for a time and a place where evil will be defeated and goodness will reign. Rumours had spread that the bishops and the leaders of the tenth Gathering of CEBs had concerns about retaliation from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Vatican Curia if they pressed on with the plans for having such an inculturated celebration of the mass.

The local bishop was spared the final responsibility because the Eucharistic dimension of the mass was slightly diluted, in that the words "This is my body and my blood; do this in memory of me" were said as part of a long discourse of affirmation of faith replacing the traditional Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. For some, though, there was no doubt about the Paschal nature of that rite, and judging by the general aura of awe and mystery, it seemed to be the case for the majority of people present. The fear of persecution because they were pushing the limits of the authorized forms of liturgy only added to the atmosphere.

Permeability is explicit here in the theme of the mass. It is a theme that came from a different and distinct culture and religion. The CEBs welcomed the *Ava* myth of a Land without Evil, allowing it to penetrate the Christian liturgy of Eucharist. The combination generated a powerful religious rite. It was Christian in all senses. It gave nothing away in terms of its religious identity. However it allowed itself to be possessed and to be the carrier of a messianic dream born out of a different story of salvation, the *Ava* mythology. The depth of spirituality was visible in the beauty of the poetry in the service. The religious enthusiasm it generated was shown in the number of people present. The model of an ecumenism of permeability allowed religious exchange and interpenetration. This wider ecumenism of permeability is dependent on a depth of spirituality that is able to link different stories of salvation. The people of the CEBs seem to find their Christian religious identity reinforced by experiences of penetration and permeability like that and not threatened by it (see questions in the Introduction to Part 2). As they slotted together, the *Ava* myth of a Land without Evil encountered the Christian promises of salvation and liberation on the Cross, in bread and wine.

The same spirit was there when the gates were opened at the mid-gathering celebration in São Luis, the spirit of freedom that flooded the place. A wider ecumenism had found its representation in the inclusive Eucharist at the basketball stadium, and at the closing celebration of the ninth Gathering. There was a follow-up of those events at the tenth Gathering, in Ilhéus, Bahia. A wider ecumenism definitely took over. A macro-ecumenism, as Dom Helder Camara called it.

For me it was an ecumenism of all struggling to bring justice and new life to the whole of humanity and to the whole of creation, using in this case an *Ava* myth of hope of salvation, of a Land without Evil. The liturgy carried a dream of a wider salvation. However, again, the CEBs and the theological community have not yet explored in depth the implications of the ecumenism of permeability the CEBs are living in their national gatherings. There are signs of a rich theological reflection hinted at in the preparatory material for the CEBs' gatherings that we will explore later in Chapter 4, but, as far as we can ascertain, a more systematic theological approach to the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability remains still to be tackled. Our thesis in this dissertation is to show there is permeability and interpenetration as result of a *stricto* and a *lato sensu* ecumenism at work in the CEBs' national gatherings, and that it is intentional and it represents a significant further contribution from the CEBs to the life of the church beyond salvation as political liberation.

This account of events shows how the CEBs in their Inter-ecclesial gatherings reached such inclusive Eucharistic practices and ecumenical exchanges. My focus has been in particular regarding a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism. It was demonstrated in stages how it was possible: from the eighth Gathering, passing in detail through the points where it changed at the ninth Gathering and being consolidated at the tenth. It also shows how they seemed to operate and how they journey: at the front there are the people of the CEBs, living their faith in the

dynamics of the struggle, in inclusive and plural ways, inspired by the bible, and still in communion with the bishops. Tensions and negotiations, regression and developments are all part of the process. One thing seems clear: the people of the CEBs have proved to be quite determined in pushing the limits of Christianity in Latin America towards permeability and penetration. In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s it was more in political economic terms, now in the 1990s and in the first decade of this Century it is in an explicit wider ecumenism.

Are there other characteristics of the CEBs' ecumenism that could help in responding to the questions posed in the introduction of this Part 2, in one phrase: what kind of ecumenism?

3.1.3. Inclusivity, the Complementary Side of Liberation

I go back again to the questions that are guiding us in this part of the dissertation: what kind of ecumenism, what processes, journey, and does that ecumenism threaten or reinforce the CEBs' Christian identity? (See Introduction to Part 2)

To recap, the DNA of the CEBs and their journey shows that ecumenism has been at work ever since the first Inter-ecclesial of CEBs. There was the presence of a small number of Protestants in the first Gathering as an embryonic sign of an ecumenical concern and commitment on the part of the CEBs. And, there were also traces of the wider ecumenism that has characterized the CEBs in particular in latter stages. This was expressed in the words of the Letter to the Churches from the first Inter-ecclesial

meeting: “that there must be an insistence on the presence of the church in the world, seeking the good of the wider human community.”¹⁹⁸ The Letter spells out what that process would involve: “openness of the ecclesial community to collaboration with other people and groups through service for the construction of a more fraternal and just world.”¹⁹⁹

The Letter to the Churches from the very first National Gathering of the CEBs expressed the kind of view that underpinned their ecumenism: a *lato sensu* ecumenical concern for the whole of humanity; collaboration with other people and groups in united service to the causes of justice. This is the kind of ecumenism for which the CEBs are opting.

At the national gatherings of CEBs, that sort of ecumenism is clearly and efficiently represented in worship, in cultic form. Religious people pour out their world and religious views for which they live and die in prayer and worship. This is not only theologically significant but it is also sociologically important. Émile Durkheim remarked in the Conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: “The cult is the most important element, in fact, anybody who has really practised a religion knows that it is the worship that generates these impressions of joy, inner peace, serenity, enthusiasm, that are for the faithful the experiential proof of their beliefs... It

¹⁹⁸ Primeiro Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1975) “Conclusões do Encontro.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil**. São Paulo: Paulinas. p. 156.

¹⁹⁹ Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) “Conclusões do Encontro.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 156.

is worship that is always efficient.”²⁰⁰ Furthermore, Durkheim argues that worship/cult is an expression of the views and of the life of a people and of society. It is worship and religion that allows the individual to go beyond himself/herself. This can easily be found in the worship at the CEBs’ gatherings, when worship allows Christians and Roman Catholics to go beyond their own faith and denomination.²⁰¹

There is also a theology behind the CEBs’ ecumenical/inculturated worship expressions. That theology tries to bring together faith and life. A theology of faith and life belonging to each other influences the entirety of the Conclusions (Letter) of the first Inter-ecclesial, calling the communities to be communities of faith and life. The Conclusions will take that most daring request from the bases of the church that the common priesthood of the people of God should be recognized and given its rightful place, the content of which would be that the faithful “may be able to celebrate the everyday ordinary events as signs of God’s presence in life, as well as to celebrate the sacramental expressions of the faith.”²⁰² In other words, it is a two way street: there is a sort of sacramentality in looking at the world and in everyday life as signs of God’s presence; as the CEBs bring in prayer and worship the world to God including cultural and religious manifestations. This stands in contrast with the

²⁰⁰ Durkheim, E. (1983) **As Formas Elementares de Vida Religiosa**, Seleção de textos, Editor Victor Civita. São Paulo: Abril Cultural. p. 222 and 223. (my translation from Portuguese). For an edition in English see, Durkheim, E. (First Published, 1915, Seventh impression, 1971) **The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life**. Translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain. London: George Allen & Unwin. p. 417.

²⁰¹ And beyond that, Durkheim will say: “We have said that there is something eternal in religion: it is the cult and the faith. Men cannot celebrate ceremonies for which they see no reason, nor can they accept a faith which they in no way understand.” Durkheim, E. **The Elementary Forms**. p. 430.

²⁰² Primeiro Intereclesial. (1975) “Conclusões do Encontro.” In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais**. p. 156.

view and theology of other forms of Christianity in Brazil. These other forms consider influences from Afro and Ava religions and traditions demoniac or mundane and try to cast out their influences. Not in the CEBs' views as was shown above with the permeability to Afro and Ava influences. Their theology grew from concern for political/economic liberation to inclusion and participation.

To put it in a simple formulation: God is in the church as well as everywhere else. This is the theological basis for a wider concern and interest. All that concerns humanity concerns God, and therefore it demands the church to engage with it. This is dismissively simple, however such view demands a radical re-thinking of the relationship of Christianity with other religious traditions in Brazil.

Furthermore the ecumenism we have found in the CEBs, in the core of the CEBs' movement, is based on an urge to embrace and care for the community. Ribamar Garcia, a poet in the tradition of the *repentistas* (that is poets who improvise as they sing) puts this in the following way: "CEB is fraternity: it is people helping people ... The CEBs join forces to see life improve."²⁰³

Such a view gives way to an ecumenism bathed in inclusivity. The inclusivity here is synonymous with a wider salvation. This is spoken about in the examples above as God's presence in life in general, and the mission to join with the forces that work

²⁰³ Garcia, José Ribamar. (unpublished. São Luís, julho de 1997) **História dos Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs**. paragraphs 11, 14.

towards seeing life improved. The CEBs seem to be hinting and pointing at an ecumenical mission, a mission beyond their own religion, belonging to all and addressed to all. The hope for the Kingdom of God gives them a theological language, a Gospel-based concept that inspires a view of liberation/salvation for all. This is testified to by the words, full of enthusiasm, of one the participants of the tenth Gathering:

For me, the tenth Gathering has been a fantastic experience, an energy boost. In particular, because in sharing with other cultures, I came to know a different Brazil. And the most important thing is that I came to realize that despite all diversity we have something in common: the yearning, a dream to make the Kingdom of God a reality amongst us.²⁰⁴

The first concern about this kind of wider ecumenism is that it is not sharp enough to deliver any result. That it might imply a feeble attitude towards faith because it seems to try to be everything to everybody. However in our observation, inclusivity in the CEBs' religious framework does not imply a neglectful attitude towards their faith and tradition. As shown in the quotation above, inclusivity and enthusiasm can live together. They also seem to be able to combine enthusiasm with an open mind. Inclusivity seems to be compatible with a life of dedication and enthusiasm for a movement and for a particular faith. Their ecumenical inclusivity does not seem destined to lessen religious fervour. At first glance, the other religious manifestation

²⁰⁴ Fabio. X Intereclesial de CEBs. Área de Documentação. (2000) **Axego. Achegando - memória e caminhada - sonho - compromisso Boletim Informativo "A Caminho"**. (14th July 2000).

of fervour and enthusiasm found in fundamentalism and orthodoxy would suggest strength in numbers, views, and religiosity. But the CEBs point to a different conclusion that it is the possible to combine a critical religious mind with spiritual enthusiasm.

In addition, the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration indicates that inclusivity is deep-seated in the religious mind of the CEBs' participants. Inclusivity suggests a kind of relationship that involves being open to other realities bigger than the more immediate one. It also implies that in that relationship some permeability will be happening. It is natural that getting involved with people and situations brings moments of deep penetration. Getting really involved means sharing moments of intense exchange. We don't believe that this is only temporary and circumscribed to a particular acceptable environment and situation like the celebrations at the gatherings. And, if it is, in spite of the momentary nature of this permeability, it remains highly significant. These moments of permeability can be fertile moments even if limited in time and space. The inclusivity that is present in the CEBs' gatherings generates religious fertility. These moments permit deep permeability in a particular time in a specific situation generating energy and enthusiasm. And they are signs of a religious culture that is ecumenical in character and allows room for exchange.

Our research has shown that, in the experience of the CEBs, the fertility and enthusiasm generated by some permeability encourages faith and religious identity

rather than hindering them. In the CEBs' experience, inclusivity and enthusiasm/commitment belong to and complement each other. This is different from the more liberal approaches that are inclusive, but lack fervour and enthusiasm/commitment. The strength of the CEBs' form of spirituality, permeable, tolerant but full of enthusiasm is in bringing together inclusivity and commitment. Mysticism and martyrdom are prime representatives of that form of spirituality. These two dimensions of the CEBs' ecumenism are also linked with permeability. Mysticism appears as the veneration of the dead, and it inspires or is followed by martyrdom as a readiness to die for the cause of justice. We have so far studied the permeability to Afro and Ava traditions. The following section has to do with a third form of permeability, namely, to popular religiosity.

3.2. PERMEABILITY AND POPULAR RELIGIOSITY. ECUMENISM OF MYSTICISM AND MARTYRDOM

I will undertake to explain in the following three sub-sections firstly, the connection between the CEBs' prophetic vocation to martyrdom, and the CEB's mysticism to the veneration of the martyrs. Most of the veneration of the dead is better understood in the context of popular religiosity. I hope to show that the memory of the martyrs is of great importance for the CEBs and that it points out the CEBs' ability to relate to and incorporate in their faith dimensions of popular religiosity. This fact, I also hope to show, constitutes evidence of the CEBs' wider inter-cultural and inter-faith relations.

Secondly, I will try to explore the CEBs' veneration or homage paid to the dead as a significant part of their Christian faith, how they may justify it theologically and the connection to an ecumenism of permeability to popular religiosity. Whilst these two areas are explored that is connecting martyrdom to the cult of the dead, and that to the Christian Faith as permeable to popular religiosity, we will also relate the different causes of martyrdom to and as the causes of the church and of Christ, again making the point of a wider ecumenism of permeability and of political/economic liberation. Although popular religiosity is elusive as well as pervasive these points will, hopefully, go some way to show and to justify theologically the CEBs' permeability to popular religiosity. I will at pains try to make the CEBs' prophetic and mystical dimensions (expressed in their memory of the dead), martyrdom amongst their numbers and permeability to popular religiosity distinctive and clear, although in the practices of the CEBs they are all tied together.

Besides the permeability to Afro and Ava influences, the relationship the CEBs have with popular religiosity is also of permeable nature. The CEBs' permeability to popular religiosity is reinforced by their mystical spirituality, and also shaped by their prophetic ministry. In the CEBs, prophetic ministry and mystical spirituality are intermingled. This fact can lead to martyrdom.

Martyrdom, which is, unfortunately, a reality amongst the participants in the CEBs (see Chapter 4), is a consequence of, as well as, a demonstration of the prophetic dimension of the CEBs. Mysticism in turn can be seen in their love and veneration of

those who have been killed in the struggle: the cult of the martyrs. Not that these martyrs have been officially canonized by the church, they have not. This is part of what we call popular religiosity: the practices and beliefs that are latent in the religiosity of the people and that go beyond the official version of Christianity accepted by the Roman Catholic Church.

Popular religiosity, although not a religion as such, presents challenges even to quite open and ecumenical forms of Christianity like the CEBs: to relate and be permeable to unauthorized forms of belief. I will present below results of research that indicate the CEBs have been able to relate to dimensions of popular religiosity in permeable and constructive ways.

The fact that features of popular religiosity are not exclusive to Christianity is of great importance to our research as it indicates the wider ecumenism, brotherly speaking, that the CEBs are able to sponsor. The CEBs' prophetic ministry and their mysticism, clearly expressed in the place martyrdom has in their religious practices, are the great contributors to the permeability and interpenetration we are studying, be it to Afro, Ava or popular religiosity.

3.2.1. Politics, Mysticism, Martyrdom and Popular Religiosity

The memory and veneration of the martyrs, the celebration and devotion to them is a traditional feature in popular Christianity. It may be considered a practice confined to

the past. It is certainly not confined to the past in the case of the CEBs. A piece of quantitative research undertaken at the end of the 1990's showed that:

The communities (CEBs) themselves run or take part in rosary collectives (91%), nine mass 'novenas' (86.82%), vigils/watch night (71%), visiting tombs (66.82%). The data revealed by the research in the Diocese of the Bom Jesus da Lapa shows that the 'CEBs communities are rich in devotions and popular religious traditions; highlighting amongst them the rituals connected with funerals and the dead: the vigils, the visit to the tombs. Nine out of ten CEBs practice them.²⁰⁵

Why should that be the case with the CEBs? Our observation at the national gatherings suggests that those rituals mentioned in the quotation are for the CEBs related in particular to those killed because of their dedication to and engagement with the political struggles in favour of social justice. All of the popular religious traditions connected with the dead named above are then reflected in the national gatherings connecting the veneration of the dead to the martyrs of their cause. In the national gatherings there are processions and services in honour of present-day martyrs. These signs of popular religiosity are a common feature in the CEBs' national gatherings.

i) Politics and permeability: All over the national gatherings are signs connecting the CEBs to the memory of the political martyrs of the Way. There are publications with their names. There are banners, t-shirts and caps with their names. Groups or

²⁰⁵ Teixeira, F. (1997) "A Espiritualidade nas CEBs." In Boff, C., Lesbaupin, I., de Oliveira, P. R. et al. **As Comunidades de Base em Questão**, São Paulo: Paulinas. p. 210.

sections of the gatherings are named after those martyrs. This was the case, for example, at the seventh Gathering as all the halls in the cathedral or in the schools nearby had the names of martyrs: William, Valmir e Barroso, who were metal-workers in Volta Redonda who went on strike in 1988 and were killed in clashes with the police.²⁰⁶ There was no doubt about this being a political matter because even the monument built in their memory in Volta Redonda, whose architect was the world renowned Oscar Niemeyer, was suspiciously bombed. Another name was João Cândido, who was one of the leaders of a revolt in the navy against the legality of physical punishment, he died of old age and was linked to the local Catholic Church in Caxias, Baixada Fluminense.²⁰⁷ There was a hall called Mariazinha, little Mary. In the CEBs' own words, they say: "In the last celebration of the seventh Gathering a poster was brought to the stage/altar with Mariazinha's picture on it, she was a woman who made her living by washing clothes for others, a working class woman who participated in the Rural Worker's Trade Union, and in the Roman Catholic Church's National Ministry for Land Issues (CPT), and also in her own community, always on the side of life for all. Mariazinha was part of the Local Coordinating Team for the seventh Gathering, and died a month before the gathering took place. They sang - '*Negra Mariama*'.²⁰⁸ There was another Hall called *Índio Marçal*, this was in tribute to the Guarani Ava who is a martyr of the Guarani cause.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Arquidiocese de Goiânia. (1989) 7 Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs: Povo de Deus na América Latina, a Caminhada da Libertação. **Revista da Arquidiocese**, XXXII - 7/8/9. p 251.

²⁰⁷ **Idem.** p. 256.

²⁰⁸ **Idem.** p. 297.

²⁰⁹ **Idem.** p. 253.

Similar arrangements were present in several of the eleven gatherings. As the national gatherings became more like big events for thousands of people, sports stadiums were used to house groups from the gathering. For the duration of the gathering, the sports stadium is named after one or another martyr, in general in accordance with the theme to be worked on by the group. For example, in the case of a group working with the theme of being Black and with the Afro-Brazilian cultures and religions, the place where they met in the tenth Gathering had the name of a martyr of the cause of the Black people: Zumbi dos Palmares. He is a symbol of the cause of Afro-descendants in Brazil. 20th November, the date of his death is an alternative day to remember the slaves rather than the 13th of May the national bank holiday to commemorate the abolition of slavery granted by Princess Isabel in 1888. Zumbi died at the end of the 17th Century as the leader of the *Quilombo* dos Palmares in Serra da Barriga, in Pernambuco. Run-away slaves established *Quilombos* as free territories. The social structure of such places was based on collectivism. Whether Zumbi was a Christian or not does not seem to be a problem for the CEBs because they have embraced him as a martyr. The justification for that is that Zumbi is a historical hero of liberation and represents the dreams of liberation for Afro-Brazilian descendants. In his case, martyrdom plays the role of a bridge between the Christian history of salvation, and the Afro-Brazilian people's dream of liberation. For the CEBs to consider Zumbi someone whose memory is worth keeping is evidence, for us, of the kind of ecumenism we have observed at work in

the national gatherings and have named ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration.

Politics has the role of making the person who was killed because of the struggle a saint or a martyr. It is a canonization process in popular terms. Permeability to popular religiosity encourages the veneration of these people. The veneration of the martyrs, in its turn, allows the environment where these ecumenical features, of absorbing a religiosity that goes beyond the church's traditional practices, take place.

ii) **Mysticism, spirituality and permeability:** All of the above is evidence that there is a veneration of the martyrs, a devotion to the dead, a religious expression of respect and of homage paid to those who were killed in the struggle. The veneration of the martyrs is a strong sign of a political and militant mysticism present in the CEB's spirituality. I take the CEBs' joyful, prayerful and celebratory veneration of the martyrs as one of the more palpable expressions of their mysticism.

As showed above (item i) there are different ways in which that sort of mysticism palpable in the veneration of the martyrs happens in an Inter-ecclesial gathering of CEBs: their names become like brands, their image is carried in processions, their stories are told in songs. That mysticism is nurtured also through the Great Celebration of the Martyrs that is an integral part and a constant feature of the programme for the Inter-ecclesial gatherings.

The description of the mass that took as its theme martyrdom, when the CEBs celebrated the martyrs of the struggles they espouse, in the basketball stadium in São Luis do Maranhão in July 1997 (see 3.1.1) is one example of those occasions. It showed that the CEBs give martyrdom a high religious and spiritual status. The political/economic struggle they are engaging with can involve being killed. The Celebration of the Martyrs showed that they see this as part of their Christian discipleship, their spiritual path, their dedication to God and the Kingdom of God. It is not a removed or remote religious mysticism. It is a form of spirituality and a form of mysticism connected with their political militancy. Another aspect of it is that, the religious commitment of the faithful in the CEBs to the struggle for justice can bring them, themselves, the ones celebrating the dead to the brink of martyrdom.

The devotion to the dead makes the CEBs permeable to a wider spirituality present in the culture in general. In the popular culture and religiosity of Brazil the dead is treated with respect and it feels as if the dead is never far away. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, it is common to see candles lit at the corner of streets on Monday evenings. It is said to be a religious gesture to remember the dead. The devotion to the dead at the CEBs' gatherings around the memory of the martyrs is evidently a relationship with popular spirituality.

iii) Martyrdom. We have seen so far that martyrdom is a possible reality to hit those in the CEBs. It happens in the struggle against injustice and poverty, environmental threats and ethnic persecution, and in particular, in the struggle for rural and urban reforms. Although it is political and linked with their political militancy, martyrdom is still understood in a religious dimension and as part of the participants of the CEBs' discipleship. There is encouragement for martyrdom to be seen as a gift rather than as cost of discipleship.

Martyrdom implies reasons, causes and struggles. Permeability allows scope to the fact that the causes may not to be directly linked with the CEBs' faith or with their church. The causes may be quite specific in each situation. Yet, a common thread of struggle for justice can be recognized. Some of the main general issues behind people's involvement in social action are: employment and social exclusion, the rights of minorities, land distribution, the struggle for the environment. Their involvement may actually represent, for some, in the end, the way to martyrdom.

Martyrdom could be seen as a disgrace and a curse. But, in the sermon for the Celebration of the Martyrs already described in this Chapter, the bishop exhorted people to receive the threat of martyrdom as a religious gift, to enrich it with joy, and to live life under the freedom martyrdom gives. Martyrdom is seen by the CEBs as part of the binary spirituality that combines life and death, God and liberation, prayer and social/political action.

The memory-keeping exercise of the Martyrs of the Way by the CEBs, expressed in the naming of the martyrs and affirmed in the chanting “present with us in our journey” is in their faith the cultivating of the political seed of a transformed church and a transformed society. Their spirituality is political. Martyrdom is linked to the cause of the poor. Their hope is that that sort of commitment to the cause of the poor shall take over the church and shall transform society for good. One could not give one’s own life without a hope like that. Their spirituality is linked to popular religiosity as it is expressed through the worship of the dead, and the paying of homage and the veneration of the martyrs acclaimed by their people. The veneration of the martyrs indicates permeability to popular religiosity. This is evidence for us of the CEBs’ *stricto* and *lato sensu* ecumenism.

iv) Popular Religiosity. Popular Christianity is the freedom people have to appropriate the Christian symbols, rites, and myths and apply them to their life without any doctrinal concern. Whilst in the stadium at the Great Celebration of the Martyrs at the ninth Gathering of CEBs in São Luis do Maranhão (see 3.1.1.) the hammer hit the nails against a massive wooden cross as an allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus, there was the reading of more than sixty names of martyrs of the Church of the Poor in Latin America and in Brazil. Then followed the deafening sound of the shouting of the names of the martyrs with the customary repetition of the phrase that became almost like a chant after each name: “present with us in our journey”. These were names that had not been said by the leader in the improvised

altar, names from people's diocese, from people's local parish, from people's base ecclesial community (CEB) these were being shouted aloud from the terraces. That generated an enormous sound. It was followed by a deep and moving silence. It seemed that the only criterion to have a name included in that exercise was the commitment to the struggle and the recognition of the community. There was no other requirement in order to be considered one of the martyrs of the church. In that memory-keeping exercise, unknown names and stories were represented by better-known names and better-known stories. Sixty odd names were called out from the microphone. Many more names of martyrs were called out from the terraces of the stadium. Although these were people killed because of the commitment to justice and in the struggle to make life better, they are not, in a strict sense, martyrs or saints of the Christian faith as more traditionally understood. They are people who died in the specific struggles they were involved with. In the context of the national gatherings of CEBs they were given the religious status of martyrs by popular acclamation. Obviously, the tacit criterion would be the commitment to the causes the CEBs defend: the struggle for better salaries and conditions of living and, in the countryside, the struggle for land. All these issues are highly political, but the status they receive is highly religious.

This link to popular religiosity is not to diminish the religious status of those who made the commitment of giving their own lives to the causes. Nor is it to devalue the importance for the CEBs of their example. The martyrs are almost heroes of the church in Latin America. Well-known or not, they witnessed to the same

determination and courage, representing the same dedication and offering the same sacrifice. For one well-known and famous martyr, there are many who are unknown and who are not famous, but still in their communities they are respected and their memory kept. This brings to mind Hebrews 11 - the cloud of witnesses.

iv) **Martyrdom as a Bridge:** After separating these elements, let me bring them together again. To have martyrs points to the fact that there are those who are prepared to give their lives to the causes of justice, fairness and inclusion, which are political issues. It demands though a religious commitment to give your life to the cause. Faced with such a cloud of witnesses, one cannot avoid the question of what is it that makes people prepared to give their life to and face martyrdom for?

For the CEBs, as for many other movements in history, martyrdom comes between politics and religion. A martyr comes out of an intense religious/mystical self-giving commitment and also out of a very intense political engagement. Martyrdom could be compared to a bridge between mysticism and prophetic ministry. In a manner of speaking, it links a whole 'continent of spirituality' to another whole 'continent of politics'. The CEBs happen to have an articulate theological perception of the permeability involved in this linkage, as we shall see in the following sub-section.

Perhaps, similarity could be drawn from the fact that across the Atlantic, on another continent, at the turn of the Millennium one of the well-known martyrs - Dom Oscar

Romero – has been enshrined on the facade of Westminster Abbey. He is one of the better-known names amongst the martyrs of the Church of the Poor. The row of the martyrs on the facade of Westminster Abbey is a statement of ecumenical recognition. In the centre of the row of martyrs there is the Latin American Roman Catholic Bishop, Dom Oscar Romero, and also at the centre there is the North American Baptist Minister and civil-rights campaigner, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. Just beside his statue, stands that of Lutheran Pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to name just a few of them. Martyrdom here facilitates permeability between different Christian traditions. Martyrdom in the CEBs seems to play the same role of facilitating recognition of martyrs, even though they may be of different traditions, like Zumbi dos Palmares.

Meanwhile, before moving to a more theological interpretation of the veneration of the martyrs it is important to introduce a corrective measure to say that the struggle is not all outside of the church. There is also a commitment to a symbolic martyrdom in the case of the struggle for a more participative and inclusive church, in particular as the CEBs explore the permeability in relating to other religions and the tensions this brings within the institutional church they belong to. Leonardo Boff's difficulties with the Roman Catholic Curia bring the threat of discipline to the fore. There is a threat of excommunication as shown in the case of the Sri Lankan theologian, Tissa Balasuriya, "excommunicated for deviating from the Catholic faith because of 'errors'

in his book *Mary and Human Liberation*.²¹⁰ These threats demand commitment to the struggle regardless of the dangers, symbolic or otherwise.

Before moving on, let me also assert at the end of this subsection on concrete signs of the veneration of the martyrs that for the CEBs martyrdom seems to play an important role in a more open and flexible way of relating to other agents of transformation in society even when they are from other religious traditions. If someone was killed in the struggle, the CEBs are able to add their name to the role of martyrs as showed above in the case of Zumbi. This testifies to a commitment to a wider liberation, in other words, to recognize those engaged with the transformation of society. In this sense the CEBs seem to be operating with a wider understanding of salvation. In our view, this is the basis of an ecumenical attitude and to a commitment to permeability and interpenetration. In the same direction, an area not yet mentioned and explored, is the fact that the kind of worship of the dead, or paying homage to the martyrs, may resemble the worship of ancestors. Not that the CEBs would put it in this way. If this view is correct, it can be argued that the ecumenism of permeability of the CEBs goes as far as to incorporate elements that are part of the widespread spiritualism present in Brazil (mentioned in the example about Rio de Janeiro above) which relates to the dead in a way that resembles worship. I will need to leave it here because the focus of this research is the CEBs

²¹⁰ Hebblethwaite, Peter. (1999) "The Roman Catholic Church." In Rowland, C. (ed), **The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 196.

ecumenism of permeability at their national gatherings and move on to a theological understanding and justification of the veneration of the martyrs.

3.2.2. The Mysticism of the CEBs is the Memory of the Martyrs, a Subversive and Ecumenical Memory: a Theological Interpretation

What follows below is the result of an interview with Dom Pedro Casaldáliga who is the Bishop of São Felix of Araguaia Diocese in the State of Tocantins, Brazil. The theological interpretation is from his perspective. He was asked questions about martyrdom and about the celebrations in the CEBs' gatherings around the veneration and the remembering of the martyrs. It is necessary to warn the reader that the answers came not only in a language somewhat highlighted by a creative use of Brazilian Portuguese by a man whose mother tongue is not from Brazil, but also by a language blurred by a somewhat mystical approach and with the passion of a life lived under the commitment to the Church of the Poor and, maybe, to martyrdom itself. His discourse is like a mountain to be climbed but without a path, or without hooks on which to hang the theological concepts or elements. Despite the difficulties, I hope this interview will help us to appreciate the theological importance of martyrdom to the CEBs, help us to try to listen to and to access how the CEBs unpack what martyrdom is, and help us to understand their readiness in facing extreme self-giving sacrifice.

Dom Pedro was the bishop presiding at the Celebration of the Martyrs referred above, and here for us he represents the spirituality expressed in pilgrimages and in

other symbols and celebrations that relate closely to the lives of the martyrs. The Eucharist of the Martyrs at the ninth Gathering in São Luis do Maranhão in the basketball stadium was yet another example of an event where that spirituality is expressed and nurtured. The pilgrimages and celebrations can be quite elaborate religious rites. They abound in symbols evoking the martyrs. The most common are banners with their names and pictures that are processed with or displayed, but also songs composed in their memory are sung. For the Celebration of the Martyrs at the ninth Gathering, the cross carried into the service to the middle of the basketball stadium was made out of the wood of a symbolic tree, providing a link with a particular martyr, as the bishop explained in the interview, telling the story behind that symbol.

We took with us to the ninth Gathering of the Base Ecclesial Communities, in São Luis do Maranhão, the hardwood cross, made out of the tree that people planted at the very place where Father João Bosco Penido Burnier was martyred - he was my substitute in martyrdom! (As the bullet was meant to kill Dom Pedro). And that cross presided over the Eucharist of the Martyrs, a regular event in the CEB' gatherings; it is a habitual thing we do, to keep their memory in our communities, in the pilgrimages for land, in the pilgrimages explicitly for the martyrs; this is present in the chapels, in the community centres, in the alternative publications of the CEBs and/or the popular movements.²¹¹

I will try and provide a coherent division of themes in which to organize Dom Pedro's theology. There are several elements in the rich symbolism of the veneration of the

²¹¹ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview took place during the tenth Gathering in Ilhéus Bahia, 2000.**

martyrs, but I will highlight four: firstly, the emphasis on memory keeping of the martyrs; secondly, the link with the Eucharist; thirdly, the pilgrimages for the martyrs linked with the demand for land and issues related; and lastly martyrdom as an ecumenical element in the life of the CEBs. These four dimensions will guide the selecting of material from Dom Pedro's interview.

i) Memory keeping: Dom Pedro's reflection on martyrdom goes from an approach to martyrdom as a gift, as a way of sharing ultimately the life, passion and death of Jesus Christ, to the need to remember, to not let it go without noticing and to keep the memory of the martyrs. In his view, martyrdom becomes a compelling characteristic of a church, a movement, a people: "A people, a church, that forgets its martyrs does not deserve to survive. 'Remember Israel' was always the big warning for the People of God in the bible. And in remembrance, in memory of him, we meet, in Eucharist the People of the God, of Jesus, exist."²¹²

For Dom Pedro, "The Gospel of Jesus and of the mark of the cross is paradoxically linked with the memory of the process of evangelization of Latin America by the Portuguese and by the Spanish. Behind the cross there came men with guns and in the shadow of the cross there came slavery, robbery and death."²¹³ Now, this movement of CEBs, being part of the church that remembers, tries to ask for

²¹² Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²¹³ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

forgiveness, recognizing where the church was the perpetrator and now the CEBs/church seek a greater authenticity by bringing to the fore those who were victims in the history of the peoples of Latin America to be the heroes of it, even though some of them still, as in the past, need to die for their causes.

As was said in the preparatory material for the eighth Gathering: "The CEBs can be for the Indigenous nations the first Christian nucleus of the surrounding society that are not to be seen any more as enemies."²¹⁴ In the CEBs' gatherings the memory of the suffering of the *Avas*, of the Afro descendents, of the oppressed people is kept alive. There is no way that memory can be separated from the blood of the victims made Martyrs of the Journey. Faithful to this aim, Dom Pedro recites by heart the sacred book of the Mayas,

The sacred book of the Mayas, *Popol Vuh*, contains this evangelical exhortation: "After our departure, remember us. Don't let us be forgotten. Evoke our faces and our words. Our image will be the dew in the hearts of those that evoke us"²¹⁵

In Dom Pedro's speech one senses that the memory of the martyrs points towards something beyond their names and stories. It is active only if somehow their struggle is kept alive: justice for the excluded, the women, the *Avas* and *Afros*, the poor and the different ones. The martyr's dreams and hopes are for the society and also for

²¹⁴ Equipe Central do Oitavo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1991) **Culturas Oprimidas e a Evangelização na América Latina, Texto-Base**. Santa Maria: Gráfica Pallotti.
p. 26.

²¹⁵ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview**.

the church. It is a struggle towards an all inclusive church and society. This is important for the ecumenism being explored in this thesis as it shows that the CEBs have proved to be a church that is porous, admitting infiltration, a church that can interact with those who are the suffering people today and make them its cry for justice. This process demands permeability all around.

ii) Eucharist. The questions asked in the interview with Dom Pedro Casaldáliga were about the place and importance of martyrdom in the life of the CEBs. To those questions his answer was to link martyrdom to the Eucharist:

The memory of the martyrs is subversive because it is committed to the same causes that we take up - those subversive to the established (dis)order - for which they fought and for which they gave their lives. It is not a sterile memory. "Do this - give body, give blood, entrust life, in memory of Me, as I did..."²¹⁶

There are two elements in Dom Pedro's words, the 'same causes that we take up', and the link of martyrdom to the Eucharistic celebration. I will take first the link with the Eucharist. He says, "Starting from that first definitive memory 'Do this in memory of me', the memory of the witnesses faithful until death is always and remains until today, an inevitable and subversive memory."²¹⁷ Here it is clear that the words of the bishop take the CEBs' practices and understanding right back to the first and inaugural events of Christianity, Jesus Christ's death on the Cross, represented

²¹⁶ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²¹⁷ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

throughout the history of Christianity by the Sharing of Bread and Wine in his memory. To put it in Dom Pedro's language, following the example of Jesus' witness and martyrdom. This links the sacrifice of the martyrs of the CEBs to the commitment and sacrifice of Jesus Christ remembered and actualized by the church at the Eucharist. This can be attested in the arguments Dom Pedro puts forward paraphrasing the Pope: "A large part of John Paul II's Encyclical *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* is dedicated to martyrs: '...the church has gone back to be a church of Martyrs... It is a witness that cannot be forgotten... In our century the martyrs of the great cause of God have come back... The local churches need to do everything possible to remember those who have suffered martyrdom...'”²¹⁸ He repeats his plea for memory keeping and not forgetting those who gave their lives in the struggle.

The national gatherings seem to provide that memory link through the Eucharist of the Martyrs. The gatherings intentionally aim to be a big Mount Tabor experience (Mark 9. 2-12) where all feel at home in the company of the martyrs and their memory. The special Eucharistic services and processions linked to the memory of the martyrs provide that sort of moving experience. But also the atmosphere of the gatherings leads to the keeping of the dangerous and subversive memory of those who gave their life to the causes the CEBs consider are in favour of the Kingdom of God.

²¹⁸ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

Dom Pedro's presence and influence in the national gatherings shows in the way they give to the local incidents and conflict a national dimension, and also in the way they find inspiration for their own witness in the memory of the martyrs. Here the binary spirituality of combining politics and faith is at work. As with Jesus Christ's death on the cross, Christians would say there was more than just politics, because the salvation of the world was being enacted in the political and religious story of Jesus, the Nazarene called the King of the Jews; so for the participants of the CEBs there would be more than just politics in the martyrdom of their friends; each name has its own story and tragedy and cannot be reduced to a strategy.

There are several Eucharistic songs sung and danced when the elements for communion are presented. One of these songs, a very popular one, links the offering of Jesus with the struggles of the people, from an individual who seeks a plot of land to events in history that sought liberation.

The People's Offering

Chorus:

Who said we are nothing
that we have nothing to offer.
Look at our open hands
bringing our lives as offering.

1. The faith of the North-eastern person
who seeks a destiny, a plot of land.
The struggle of the oppressed people,
who open the way and transform the nation.
Oh! Receive, Lord.

2. Shredded pieces of our history,
beautiful victories that my people have:
Palmares, Canudos, Cabanas
were struggles of yesterday
and also of today.
Oh, Receive, Lord.

3. Here we bring seeds, blood
of these people, it will fertilize the soil,
the foreigner, and so many rural workers, saints
and factory workers for liberation.
Oh! Receive, Lord.

4. Courage of those who give their lives
is being offered in this bread and wine.
This is force that destroys death,
change our destiny,
it is resurrection.
Oh! Receive, Lord²¹⁹

In his sermon at the Mass of the Martyrs at the ninth Gathering, Dom Pedro - the bishop who wrote to the Pope suggesting that all the bishops around the world should change their ecclesiastical vestments to ordinary clothes and their silver crosses to wooden crosses - said that, "martyrdom was a gift from God, and that those who have it should work it out as a talent: enrich it, celebrate it, live the life of freedom that martyrdom can give, and then, when enriched like that, give this gift back to God in joy and thanksgiving."²²⁰ This seems very close to the spirit of the song translated above. Martyrdom is a gift and a cross:

²¹⁹ Zé Vicente e Machado. "Ofertório do Povo." In Secretariado das CEBs, 9 Encontro Intereclesial São Luís - MA, 15 a 19 de julho 1997, **Cantando a vida e a Esperança. Livro de Cantos**. Number 59. p. 24.

²²⁰ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (July 1997). **Sermon at the ninth Gathering of CEBs**. São Luís do Maranhão.

In this cross (of martyrdom), maybe familiar, maybe of a neighbour, the cross of a martyred comrade, brother or sister, the people know how to venerate the bigger cross of our redemption and they confess, with the apostle Paul: "Far be it from us to glorify ourselves except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."²²¹

iii) **Causes.** The other element present in Dom Pedro's words, already mentioned above, had to do with the causes for which they are giving their lives. He said: "The memory of the martyrs is subversive because it is committed to the same causes that we take up."²²²

They know the causes they are prepared to take up, to link with martyrdom and the memory of the martyrs. People are articulate about pressing social issues, they have a political opinion, they have a view of society, and the gatherings reflect that atmosphere of political debate inspired by bible reading and Eucharistic celebration. They are critical of others, the government, the elite, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its policy, rich nations and foreign debt, environmental exploitation and consumerism. They are critical of corruption and prepared to organize themselves around small and big initiatives to change things.

²²¹ Dom Pedro Casaldàliga (2000). **Interview.**

²²² Dom Pedro Casaldàliga (2000). **Interview.**

Their criticism does not spare the church; on the contrary it is where it starts. Here, this self criticism, self awareness can be seen in Dom Pedro's words: "This emphasis on martyrdom is a new (*sic*) characteristic, one not previously emphasized, indeed one that could not even be evoked. In the conflicts between the churches, they – the churches - made the martyrs. It is a witness that cannot be forgotten. 'The ecumenism of the martyrs', writes the Pope, 'is perhaps the most convincing.'"²²³

The political causes internal to the church or directly related to the society where the CEBs are placed are considered to be subversive, as they are intended to transform both. Concomitantly it is all being related to the following of Jesus and the continuation of the work of the first generation of Christian. The bishop carries on to say that: "Those who gave the greatest proof, according to the criteria of Jesus of Nazareth himself, deserve credit. This memory calls upon us, commands us and commits us."²²⁴

What is it to be a Christian? According to this understanding of Jesus Christ's subversive memory, and also the commitment of those who gave the greatest proof, being a Christian is to have the same commitment as Jesus had to an extreme witness. This may not necessarily be in life and death terms but in terms of being prepared to be a martyr or a witness everyday, to live by a set of principles that are

²²³ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²²⁴ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

dependent on values that may be alien to the main culture, values rooted in the prophetic ministry of Jesus, in other words: values subversive to the present status quo.

This subversive memory is also called “the dangerous memory of Jesus.”²²⁵ In the preparatory material for the tenth Gathering of CEBs, in Ilhéus, Bahia, 2000, the biblical scholars insisted that the danger of Jesus’ memory was contained in several aspects of his life and ministry but above all in the fact that he, although helping people to be better Jews, would insist that people should find a deeper faithfulness, and within that find out the limits of the tradition and go beyond them to respond to the challenges of their time. They continue to say: “the same happens today.”²²⁶

This appropriation of the tradition contained in the words of Dom Pedro, ‘as I did’, is an important theological point in relation to validating martyrdom. This might be one way in which martyrdom is considered an element of the Christian life for today. It suggests that saints and martyrs are not simply a tradition of the past, but a living and present experience for today. If taken as a principle of actualization it opens the way to the adaptability of the faith for different contexts and times, and also that these people whose martyrdom deserves veneration are to be found in contemporary circumstances and diverse contexts, including political as well as in

²²⁵ Orofino, F. and Mesters, C. (1999) “A inculturação da Boa Nova na Vida do Povo.” Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Encontro Intereclesial. **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base**. Paulo Afonso: Fonte Viva. p. 30.

²²⁶ *Idem*, p. 30.

ethnic, cultural and religious terms. Because of the approach exemplified in the words of the biblical scholars, 'the same happens today', we might have other saints and martyrs of the Way today. In this theology, it is important to keep their memory, and as important to keep as some of the most holy of the saints of the past.

There are complex issues in relation to martyrdom in the present context of religious extremism in general and Islamic extremists in particular. The interview with Dom Pedro was given before religious martyrdom became confused with mass killing in the events in the USA on 9/11/2001. In the CEBs' views, expressed by the bishop, martyrdom is self-giving sacrifice, not a killing exercise. That makes all the difference. The martyrs of the Way are not suicide bombers. The opposite, they have been targeted and killed for standing up for justice.

Defending theologically these practices, the poet bishop makes the point that: "throughout its history, in the midst of so many infidelities and denials, the church of Jesus always welcomed with veneration - committed by although not always committed to - the memory of its martyrs."²²⁷

He continues, saying that:

In our America - continent of death and of hope - in the last decades, above all, because of military dictatorships and at the same time because of the social commitment of faith, martyrdom

²²⁷ Dom Pedro Casaldàliga (2000). **Interview.**

has grown with a pentecostal exuberance, in all sectors or categories of the church, of society. There are martyrs who are universally known and the more anonymous martyrs only recognized in the Book of Life - the *milites ignoti*, the unknown soldiers of the first Christian generations.²²⁸

Our last point presenting Dom Pedro's theological view on the CEBs' emphasis on martyrdom and its relation with permeability to popular religions is in the area of ecumenism.

iv) Ecumenical: In the CEBs' appropriation of martyrdom for today there is an ecumenism of the martyrs because the causes and issues which people are engaging with are well beyond the limits of the Roman Catholic Church alone, well beyond the limits/boundaries of the churches and beyond a narrow concern about Christianity. One could say that the causes are the causes related to the mission of God in the world. As the bishop of São Felix says: "In fact, throughout Latin America, very significantly, Catholic and Protestant blood has been mixed with blood which may be Marxist. Generous lives donated to Life, in the concrete causes of human rights, for the Earth, for the Indigenous cause, the kingdom of God, the cause of God and humanity."²²⁹

The image of the mixed blood of martyrs from different traditions fighting for the same causes represents well our point of an ecumenism of permeability. Here the

²²⁸ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²²⁹ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

criterion for any permeability is the struggle for justice. Any doctrinal restrictions have to bow down to the commitment to the struggle.

Again, a parallel could be drawn with the ecumenical views behind the row of the 20th Century Martyrs on the facade of Westminster Abbey (see above 3.2.1), which is rooted in the causes for which they died. As was said by the Bishop we are interviewing: "On the same day of his death as a martyr, Oscar Romero wrote to me, as a legacy: 'happy to run the same risks as Jesus, by identifying ourselves with the causes of the dispossessed.'"²³⁰

This is the simple commitment that can be found in the CEBs: the commitment to the cause that is theirs, the cause that is also of others, the cause of the dispossessed. This could not be a more inclusive and a more missionary statement of faith. This is the real root of the macro ecumenism lived in the gatherings and embodied in the CEBs' people's spirituality, which embraces *Brazilindian* and Afro-Brazilian religions. Beyond matters of faith and doctrine, creeds and baptisms, there lies a common commitment to the cause of the dispossessed, to causes for which they are prepared to pray side by side, and, moreover, prepared to die side-by-side. In the celebration (worship/veneration) of the martyrs this ecumenism of the struggle is reinforced. Dom Pedro remarks: "In the sanctuary of the Martyrs of the Journey, that we built, in Ribeirão Cascalheira, with our Parish and Diocese, the faces, the names, and the

²³⁰ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

causes are mixed together, coming from all over Brazil, from Latin America as a whole: all martyrs of the Latin American Journey.”²³¹

Dom Pedro will carry on expanding on the meaning of the commitment of the CEBs to the causes of justice for all. In this commitment resides the faithfulness to Christ. The memory of the Martyrs is also to be faithful to their causes and to Christ: “While we are faithful to the memory of the faithful witnesses - ultimately to the faithful Witness, we will be faithful to their causes, the cause of the Kingdom of God. Martyrdom is the greatest seal of authenticity in the community of the followers of Jesus.”²³² This is the source of the CEBs’ macro ecumenism.

People are linked by a common spirituality, a spirituality of justice, not of death and martyrdom. That is not spirituality of death but of life and of the struggle for life. Dom Pedro says: “This is not a masochistic victimization, it is a committed loyalty, a response to the witness. It is a strength that always transmits a greater life that gives life and continues to give life until the moment of death - to Life, to the Kingdom! Our martyrs are our more legitimate glory, the incontestable strength of the journey. They, as the Jesuit martyr Inacio Ellacuria, Dean of UCA in San Salvador, used to say - make us ‘full of hope and channels of hope.’”²³³

²³¹ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²³² Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

²³³ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview.**

Martyrdom is a by-product. Martyrdom is understood as a possible consequence of the resistance people are prepared to put against forces of injustice, oppression and death. They resist, they protest, they organize themselves in demonstrations of all sorts, they engage in political campaigning. However, the terrorist/martyr archetype does not necessarily represent the kind of martyr that is being celebrated and encouraged by the CEBs. The borderline may be blurred when the macro ecumenism takes over and brings together under the umbrella of justice causes from all sorts of groups. This ecumenism corresponds to the unity a common front represents. Meanwhile, within that front the diversity is immense and the differences quite significant. However, I would suggest that the movement of CEBs is a Christian movement ultimately committed to life and not to death. The suicide/terrorist/martyr type is not part of their tradition and cannot be reconciled to it. The martyrs of the CEBs are in general unarmed, have never attacked anybody. Their activism is based on political pressure. In some cases it gets close to becoming violent, for example, in the case of the struggle for land. Nonetheless land occupation is planned to avoid too much of a problem with the justice system, so that they will have a chance to get the possession of the piece of land legalized eventually. With political pressure, social action and campaigning - trying to avoid violence – they might move the hand of justice to their side. In reality it is the sacrifice here or there of another victim/martyr of the police violence or the hired killers that might attract media interest and bring public outcry. Martyrdom can influence the outcome of legal cases to the side of the campaigners.

Behind the social movement of the CEBs there is a force for change based on political and social pressure, not on war or hatred or violence. Their action is essentially for life and for hope. It is loud but pacific. It is based on a spirituality that is committed to seeing justice done and for that it is prepared to pay the ultimate price.

One of the songs of the songbook for the ninth Gathering relates to that precise mixing of the sacrificial martyrdom of Jesus Christ with the killing and the blood of those martyrs that had fallen in the struggle and the life that comes out of it:

The Blood

Chorus:

From the blood of those who have been killed
in the struggle
there will be born a new people.
There is life in the One who was killed,
crucified
witnessing to the life in a new world

1. He is wine, he is bread,
the bread of a new covenant
that leads us to salvation

2. He is the way, he is the light,
the light that for ever
leads us to the truth

3. He is the peace, he is forgiveness,
forgiveness of those who forgive
and love others as brothers/sisters

4. He is joy, he is the kick towards struggle

he is the freedom of those
who live in prayer²³⁴

The theological interpretation of martyrdom giving by the Bishop and the song above reveals also that there is a Eucharistic dimension to the memory of the martyrs. It is explicitly Christian, as it is also for the salvation of the world. The martyrs' sacrifices are geared towards the redemption of humanity. This might explain the CEBs' ability to include others who might not have an obvious link with the church in the book of life. To be a martyr, a witness to the cause of God, becomes an ecumenical credential for the CEBs. As shown above (3.1.1) the Church of the Poor represented by the CEBs is prepared to keep their memory, even though they may not be Christians in a strict sense in the first place. Therefore, in the mysticism of martyrdom there is a *lato sensu* ecumenism as the martyrs are all counted in the book of life as expressed by the bishop.

The ecumenical argument in Dom Pedro's view and words go this way: "to be a witness is a New Testament definition of what being a Christian is. And the Martyrs are extreme witnesses."²³⁵ Martyrdom therefore is a confirmation and a sign of someone who was a witness and a follower. Martyrdom involves political commitment and militancy; for the bishop, Christian witnesses are engaged with causes and reasons to testify to. The sort of commitment and engagement with particular causes that are rooted in the example of Jesus Christ and of the early

²³⁴ "O Sangue." In Secretariado das CEBs, 9 Encontro Intereclesial São Luís - MA, 15 a 19 de julho 1997, **Cantando a vida e a Esperança. Livro de Cantos**. Number 173. p. 70.

²³⁵ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (2000). **Interview**.

martyrs but that are also present and contemporary and of relevance to society today, relevant to wider groups than just the churches. This is the way to recognize martyrs that might not be directly linked to the Roman Catholic Church, or even to Christianity. They might be considered martyrs if they paid the extreme price of giving their life to the causes of justice and of the Kingdom of God.

In summary, martyrs are witnesses, extreme witness. They have, like Christ, given their life for the salvation of the world. Their causes go beyond the limits of the Christian faith. Martyrs of the same cause are recognized by the CEBs. They are all counted in. That is the theological argument for the CEBs' inclusive approach in keeping their memory. The veneration of the martyrs encourages an ecumenism of permeability.

To revise the whole argument so far: the CEBs have been pushing the limits of the church towards plurality, adding interfaith practices to their spirituality of justice, as described previously in Chapter 2. They have been pushing the limits of society towards justice and inclusion. In the church they have been pushing the limits of ministry towards an all-ministerial church including women (as we shall see in more detail later in Chapter 4). The CEBs also represent a daring inclusivity towards Christians of other denominations. They have been pushing the limits of their Christian faith towards other faiths and cultural traditions present in Brazil. As could be seen in the most recent gatherings of the CEBs they were pushing the limits to

include leaders and priests of other religions, in particular of Afro and Ava origins (see 3.1.1 and 3.1.2), being permeable to their presence and influence. There had been the presence of Afro-Brazilian religions leaders offering prayers and sharing in the leading of worship in their own way. There were inculturated celebrations bringing the Eucharistic celebration within the context of an *Ava Myth*, The Mass of the Land without Evil. There had been other symbolic gestures about this when the Gospel was read in various *Brazilindian* languages at the tenth Gatherings, in Bahia and at the last meeting in Minas Gerais. Those gestures demonstrated that the CEBs have been and are trying to take into account the issue of languages²³⁶ and of cultures. In doing so they are consciously pushing the limits towards an inculturated Christianity, providing spaces and times when Christianity is permeable to other religions, spaces and times of cross-cultural and inter-religious encounters, sometimes diverse in languages, and frequently sensitive to and valuing ethnicity, as well as gender and popular religiosity. These permeable signs mark a shift in terms of the relation between Christianity and other cultures and religions.

We have shown in the previous Chapters that permeability has not been explored theologically as it should. We have described in this Chapter 3 the way in which the CEBs have been permeable to Afro and Avas traditions and religions. We also have

²³⁶ There is an almost exclusive domination in Brazil of the Brazilian Portuguese language in terms of education, media, urban and rural life. This domination has been imposed since the arrival in Brazil of D. Joao VI and his Portuguese Court in the beginning of the 19th Century. A relatively short period of language domination that could be changed, but there is virtually no cultural or educational initiative to revert the situation. And here is the value of the CEBs symbolic act of including the Gospel reading in other Brazilian languages, a number that reaches around 600 different ethnic groups and around 200 different languages.

studied the permeability to popular religiosity expressed in the ecumenism of martyrdom. In the case of the latter, we found a theological reflection supporting such approach. The mystical theology is only partially sufficient to respond to the CEBs' practices. We are still the opinion that the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability deserves more attention from the theological academic community.

In the next Chapter we will explore how far the CEBs understand and articulate theologically their ecumenism and how it goes beyond liturgical celebrations engaging prophetically with the political issues related to specific cultures and groups of oppressed and marginalized people.

CHAPTER 4

ECUMENISM OF PERMEABILITY, INNOVATION IN PROPHETISM

It has been already mentioned in the Introduction of the previous Chapter that the ecumenism of permeability of the CEBs is an ecumenism also of prophetic characteristics. I strived to spell out in Chapter 3 how mysticism called for and enabled permeability to Afro, to Ava and to popular religion. The religious/mystical practices of the CEBs produced a *lato sensu* ecumenism. I turn my attention now to the other characteristic of the CEBs' ecumenism and inter-religious relations that comes out of their prophetic leaning.

The prophetic spirit, as in the case of mysticism, is not exclusive to Christianity. I use the term prophetic to characterize the religious demand for justice, peace and righteousness, the concern for the wider good of humanity and of the environment. A prophetic spirit is manifest in critical engagement with reality in order to transform it.

In this Chapter I will try and show how the prophetic characteristic of the CEBs has helped to shape their very inclusive ecumenism, permeable and popular. And how conversely their ecumenism has then reflected their prophetic spirituality of justice. I hope to show that the CEBs' prophetic spirituality of liberation is also the basis of their ecumenism and their openness to other cultures and religious traditions.

The first dimension of this prophetic side of the CEBs is found in their claim that justice and faith belong together. This is integral to them and to their sense of identity. They trace it back to the origins of Christianity. The inheritance they claim links them with the early Christian and Apostolic community that persevered in prayer and shared all possessions equally (Acts 2). For example, the theme of the tenth Gathering was "CEBs, 2000 years on the way". What the CEBs are saying is that there is a sense of belonging to and journeying with the people of the Way for 2000 years in the pursuit of spirituality (prayer) and justice (equal sharing). The Letter from the Gathering to the Communities asserts this claim unequivocally: "We began with Jesus and his first followers, who persevered in accepting the teaching of the apostles, in mission, in the breaking of the bread, in prayer and in sharing in common all they had."²³⁷ For the CEBs, there is a link and a *continuum* between prayer and justice. Furthermore, in the letter they place themselves within two dimensions of Jesus' ministry and the apostles' mission: prayer and sharing. More explicitly these two dimensions become the roots, "in more recent times" that will be

²³⁷ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar.** paragraph 5.

identified as their own roots: "the Base Ecclesial Communities grew out of two currents which intermingled and complemented each other: one was more religious, through the praying of the rosary, reflection groups, bible circles, pilgrimages; and the other was more social, engaging in popular struggles in the countryside and in the town."²³⁸ This Part 2 of this thesis reflects exactly this arrangement: Chapter 3 is about spirituality and liturgy and this Chapter 4 is about the political engagement with relevant social issues for the CEBs; in both cases I am linking these dimensions to a porous and permeable *lato* ecumenism.

The second dimension is the kind of ecumenism prophetic engagement produces. The Letter to the Communities carries on to say that the mission of the CEBs has been carried out through the prophetic sharing of the struggle of the poor. "Because of our prophetic activity, we have on many occasions forced society to change its agenda, taking on board the themes that interest the poor."²³⁹ They recognize that in this mission of sharing the struggle of the oppressed the CEBs "have grown in the defense of human rights, in the building of citizenship, in the struggle for agrarian reform, in valuing Indigenous peoples, Black people, women, children, young people, the disabled people and the elderly."²⁴⁰ Thus the struggle for justice goes beyond just economic and social issues, reaching ethnic and cultural dimensions. It is ecumenical in a *lato sensu* of the word.

²³⁸ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar.** paragraph 6.

²³⁹ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar.** paragraph 7.

²⁴⁰ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar.** paragraph 7.

The sections below in this Chapter will take these different aspects of the prophetic ecumenism of the CEBs and expand on them. I will be trying to show how the CEBs' own material articulates these issues, in particular expressed in the preparatory material organized and published by the CEBs' Secretariat for the national gatherings. In consideration first, to start with, it will be the case of the economically poor and oppressed. Then I will look at the specific issues around the Avas, the women, and finally the Afro-descendent people.

I intend to show that the *lato* ecumenism of the CEBs is not based only on permeability of religious/mystical symbolism and in liturgical terms but to show that it is based also in a political and prophetic engagement. I will try to describe the content of this prophetic engagement and how the CEBs combine the struggle towards liberation with openness of mind and heart to other forms of cultures and therefore other religious expressions.

I will also try to identify under-pinning theological principles that come out of the struggles for justice that support the ecumenism of permeability of the CEBs.

The political and social struggles the CEBs are engaging with offer a common agenda for ecumenical relations. They provide the material bases for the wider ecumenism of the CEBs.

4.1. ECUMENICAL LIBERATING SPIRITUALITY

A theological dimension for the CEBs' commitment to the cause of the poor and oppressed can be found from its early beginnings, and it is also evident throughout developments in their national gatherings. This is quite explicit in the themes for gatherings, for example: the fourth Gathering in Itaici, São Paulo, in 1981, the theme was: 'The Church, oppressed people that organizes for liberation'. From that to the ninth Gathering in São Luis do Maranhão in 1997: 'CEBs: life and hope in the masses'. Pedro Ribeiro, sociologist, points out that the themes the CEBs are interested in come from the very geographical location of each individual CEB, "they are frequently found in outskirts of cities and towns, in social housing estates, in shanty towns, in small rural communities of landless people, etc."²⁴¹ Amongst others, the themes are, land distribution, work conditions of the poor, the issues for the People of the Forest. In 2010, the twelfth Gathering will be on the Amazon area, Porto Velho, Rondônia, a region that is economically poor and environmentally in danger. The themes suggest also a clear juxtaposition of social, political and environmental issues with a theological slant. The political engagement is also a matter of faith and theological understanding.

The CEBs' commitment to the cause of the poor and oppressed is an expression of their theology and spirituality. This is well represented for example in the three axes that gave the gathering in Ilhéus Bahia its framework. "The memory of Jesus; The

²⁴¹ Oliveira, P. R. (1997) "CEB Unidade Estruturante de Igreja," In Boff, C., Lesbaupin, I., de Oliveira, P. R. et al. **As Comunidades de Base em Questão**, São Paulo: Paulinas. p. 167.

journey of the CEBs and of the poor; the commitment to the Kingdom of God.”²⁴² The theological approach represents a manner of engaging with the political issues: “these three [theological] axes represent a tool to think the challenges of the present and of the future for the CEBs and for the poor in Brazil.”²⁴³ This example goes further as it unfolds in different mottos for the gathering, first the general motto: CEBs, memory and journey, dream and commitment, then the five different sub-mottos: (i) communities that struggle for justice; (ii) communities that take part in the struggle and serve; (iii) communities that bring together faith and life; (iv) communities that celebrate; (v) communities of brothers and sisters; (vi) communities in ecumenical dialogue with and sharing in the Afro-Brazilian cause and in the cause of the Indigenous population.²⁴⁴

The last point is, in my view, an innovation in prophetism that combines struggling for justice with sharing in inter-religious relations: this is what I call prophetic ecumenism. It is ecumenism with Afro and Avas set against the context of the political issues of the economically oppressed.

The themes above could be organized like this: i) in relation to dreams of a better future, the emphasis is prophetic/visionary and to do with the announcing and proclamation (*nabi*, *kerigmatic*); ii) regarding communities that take part in the struggle and serve, the themes are participation and service (*koinonia*, *diakonia*); iii)

²⁴² www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/tema.html.

²⁴³ www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/tema.html.

²⁴⁴ www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/tema.html.

in terms of the ecumenism of dialogue and practice the theme is the salvation, provision and inclusion of *Afro and Avas* and of the environment (*oikumene*).

Their commitment to the causes of the oppressed is enrolled in a kind of mystical and theological mantle. This prophetic spirituality is well expressed by these words: "The faith is the deepest fountain that motivates the search for better conditions of life, justice, fraternity: it is our faith that gives the strength for the struggle, for the demonstrations, for the collective actions."²⁴⁵ This is a mystical and theological language of social transformation. It also gives the members of the CEBs a language for a *lato* ecumenical viewpoint. Their language allows for interpenetration of the religious faith and of the social issues as it allows also space for those of different religious traditions to be represented and included. As a contributor to the *Texto-Base* puts it: "the CEBs and the CEBs' gatherings are constituted fundamentally by the poor and by the narrative of their sufferings and struggles."²⁴⁶ The song below is a good example of the CEBs' language that allows for permeability to social struggles and religious differences:

Invite all the poor

Chorus:

Invite all the poor for the banquet of the Lord!

1. I will invite all the washer women.

²⁴⁵ Ivo Lebaupin, *Comunidades que lutam pela Justiça*, in *Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Intereclesial, CEBs Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base*, Editora Fonte Viva, Paulo Afonso, 1999, p. 97.

²⁴⁶ www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/inter.html - O que é um Intereclesial?

She washes all the dirt of injustice and oppression.
She feeds in this Eucharist.
She fights with courage for her liberation.

2. I will invite the CEBs
who are seeking a new society
where there will be communion.
They feed in this Eucharist!
They fight with courage.
To make the world a brother/sister!

3. I will invite all the lame and the exploited
All the excluded will take part.
They feed in this Eucharist!
They fight with courage
for their liberation.

4. I will invite the prostitute and the drug addict
Many times criticized by society itself.
They feed in this Eucharist!

...

5. I will invite the abandoned children
rejected and despised without the right to live.
They feed in this Eucharist!

...

6. I will invite the Indian (Ava) and the Afro
who still exist in the tribe
those who insist on their right to live
They feed in this Eucharist!²⁴⁷

This is a Eucharistic song that names who the poor and oppressed are; it is based on the Parable of the Great Banquet: "go out into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14. 21). The CEBs

²⁴⁷ "Convindo todos os Pobres." In Secretariado das CEBs, 9 Encontro Intereclesial São Luís - MA, 15 a 19 de julho 1997, **Cantando a vida e a Esperança. Livro de Cantos**. Number 193. p. 76-77.

have added to the Gospel list those of different cultures and religious traditions, the Ava and the Afro. This innovation leads to the creation of values that sustain the unique experience of ecumenical permeability to the other cultures and religions present in the Brazilian cultural and social scenario.

In their last Gathering in Ipatinga, Minas Gerais, in 2005, the CEBs took a theme that could be considered the opposite of a prophetic stance in defense of the poor and oppressed: spirituality. The preparatory material reveals the treatment they gave to that theme and the connection with justice spirituality. The welcome words in the preparatory material for the eleventh Gathering says: "we people from Minas Gerais open our arms and our hearts to welcome with tenderness and strength the train of the CEBs which comes full to the brim with men and women to celebrate the following of Jesus in the commitment to the excluded."²⁴⁸ These words of welcome reaffirm the theme of that Gathering: CEBs, Liberating Spirituality - follow Jesus in the commitment to the excluded.

The Preparatory material for that gathering helps to grasp how the CEBs understand spirituality. At the beginning of *Texto-Base*, a priest (Benedito Ferraro) and a woman theologian (Tereza Cavalcanti)²⁴⁹ will set the tone of the reflections to come linking spirituality to a wider ecumenism:

²⁴⁸ Almeida, N. and Alves Pinto, L. H. (2004) "Explicação do Cartaz das CEBs." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. pp. 4-5.

²⁴⁹ Cavalcanti, T. and Ferraro, B. (2004) "Introdução." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no**

The theme of spirituality opens us to the connectedness of faith and life... When we say spirituality, we link with the mystic, interior motivation and therefore, link with the Holy Spirit... When we say that this spirituality is of liberation, we are actually linking it to the reality of oppression, of exclusion in which the majority of the Brazilian, Latin America and Caribbean population live in. Liberation Spirituality is a way in which we can stand up against the conflictive reality that needs to be transformed in order that we may have a common house for all human beings and in peace with creation... For this reason, a liberating spirituality points towards the whole dimensions of human life: economic, political, cultural, erotic-pedagogical, liturgical and also in relation to nature and the environment. The liberating spirituality points towards a holistic liberation.²⁵⁰

When the CEBs enlarge their struggle for justice to areas like the ones above, they articulate into words the ecumenical dimensions of the theological and practical position they have taken. In the previous Chapter we unearthed signs that showed the practices of the CEBs are permeable to influences of other cultural traditions and religions, now, here a reading of such political and theological instances can lead to the same conclusion that in the CEBs' prophetic dimension there is also a macro ecumenism at work. I would like to highlight firstly the scope of the Christian salvation and message. Salvation is for all and in particular for the oppressed and for the different ones. This is represented in the Eucharistic song above, 'they all feed in this Eucharist'. A wider salvation is also represented in the spelling out of areas that it should transform, economics but also cultural, etc. This shows that the CEBs have a prophetic vision (like the *nabi* of the Old Testament, Hebrew Scriptures) of an all inclusive and fair society, equal in social justice for all, but rich in cultural diversity.

compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. pp 7-12.
²⁵⁰ **Idem.** pp. 7-8.

They proclaim it as their message (*Kerigma* - like the Apostolic Community of the New Testament) in songs and in practical political ways. Secondly, there is the participation and service (*koinonia, diakonia*) inviting all to be together agents of transformation in society. Thirdly, there is in the Eucharistic song a definite leaning towards the oppressed, excluded and the different ones as those who ought to be catered for and welcomed at the Eucharistic Table of the Lord. In theological figurative language the symbol is the economy of inclusion for all, a house for all; house of all humanity and for all creation (*Oikumene*).

In introducing the preparatory material for the eleventh Gathering, Tereza Cavalcanti and Benedito Ferraro set the biblical foundations in which this theme and concept of ecumenical liberating spirituality finds its roots in scripture. Reading the bible linked with the life of the people, they continue to say that, "the theme of the Gathering is also in line with the hopes and dreams of the people expressed in their spirituality lived day-by-day and that strengthens them in the way of resisting the oppression, exclusion, culture of death that surrounds them."²⁵¹ And as affirming the new created-values of inter-cultural and inter-religious dimensions they say that: "these hopes and dreams are expressed in the *Land without Evil* story in the idea of a lost paradise and in the hopes of building up a society without classes."²⁵² (see Chapter 3 for more detail on *Terra sem Males* Myth and Celebration)

²⁵¹ *Idem.* p. 9.

²⁵² *Idem.* p. 11.

As seen above, the preparatory material treats the theme of spirituality in an open and ecumenically inclusive way, but not without criteria. That is what the 250 pages book is about. It is a substantial resource compared with previous *Texto-Base*. They are trying to distinguish a general open but liberationist spirituality from a spirituality that has no consequence for the concrete political and economic situation of the people, and a spirituality that does not tackle the cultural and religious prejudices the poor and the different ones are subjected to. The first part of the preparatory material, or *Texto-Base*, is mapping the reality of different forms of present day spiritualities. They look in particular at the spirituality of new-age; neo-Pentecostalism; charismatic; spiritualism, and also at the secular spirituality of the free-market. They conclude politely and with respect that those forms of spirituality are not for the CEBs.

Then the book presents the challenge to live the spirituality of liberation taking into account the perspective of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, in particular in chapters 6 and 8: "from death to life, to live today as those who have been promised resurrection, in love and joy, freedom and justice, striving to transform reality and in union with God."²⁵³ As in previous *Textos-Base* for other gatherings, here there is also an ecumenical contribution, as writers to this part include an Anglican bishop - Robinson Cavalcanti, and a lay-woman and Methodist theologian - Elsa Tamez.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ Tamez, E. (2004) "O Desafio de Viver como Ressuscitados; Uma Espiritualidade Libertada e Libertadora." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 29.

²⁵⁴ Comblin, J., Libanio, J. B., and Cavalcanti, R., and Tames, E., (2004) "Mapeando a Realidade." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade**

In the second part of the preparatory material they look at spirituality in the biblical tradition, from Exodus to Revelation, arguing that the CEBs' spirituality is rooted in and inspired by it. This relationship with the bible is done in a creative form: "looking at life with lenses coloured by the bible. Looking at the bible with lenses coloured by life. Life shines light on the bible. In turn the bible sheds light in life."²⁵⁵ This is an image taken from the Psalm 119.105 of word as lamp and light to the journey. They say that, "the oppressed people read the bible linking the bible to life."²⁵⁶ As they say in these studies for the CEBs: "one needs to keep one eye on the bible and the other on life itself."²⁵⁷

The methodology explained above opens the opportunity for unexpected outcomes from the bible stories. The study about the Exodus experience has a critical reading of patriarchal history within the liberating story of the slaves in Egypt. The author, Tea Frigerio, a missionary sister, tries to see a prophetic role of those under cover as it were in the story. She identifies twelve women to couple them with the 12 sons of Jacob (Exodus 1.1): the two midwives, the daughter of Levi, a sister, a daughter of Pharaoh, and the seven daughters of Rachel and Jethro. These are women who, diverse in culture and religion, had a fundamental role in the story of liberation of the

Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. pp. 13-40.

²⁵⁵ "Espirituality na Tradição Bíblica, Primeiro e Segundo Testamento." (2004) In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base.** Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 41.

²⁵⁶ **Idem.** p. 41.

²⁵⁷ **Idem.** p. 41.

slaves in Egypt. In this fascinating study, the author helps the CEBs to understand the liberating story of the Exodus from the perspective of the women in it, showing how their obedience to God and political resistance was essential in the liberation process and how their actions created history and a different future, keeping hope for the poor and oppressed alike.

Essentially, in the preparatory material, the Gospel of Jesus is seen as the spirituality of love, the love of God. The author, Tereza Cavalcanti again, says that outside of love there is no salvation. Obviously in a clear new interpretation of the formula: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside of the church there is no salvation); and Schillebeeckx's change of terms: 'outside of the world there is no salvation'; so the very inclusive formula is born: 'outside of love there is no salvation.'²⁵⁸ The biblical theology that supports such an affirmation goes some way in trying to address a better theological articulation of the CEBs' new ecumenical practices, however in our judgment that biblical theological work is not systematic enough to address the complex issues present in the CEBs way of mixing religious salvation with social and economic liberation, and with inter-religious and cultural relations.

4.2. LAND OF THE PATAXÓS

²⁵⁸ Cavalcanti, T. (2004) "A Sabedoria que vem da Simplicidade." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 83.

The intersection and the slot in between the CEBs' religious life and the Ava peoples has been exposed and explored in this thesis already in the way interpenetration of the Myth of the Land without Evil was articulated with the Eucharistic Celebration (see 3.1.2). But there is a political implication in the CEBs' action of continuing to point out how the original cultures, religions and languages of peoples in Brazil have been repressed and oppressed. It is a prophetic position to keep insisting that the struggle of the Amerindians has produced martyrs. The fact that some *Avas'* deaths are recognized as martyrdom by a bigger religious group than their ethnic group is a political and *lato* ecumenical stance.

The CEBs have an uncomfortable political message. This is stressed when they say the memory of the martyrs is not to be forgotten. The simple choices of places, times and themes of the CEBs' gatherings have a political resonance to them. For example, the land of the Pataxós - where the tenth Gathering took place, was where the Portuguese first arrived in Brazil in 1500 CE. The year 2000 was the celebration of 500 years of Portuguese domination (see Chapter 1.1.2.), whilst the Brazilian Government prepared the region for the great commemoration with tourist infrastructure and a campaign about the great history of Brazil, the CEBs prepared the ground in the same area – land of Pataxós - for their tenth Gathering. That was a prophetic wider ecumenical act.

The Globo communication network puts every day in the televisions of the country a regressive counting down of days: 'only so many days until 22nd of April 2000 – 500 years of discovery!' This is followed by the appearance of several

celebrities telling us about the 'joy of that encounter of cultures'.
But, the CEBs ask 500 years of what?²⁵⁹

The voice from the Indigenous people themselves was registered in the daily Notices of the tenth Gathering:

Manuel e Cicil Xucuru Cariri, de Palmeiras dos Índios (Alagoas State) said: "It is necessary that the church reassessed its role in the last 500 years of invasion of Brazil, and that a rescue and restitution happens of all that has been taken from the indigenous people of this country. We need to be able to believe that a better day for our children is possible, if not for our children, at least for our grandchildren. We would like that the CEBs be with us in crying out to our great God *Tupã* for help that together we may build up a better nation not only for Indians but for all."²⁶⁰

The issue of restitution is a political hot potato. There are political and economic implications. It is as difficult a topic to address regarding the Afro-slaves descendents as it is regarding the Ava Peoples. To mention and publish a call for restitution to the Avas shows the CEBs' commitment to their cause.

The simple fact that the CEBs publish this call for prayer to God *Tupã* and commitment to build up a better nation for all goes to the heart of my thesis here that there is a somewhat unnoticed development in the CEBs' theological journey which is an addition of inter-religious relations to their liberation and political emphasis.

²⁵⁹ www.ongba.org.be/memoria/10cebs/acaminho/ac01-04.html, Jan-Mar 1998, p. 1 and 2.

²⁶⁰ X Intereclesial de CEBs. Área de Documentação. (2000) **Axego. Achegando - memória e caminhada - sonho - compromisso Boletim Informativo "A Caminho"**. (11th July 2000).

The CEBs wanted to be present there in the South of Bahia to celebrate the arrival of the Portuguese from a different perspective, from the perspective of those who have not forgotten the price paid by many in the still ongoing colonial or neo-colonial social structure Brazil boasts. Even, in the present days *Avas* are still being persecuted and killed: “A year later, we have not forgotten the martyrdom of Galdino de Jesus, of the Pataxós-hã-hã-hã People, burnt alive in the Capital of Brazil.”²⁶¹ So they say:

We are precisely here, where the three Portuguese sailing boats (*Caravelas*) anchored. The 500 years are quite different. We want to remember what happened in our history, sharing the struggles from the perspective of the little ones. We want to sing in chorus with all the CEBs of Brazil: ‘Bits of our history, defeats and victories of my people, they are the struggles of yesterday and of today also’.²⁶²

The tenth Gathering happened in the South of Bahia, Land of the Pataxós, as a symbol of the fact that the CEBs carry the memory and are in solidarity with the struggles that the *Ava* peoples face. So the location was prophetic as well as a wider ecumenical location: set aside for the purpose of denouncing the abuses of the past and present, and to point out the need for building a more inclusive and respectful society in relation to the *Avas*. It is in this prophetic context that one can appreciate the importance of the gesture when, at the end of the tenth Gathering, the Gospel was read in several indigenous languages.

²⁶¹ www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/acaminho/ac01-06.html, Jan-Mar 1998, p. 2.

²⁶² www.ongba.org.br/memoria/10cebs/acaminho/ac01-04.html, Jan-Mar 1998, p. 3.

All of this points to a theological/intercultural/inter-religious/prophetic element of the practices of the CEBs' gatherings. It shows that dialogue with different cultures and different religious traditions - here the *Avas* - their cultures and languages, their traditional religions, are of fundamental importance for the CEBs and part and parcel of their prophetic Christian ministry. Such a theological concern and stance was in particular expressed at the tenth Gathering, in its location, in its liturgies, in their reflection groups, their reports to the plenary sessions of bigger groups and in their plans of action. (see 2.2)

Consequently, the struggle for justice the CEBs and liberation theology have been known for is not the only dimension in the CEBs' gatherings. There is an addition if not an innovation in their way of being Christians. That is the CEBs' attitude towards different traditions than Christianity. The CEBs continue to be shaped by the struggle for justice, but beyond that the CEBs in their national gatherings are doing what they can to respect and preserve diverse cultural identities, and to further their political struggle for justice. This was the case in relation to the *Avas* in the tenth Gathering, in Ilhéus, land of the *Pataxós*. And in the gatherings in general, which are the focus of this research, there is a dialogue with other traditions in terms of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue for liberation. There is a symbolic exchange and a slotting in of different trends. This seems to form a kind of hinge connecting CEBs and other traditions and religions. The mass with the theme of Land without Evil is a good example of it. The oil that facilitates this articulation and permeability of different cultures and religious traditions is the political struggle for justice. And in this case

too, the lack of articulation in theological terms of a more robust defense of these practices could, in my view, compromise the sustainability of such a move. What is the theological reflection in relation to the request by Manuel and Cicil Xucuru Cariri: that the CEBs be with them in crying out to the great God *Tupã*. Being with them in prayer and also in the political struggle. The theological reflection responding to the challenge of such an invitation could be more articulated.

On the other hand, in being permeable and innovative might be the reason why the CEBs' national gatherings have been successful. In a context of post-colonialism and urban society, it is not a small achievement to bring to the fore the struggles of the marginalized indigenous population. Embracing the issues involved working across cultures and being open to different religious narratives might have given the CEBs an ongoing recognition. As the final Letter from the eighth Gathering puts it: "We have gone through an experience of Evangelization from the point of view of the oppressed cultures and peoples. That is the reason why there were in our gathering moments of strong tensions and suffering. All that is new, is born through the pains of birth labour, but it also brings joy."²⁶³

The outcome of the work of the smaller groups (*bloco dos Índios*) in that gathering shared afterwards in the plenary, tells of the commitment to the struggle for the demarcation of land reserves, of respect for their autonomy and respect for their

²⁶³ Oitavo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1992) "Carta de Santa Maria." In Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil**. São Paulo: Paulinas. p. 200.

specific religious traditions. The report talks about the fact that “there cannot be real inculturation of the Christian faith in the indigenous framework outside of a welcoming atmosphere and outside of respect for the religious dimension of the other.”²⁶⁴

This goes along with what Paulo Suess, theologian/indigenist and advisor to the CEBs, argues on the *Texto-Base* for the tenth Gathering that although only the indigenous people can know and feel what is to be an *Ava* oppressed and destitute, the CEBs in the encounter with them “can get near in dialogue, understanding and solidarity in order to build a project that affirms life and its differences.”²⁶⁵ This project, he spells out, is a pluri-ethnic society for all three Americas. The theological characteristics of it are: sharing; getting near/incarnation; and universality (non-exclusion).²⁶⁶ I find that to have a project is the exercise of the visionaries (*nabi*); to develop close relations is to work for participation and connections (*koinonia*); and to seek universality is to manage the differences within one world (*oikumene*). Paulo Suess says:

The CEBs and the Christians in general have lots to talk about with the Indigenous peoples. Not about the substitution of their religious universe, but about its radicalization [in the sense of going back to its roots]. We have reasons to enter in dialogue with each other about the radicalization and complementarity of our beliefs and our religious ways. When a *Xavante* is able to give his life for a *Bororo* ..., or when a *Tapirapé* gives his life to help a

²⁶⁴ Teixeira, F. (1996) **Os Encontros Intereclesiais de CEBs no Brasil**. São Paulo: Paulinas. p.116.

²⁶⁵ Suess, P. (1999) “Cebs, Comprometidas com a causa Indigena.” *In* Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Encontro Intereclesial. **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base**. Paulo Afonso: Fonte Viva. p. 226.

²⁶⁶ *Idem*. p. 232.

*Carajá, a Tukano, for a Maku, when a Base Ecclesial Community defends the territory integrity of their indigenous neighbour, then the mission task has succeeded.*²⁶⁷

What is succeeding is a prophetic ecumenism of permeability. This ecumenism is sensitive to differences and able to walk alongside in the political struggle for justice. When the CEBs are respecting cultural and religious differences, helping to preserve cultural identity and language diversity as well as to keep the myths of a different ancestry they are being at the same time enriched by those cultural, linguistic and religious elements. As they express it, they are being evangelized.

4.3. THE STRUGGLE OF THE WOMEN

The theme that I am engaged with in this Chapter - about the fact that the prophetic nature of the CEBs is accompanied by a *lato sensu* ecumenism - has been the underlying principle of the CEBs Inter-ecclesial meetings. There is evidence that this is the case even as early as the preparatory material for the sixth Gathering of CEBs in 1986. This is a small publication on CEBs as small groups so popular that it had to be republished even after the sixth Gathering had been held. I use here (and in section 1.1.2.) a second edition of 1988. It is small and quite pedagogical but revealing of the prophetic, inter-cultural and wider-than-Christianity character of the CEBs. It introduces each section with a drawing. The sections are about: prayer and spirituality; bible reading and studying; pastoral support and care in the community; worship; campaigning for agrarian reform; organizing the community around issues

²⁶⁷ *Idem.* p. 233.

of church and the improvement for the community. The drawing for the last section in the preparatory material shows Jesus washing the feet of disciples and they are first a woman, and a man rural worker, an Indigenous person (Ava), a factory worker and a Black woman.²⁶⁸



O QUE ESTAMOS VENDO NO DESENHO ?

■

In these drawings the place of women is quite prominent, as can be seen in the picture above. She is the first in the line to have her feet washed by Jesus. There is

²⁶⁸ Comissão Executiva do 6 Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1988) **CEB um Jeito Novo de Ser Igreja**. Goiás: SPAR. Second edition. p. 29.

in the first drawing of the booklet (printed below), an innovation. It depicts a small group of people gathered around a table-altar, in a simple house, prayers are being said, and here is the prophetic innovation (*nabi*), there is no priest, instead a woman leads the prayers.²⁶⁹

COMO NASCE UMA COMUNIDADE ?

1



O QUE ESTAMOS VENDO NO DESENHO ?

Moving on, in the Preparatory Material for the tenth Gathering there is an article on issues of gender, written by Lúcia Ribeiro. She gives a summary of how this theme of gender equality has been present in the CEBs' gatherings.²⁷⁰ In that article she

²⁶⁹ Comissão Executiva do 6 Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1988) **CEB um Jeito Novo de Ser Igreja**. Goiás: SPAR. Second edition. p. 5.

²⁷⁰ I shall be summarizing a sub section of the text mentioned above, Ribeiro, L. (1999) "A Comunidade de Irmãs e Irmãos, a Questão de Gênero nas CEBs." In *Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Encontro Intereclesial. CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base*. Paulo Afonso: Fonte Viva. pp. 152-173.

sets the scene, gives a panoramic view about the concept of gender as a social construct and the relationship of power within the genders, about the patriarchal system that forces the subordination of women to men, and about the struggle for equality. She also stresses that equality within the diversity of gender is a fundamental demand for an authentic democratic order. She comes to propose that the concept of gender and the struggle for equality is a relational matter. It involves male and female seeking a new concept of masculinity and femininity within a context of freedom, equality and participation. The New Testament term *koinonia*, meaning in communion, participation, seems again to underline and permeate the thinking as the CEBs articulate what is important for them in terms of transformation of society and church.

Regarding the CEBs' commitment to equality of gender, Lúcia traces back the challenge to the bible. For the CEBs this is an ideal that comes from the example of the stories of creation in Genesis - God created man and woman in God's own image. And above all, for the CEBs, it is the example of Jesus that challenges most. Because, although Jesus lived in a patriarchal society, in which women were amongst those more explicitly excluded, according to Lúcia Ribeiro, Jesus' practices started a process of inclusion of women in social and religious life. In this context, she remarks, Jesus' practice is deeply innovative as he welcomes women as disciples and integrate them as active members and participants in the recently inaugurated ecclesial community.

She argues, interestingly, that the discourse in the Roman Catholic Church in the last ten years (this is to say in the 1990s) has been more in line with the demand from Jesus in terms of inclusion of women. She says that the equality between men and women has been proclaimed in various documents of the church, for example, in one of John Paul II's papal Encyclicals, '*Mulieris dignitatem*'. She says the Pope focuses on the issue of women and he emphasizes in particular the need to respond to the challenge set by the bible. I find this too optimistic an assessment of the Roman Catholic Church's openness to equality of gender.

But above all, Lúcia Ribeiro sets out the vision for the CEBs as they try to transform the situation seeking gender equality:

In the CEBs, the equality in gender relations is a demand also of consistence with their own principles. As they assert themselves as a 'new way of being church' - as communities of brothers and sisters, - participation and holistic liberation is a mark of their way of being. The CEBs are contrary to all and any type of oppression.²⁷¹

A little further she refers to what I have been calling the *oikoumene*, a world with room for all.

There is a booklet written by a group of CEBs' participants that says: *CEBs try to be a space where men and women live out a new way of relating... They form a new conscience that it is*

²⁷¹ Ribeiro, L. (1999) "A Comunidade de Irmãs e Irmãos, a Questão de Gênero nas CEBs." In Secretariado de CEBs para o 10 Encontro Intereclesial. **CEBs: Povo de Deus, 2000 anos de Caminhada, Texto-Base**. Paulo Afonso: Fonte Viva. p. 162.

*together that they will build a new society without domination, and without submission.*²⁷²

However, she points out that although nobody denies the ideal by which they want to live, reality shows that in practice situations of gender discrimination frequently afflict their communities. Taking the Inter-ecclesial gatherings as reference to measure the situation of gender equality (she says and I agree that the Gatherings are key-events to understand the CEBs), one observes that there is a crescent participation of women not only in numbers but also in terms of leadership. The gatherings have frequently engaged in analyses of gender balance, what they call 'the issue of women'. This implies recognition of injustices to women and the need to overcome that. On the other hand, Lúcia argues that women's roles and participation in the Inter-ecclesial of CEBs happen more commonly through an invisible and silent work. This is the essential work, she says, but done behind the scenes. They make sure that the basic and fundamental tasks of infrastructure, hospitality and food provision are in place. Most of this work is done collectively (*em multirão*). This to me does not seem to be fair and does not equate to the CEBs' discourse of gender equality.

Our spokesperson in this preparatory material says that, as she goes back to look at the Inter-ecclesial gatherings, she sees that the contribution from women has been in the increase. It was fundamental, in her opinion, that in the fourth Gathering Mônica Kopf took the great responsibility of the general secretary of the gathering. This contrasts with the fact that it was only in the sixth Gathering (Trindade, Goiás,

²⁷² *Idem.* p. 162.

21st-25th July 1986) that the issue of gender balance was more explicitly articulate, together also with the issues of Indigenous population, and of the Black people. The CEBs were empowering women and getting them in position of leadership even before the theme was singled out in of the national Gathering. Therefore, one is justified to say that women's liberation has had a fundamental importance in the journey of the CEBs. For example, in one of the reports from the smaller groups of the seventh Gathering, in Caxias 1989, there is a clear and explicit request, a check-list of action to be taken, and a definite commitment to the cause of women,

What is still to be done? a) *Women*: to insist on the opening of the priestly ministry in the church for women to take part in it; to work harder on conscientizing women about their place and role in society as a whole;...in Lent course in the 1990s to promote the discussion of: women prostitutes, 'macho' husbands; women factory workers; as well as religious women;... debate the organization of women's groups; and reread the bible from the point of view of women.²⁷³

For the CEBs, God is to be found in the struggle of women. In a long report from Leonardo Boff speaking to the plenary of the seventh Gathering, he points out that the prophetic spirituality of the CEBs is in debt to women from the beginning of Christianity; Boff roots his argument on the bible saying that it is the bible that helps people to find out and try to be a new type of Christian. These are coming about by the work of the Spirit and are for Boff characterized by four emphasis:

²⁷³ O que ainda precisa fazer. (1989) **SEDOC, Serviço de Documentação**. 22 (217). p. 328.

(i) ... the spirituality of the bible, a militant spirituality, devout to the saints and also committed to following of Jesus and of Mary. (The new Christian) is someone who has as a great centrality in Jesus' option for the poor; has a critical approach to all power exercised as domination; has a suspicion of all riches; who has the beatitude of all those who struggle and suffer for the cause of justice; who venerates the martyrs who were themselves witnesses to the new life that comes from the Gospel.²⁷⁴

In this first characteristic, Boff mixes the following of Jesus up with of that of Mary. He puts together side-by-side male and female. The theologian pays tribute in this way to the veneration of Mary in the CEBs' gatherings. Rather than to question it as an alienation and repression of womanhood, he takes that veneration as an affirmation of a woman and her role in the divine plan of salvation.

The image of Mary is carried high in many of the processions and celebrations of the CEBs, and of the Inter-ecclesial gatherings of CEBs. It is difficult to reconcile their militancy in terms of equality of gender with the veneration of Mary. This could suggest the negation of women's most fundamental nature, her body and sexuality.

Boff goes on to interpret what he had seen in the work of the small groups in the meeting, he tackles the question dear to our interests, the ecumenism so strongly present in the seventh Gathering in Duque de Caxias in 1989

²⁷⁴ Boff, L. (1998) *Eclesialidade das CEBs, colocação feita na Assembléia do dia 13/07/1989, durante o 7 Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs.* Arquidiocese de Goiânia. **Revista da Arquidiocese.** XXXII - 7/8/9. p. 360.

(ii) Christians also feel as companions of the way.... (iii) open to ecumenism... and have a clear conscience about the ecumenical journey... together, we give witness to the Gospel of service to the oppressed in order to rescue them from oppression. This mission creates a new unity, a new way of living together, even though within the differences in the churches.²⁷⁵

The verb Boff uses is to feel, rather than to think or to understand, but feel as a companion of the way. He sees in peoples' ecumenical commitment together to the service of the oppressed, engaged in the task of rescuing them, as values more inclined to woman than to traditional *macho* Latino American. The new Christian seems to inspire a new man, able to live together in unity and share the journey of liberation and of service. However, where is the force and judgment of those who need to get stuck in the political struggles of life? To answer that question Boff will complement the feminine character of his interpretation with the sharpness of maleness.

(iv) Open to ecumenism and also committed politically. Not every thing is valid before God. There are things that are not valid and the Christian has to have the prophetic courage to say: this is not permissible! A Christian should be able to have an elaborate conscience illuminated by the Gospel that will help them to discover where and how the process of liberation is happening. Who is trying to trick us? Who are not really our allies? What is the real politics that we need to build up together so that the historical debt we have with the oppressed, with the indigenous population, with the Black people, with women and with the poor can be repaid? Because it is in these causes that God is to be found.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ *Idem.* p. 361.

²⁷⁶ *Idem.* pp. 361-362.

Although not referring directly to inter-religious dialogue, but bringing together what was heard from the small groups, in Boff's speech are the great words we are concentrating on in order to understand the CEBs' wider ecumenical practices, their inclusive spirituality, their prophetic role: martyrdom, struggle, journey, commitment. And above all, in his speech there is the unequivocal affirmation that it is in engaging with the struggle of the causes of the oppressed, of the indigenous population, of Black people and of women that is where God is to be found. Where there is a more articulated theological work it confirms the deeper religious feeling and gives an understanding and sharper edge to it.

4.4. THE STRUGGLE OF THE AFRO DESCENDENT PEOPLE

The CEBs have added to their justice spirituality and liberation theology - that was firstly geared to the struggle of the poor for better conditions of work and living, for land reform, for the end of killings - the more specific struggles of women, of the Amerindians, and of the Afro descendent people. As was the case with the commitment to the poor as a single category, the unfolding into specific groups of oppressed, is also a prophetic commitment. On the one hand liturgies and prayers with these themes have been prepared, songs composed, study material written, and on the other political campaigns initiated, letters written to politicians and to church leaders.

As the commitment to each of these specific groups unfolds the prophetic dimension of the CEBs' ministry shows what needs to be tackled: inequalities in social conditions, history background to be unearthed, cultures to be celebrated, church structures to be challenged, etc. One of the group reports from the seventh Gathering in 1989 said with clarity of vision (*nabi*) about the specific ministry of and to Black people:

What is still to be done?

b) Black people: conscientization; a deepening of understanding of the historical roots; studying of the Black people's religiosity; to include the Afro-religions in the ecumenical processes; to strengthen the work of the Black people's organizations; to encourage the Black people of the CEBs not to deny but to assert their Black identity; to contribute towards the creation of Black people's organizations wherever they are lacking; encourage vocations to priesthood amongst Black people; to inform and give value to the work of the APN.²⁷⁷

The reference to APN – *Ação Pastoral Negra* (Black People's Pastoral Action) - has to do with the initiative from the CNBB, the Brazilian Conference of Bishops, who in 1988 at the occasion of the launch of the politically influential Lent course, created the APN. In that year, the CNBB Lent course took the theme, "The issue and the plight of Afro descendent people in Brazil as a sign of solidarity with them in the Centenary year of the abolition of slavery." Studying the preparatory material, and the reports and letters from the inter-ecclesial gatherings of CEBs after 1988 it

²⁷⁷ O que ainda precisa fazer. (1989) **SEDOC, Serviço de Documentação**. 22 (217). p. 328.

shows how serious the commitment was taken, and coincidentally or intentionally, how the strategy proposed by a simple group in the seventh Gathering in terms of what was to be done, how that strategy was taken up. Perhaps this indicates something beyond the leadership skills to hear all the reports from the groups; rather, the fact that the strategy laid-out by the group was taken up shows that there is a consensus around this issue and the struggle of Afro descendent people. The visioning (*nabi*) implied in the report indicated an awareness and consensus around the importance of the matter and how to try and handle it.

There has been such a consensus around these issues that the whole theme for the next inter-ecclesial gathering of CEBs - that met in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul in 1992 - was dedicated to "Oppressed Cultures and Evangelization in Latin America". The preparatory material for that gathering (*Texto-Base*) is a comprehensive book addressing the painful and thorny issues surrounding the relationship with marginalized cultures. A summarized view of its content may give the English reader an idea of its scope: i) Latin America, reality of many cultures – Indigenous cultures; Afro-American cultures; immigrant cultures; ii) social groups that suffer specific discriminations; working class cultures, rural and urban; women's culture; iii) The encounter of evangelization with the oppressed cultures yesterday and today; iv) what is evangelization when the Gospel is given to the oppressed cultures. Inculturation, taking the Gospel in your own hands; v) Bible, the culture of the CEBs as a new culture of the bible; bible in the hands and feet of the people; vi) CEBs and cultures, pastoral tips – Black people; Indian; women; migrant; rural and

factory workers; the excluded; CEBs and Modern culture – ecology; love and affection; technology; new utopias; new religious sensitivity.²⁷⁸

The chapter in the preparatory material referred above on Afro-American cultures addresses two main areas. Firstly it gives an account of the history and the struggle of Black people in the Brazilian history. Then it moves towards the explanation of the cultures and religions of Afro-Brazilian people and the challenge they present to the church in terms of an inculturated Gospel. The preparatory material serves as background information for the participants of each Gathering, and also as a pointer to the issues that lie ahead for the CEBs and for the church in general.

Below, I am going to follow extensively the text and present its main points. The text is important as it gives an indication of which direction the general secretariat for the CEBs' gatherings is encouraging the discussion to go in the eighth Gathering.

Suffice to say that the group work where the material (*Texto-Base*) was considered would be enriched also by the sharing of experiences, note speakers, encouragement from music, prayers, dance and it would also be enriched with the plenary sessions and the worship. The importance of going through the details of how this issue of Afro-Brazilian cultures has been taken, and where it has not been, is to show how the CEBs have been engaged in a process of growing in the ability of embracing them in an inculturated form and within a macro ecumenical manner, i.e.,

²⁷⁸ Equipe Central do Oitavo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1991) **Culturas Oprimidas e a Evangelização na América Latina, Texto-Base**. Santa Maria: Gráfica Pallotti. pp. 5-8.

a prophetic ecumenism that has reached beyond the boundaries of the Christian faith alone. This is a critical contribution from the CEBs not yet completely recognized by the theological community at large.

The next several paragraphs then will be a summary of the article on Black-American cultures²⁷⁹ in the *Texto-Base* that was sent to the participants of the eighth Gathering that was to happen in 1992, in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul. What follows is a summary of the text. I acknowledge this here and will avoid indentations and footnotes as the text is translated and summarized in a free manner. The content of the next paragraphs is from the *Texto-Base*. The authorship of the text is unknown to me. It is sharp and prophetic in its social cultural analyses; it is innovative in its proposition. It is short in its theological work.

The presence of Afro-American cultures and religions is so big in the continent that there is no Latin-American culture completely untouched or not influenced by it. Its presence is found in music, dance, in religions, in the customs and the way that people are. The dominant classes try to dismiss its influence, pretending it remains at a folklore level. The official channels try to pretend Latin-American cultures are just a disfigured reproduction of the Western European cultures. But in many countries of the Americas the Black population is in the majority, and they preserve their specific cultures: Haiti, Dominican Republic, Panama, Cuba, Colombia,

²⁷⁹ "Culturas Afro-Americanas." In, Equipe Central do Oitavo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (1991) **Culturas Oprimidas e a Evangelização na América Latina, Texto-Base**. Santa Maria: Gráfica Pallotti. pp. 29-39.

amongst others. In Brazil until the second half of the XIX Century in every 4 Brazilians, 3 were Afro-descendent. That only changed with the massive European immigration in the second half of that century. However, when the population of Brazil was 150 million people the census data of 1990 showed that no less than 70 million were Black. That made Brazil the second country in the world in numbers of Black people, behind only Nigeria.

The abolition of slavery in 1888 did not bring an end to racial discrimination. The opposite, the dominant White ideology has made the Black people into kind of second-class citizens, a situation that has not been corrected to this day. The political, racial and social pressures make many people to have a low self-esteem to the point that they even stop considering themselves Black altogether. The great majority of the Black population in Brazil remains marginalized, poor, living in inappropriate accommodation in the *favelas*, i.e., shantytowns, and without access to good health or education.

The connection with Africa was dominantly strong in particular with two ethnicities: Banto and Nagô. The first group came in particular from the Congo and Angola, although in Africa, Banto culture extends to a very large geographical area. The second group came later and from West Africa, in particular, from the Southeast of Nigeria and Benin. All these groups would have brought to Brazil their cultures and languages, and in particular in the case of the Nagôs, their religion.

The name Nagô referred originally only to the descendent of *Yorubá* of *Ifé*, but was applied extensively to all *Yorobá* people. They arrived in Brazil towards the end of the XVIII century and beginning of the XIX. They were sent more to the urban areas of the Northeast of Brazil, Pernanbuco and Bahia, in particular to their capitals, Recife and Salvador. The majority of the Bahia population is Nagô. The intense commerce between Bahia and Africa kept the Nagôs of Brazil in touch with their land of origin. It was above all through continues practice of their religion that the Black-Nagô people maintained a deep sense of community and preserved the more specific roots of their cultures.

Banto and Nagô have basic characteristics in common. One of them is a world-view deeply religious. They see everything has its origin in *Nzambi* (for the Banto tradition) or *Olorum* (in the Nagô tradition), the creator and organizer of the universe. *Nzambi* (God) is the source of all life, founder of the first human clan, the first cause of all that exists. *Olorum* (God) is the supreme force that has created every thing. Below *Olorum* there are the *Orixás*. These are religious entities, or deities. These are two very religious cultural traditions that have been surviving despite increasing secularism, materialism, or atheism. The religious spaces are the *terreiros*. They are very simple and humble spaces where Africa and its cultures happen again. For the Banto, a woman – above all a mother – becomes religiously revered. For the Nagôs, the supreme chief of the *terreiro* is a woman, ‘*Yalorixá*’ (*Mãe de Santo*). She carries the *Axé*, the creative force (see use of the word in CEBs’ gatherings in Part 1, Chapter 2, 2.3). Therefore, she is the priestess *per*

excellence. (This is the reason why women were the representatives of Afro-Brazilian Religions in the CEBs' gatherings described in 2.1)

According to the article from the *Texto-Base* for the eighth Gathering that I am summarizing here, the concept of *Axé* is a singular cultural characteristic from Africa. *Axé* is the force that guarantees the dynamics of existence. It is the principle that allows the vital process of life to take place and to carry on taking place. It is present in all parts of reality, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. The transmission of the *Axé* happens in rituals of initiation and also through symbolic elements. Women, in particular mothers, are the most important transmitter of *Axé*.

It would be impossible to describe here all the richness of the Afro-Brazilian cultures. But it is important to say that the Afro-Brazilian religions play a fundamental part in terms of keeping alive the cultural values and traditions of Afro-descendants. And in other countries of the Americas that maybe the same, for example, in Haiti is the *Voodoo* that helps to keep the African traditional cultures alive, in Cuba is the *Santerias*. In Brazil there is *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*. *Candomblé* receives different names according to different regions of Brazil: *Candomblé* in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro; *Xangô* in Pernambuco, Alagoas, Paraíba; *Tambor* in Maranhão; *Batuque* and *Baquê* in the Amazon area, *Macumba* in São Paulo. *Candomblé* is considered to be more of a purist practice than other African traditions and rituals; whilst *Umbanda* is considered to have more regional influences.

The text from the booklet we are basing this summary on also says that it is important to, at least, indicate that much of the Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious values are actually preserved and lived out in the symbiosis that there is of these practices with the traditional and popular Roman Catholicism. They affirm that there is a truly inculturated black-Brazilian Catholicism.

However the preparatory educational material for the eighth Gathering recognizes that the Black cultures had to fight and challenge the impositions from the mainstream society, and from a pervasive racism even in government policies. The Black cultures had to escape through the fingers as it were of the dominating system. They escaped in order to survive, but more than just survive they became the ground of the main cultures of Brazil. (I find here great sense of *koinonia*, of participation). The Black people's cultures are noticed in the religious field, in the aesthetic, in the music, in literature, in the cuisine, in the family life of Brazilian people as a whole, etc. One of the problems is that the educated class is oriented to Europe and does not want to recognize the reality of Afro-Brazilian cultural place. For that part of the population, the cultural standard is the European one.

And the article in the *Texto-Base* says prophetically that this is also the case in particular for the churches and for Roman Catholic Church. In general, bishops, priests and religious nuns know well the European way. Even Black priests or Protestant Pastors from Afro-Brazilian origin disrespect and aggressively attack anything connected with Black people's traditions and religions. Many Roman

Catholic dioceses refused to use the material from the CNBB's Lent course in 1988. This shows how unprepared the clergy are to take forward an evangelization that is incultured and close to where people are. Many for ignorance had put the Lent course material away, whilst others did not know how to speak about it, and worse than that – says the article assessing the state of the relationship with Black peoples' issues, many of the priests spoke against the Lent course. In Brazil, not only the ecclesiastic studies always ignored the Black cultures, even the vocational campaigns discriminated against the geographic regions with a bigger presence from the Black population. The big vocational investments and campaigns were always taking place in the South of the country because of the bigger presence of European descendents. The Black priests carry on being a minority. And in a church in which they are at least half of its members, there aren't more than half a dozen of bishops that are Black. And of those who are Black, there are still serious issues about some of them assuming their cultural identity more fully, says the article.

All of this above seems to indicate great cultural and religious challenges facing the church in Brazil. The CEBs are pressing forward with these challenges trying to identify and co-create values distinct from the prevalent ones. The CEBs are calling for new ways of being and doing things. This is a project for the churches but also for the country.

The discrimination against the Black people's cultures happens in formal and informal spaces. Education is considered universal in Brazil, but even in terms of

access to it the Black population has it in the hard way. They use in the article at this point data of the 1980 census about illiteracy of the economic active adult population when it was twice bigger for the black people than for the white population. The numbers of children in school, of years in education, etc, are alarmingly small for the Black population in comparison with the White counterpart. I will leave the numbers out as they refer to an old census figures, however, the sad thing is that this reality is only slightly better now. Since 2001 there is a more active government in terms of trying to change the social inequalities in Brazil – the Lula Government.²⁸⁰

The White European dominant culture sets standards of beauty and civility that alienate other cultures, for example the indigenous and the Black cultures. The influence from the media on the image Black people have in society, and an increasingly technological environment assure that the Black population remains at the margins of society, involved many times with urban violence, drug dealing and crime. From the time of abolition of the slave system to now the Black population still finds itself confined to shantytowns and overcrowded housing. In these environments family are put under massive stress and there is a disintegration of family cohesion with devastating consequences in particular for the children. That is without taking into account the fact that before the abolition the right to have a family was systematically withdrawn from the slaves.

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For a more detailed analyses and a comparative view see, Aloizio Mercadante, A. (2006) **Brasil, Primeiro Tempo, Análise, comparativa do governo Lula**. São Paulo: Editora Planeta.

There is a courageous recognition in the text we are using in relation to the condition of Black women in particular. They say that it is important to stress the slavery system had interfered with the structure of the Brazilian family as Black women were taken by their owners and the owners sons as sexual partners. That created a great number of illegitimate children living in the sugar cane farms. Amongst the serious consequences of such a situation are the inherited machismo in society in general, disrespect to women, and the horrendous link that still is made in some corners of sexual abuse of Afro-descendent women at work.

Black women have been particularly marginalized and discriminated against since colonial times. They have been slaves used as sexual objects, child bearing, exploited in domestic work as well as a worker elsewhere. No other segment of society has lived so great psychological and social disintegration throughout history than Black women. They passed from former-slaves to low paid worker, from the kitchen of the White owner to the kitchen of the present day Madame. They live in shantytowns, have low-paid salaries or work in the informal economy without any social security. They are the victims of sexual assaults, rapes; they endure beatings and other forms of violence. They suffer a three dimensional discrimination: as women, as poor, and as black people.

From this prophetic description of the context of discrimination of Afro-descendents the CEBs' document identifies missionary challenges. I shall stop from here the more direct summary of the text and will just highlight the challenges for the church. The

educational material for the eighth Gathering says that the rupture between the Gospel and the cultures is a tragedy of our time. How to decipher, understand and take consequences deriving from the cultures in Latin America is the task of a true evangelization?

Above all, they say it is necessary to embrace; I would put it like this, to be permeable and allow interpenetration of the cultures of the peoples; and in particular, the cultures of the Afro-descendent people. They continue saying that this is only going to be possible through a real and inseparable immersion into the popular cultures. I would use a theological term to explain it, *koinonia*, participation. They say that priests, ministers, pastors, bishops who put themselves distant, or above the people will carry on been judgmental of the popular cultural expressions and practices thinking that these are inappropriate or wrong even though from the perspective of the CEBs they are profoundly Gospel like.

So, one of the first challenges they identify for the church is to eliminate from agents of pastoral ministry any prejudice against popular and Afro cultures. They say that, the diverse cultures of Latin America put before the church a delicate mosaic with a myriad of details of small but important parts and components. They say, those who are in a hurry end up missing the richness of the mosaic.

Our guiding text talks about the fact that there is a lot of conversation about inculturation in the church. Inculturation is treated as if it was something totally new.

But, the way Black people have lived their faith and religious practices throughout the centuries, has it not been a profound experience of inculturation? The *Texto-Base* affirms that, the Black people and other popular cultures not only reproduce religious practices, they also reshape them, they express through these practices elements of their own cultures. The reality is, when a people does not relate to the Gospel with its own categories and cultural expressions, there has not been and there is not real evangelization.

They go on the attack, the material will denounce that there are recommendations in the church that go in the direction of preventing Christians who practice Afro-Brazilian Religions from receiving Eucharist. There are priests who with an attitude deny Holy Communion to a *Mãe de Santo*. For him it does not make any difference that she dedicates her life to serve the poor in the *terreiros*, it does not matter that she may feel closer to God. Although, the same priest will serve communion to an assassin farmer, to a corrupt politician, to a member of local government even though they live in an irregular marital state. The preparatory material for the eighth Gathering says this prophetically because indeed it happened later during the gathering when a confrontation between the CEBs' Gathering organizers and some of the hierarchy took place over the presence of *Yalorixás – Mães de Santo* on the altar.

In short, the text continues to say that the spirit and the practice of ecumenism have to be also a respectful attitude towards the so-called Afro religions. The Afro-

American cultures as well as the indigenous cultures bring a spiritual and ecological contribution to society as a whole. The challenge for churches and for society as a whole is to open themselves for these cultures. This above shows that the CEBs are a way of being church that is trying to respond to this reality of discrimination against Afro-descendants. This is though a systemic problem in the church and in society at large.

In summary, the CEBs pride themselves in their actions in terms of engaging in practical ways to defend the oppressed and also the oppressed cultures. As they say in the Letter from the tenth Gathering: "We have seen, also, with much hope, all the effort which has been made to defend and rescue oppressed cultures... It has been our joy the constant presence of ecumenical partners with brothers and sisters of many different Christian churches and of other religions."²⁸¹

The way the Letter starts and sets the scene for the tenth Gathering is a testimony to these words of welcoming and embracing others: We meet around "the drums, *atabaques* (African drums typically part of Afro-Brazilian religions rites and celebrations), *berinbaus* (instrument linked with the Afro-Brazilian martial-art-dance *Capoeira*), *pandeiros* (samba connection), and *maracas* (indigenous instrument)."²⁸²

The way they organized the groups and the names they gave to the places where

²⁸¹ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar. Ilhéus, 2000.** paragraphs 12 and 13.

²⁸² **Idem.** paragraph 1.

the groups met gives us also a measure of the CEBs' stance in the faith, how ecumenical they are and how connected with the struggles for land and others social issues: "Dorcelina (a woman martyr), Reverend James Wright (a protestant minister who with Don Paulo Arns made inroads in the struggle for restoration of Human Rights); *Indio Xicão Xucuru*, Eldorado dos Carajás (a place where 19 Landless people were massacre by the police); Dom Helder Camara (considered a prophet and a pioneer of the church of the poor)."²⁸³

The struggles described above have enlarged the theological reflection of the CEBs, although, the CEBs have still been unable to articulate more deeply the impact that this has had on their Christianity. However, there are theological principles out of the struggles that seemed to be underlying the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability: God is to be found in the struggle of the oppressed people, Christians or otherwise. Some of the theological language encourages ecumenism: participation (*koinonia*); service to the other (*diakonia*); conscience of shared Earth as a house (*oikumene*); denouncing injustice, visioning and proclaiming the new (*kerigma, nabî*). And, above all, there is an underlying theology of a wider salvation. The impact of all of this has led the practices of the CEBs at their national gatherings to new acceptance of faith traditions outside of the Roman Catholic tradition to which they belong.

²⁸³ **Idem.** paragraph 4.

PART 3

THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT OF PERMEABILITY

CHAPTER 5

RESPONDING TO THE DETRACTORS OF PERMEABILITY

I have exposed in great detail in the previous parts of this dissertation the wider ecumenism of permeability that the CEBs are practising, in particular as evident in their national gatherings. Now we turn to the question of where this ecumenism leaves the CEBs in relation to their own Roman Catholic tradition.

I have shown at the beginning of this dissertation that the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration has not been adequately explored or studied by scholars and theologians (see Part I, Chapter 2 in particular). I hope to demonstrate, in this Chapter, firstly, that this ecumenism has not passed unnoticed by those who felt threatened by it or by those who felt that Christianity was sold cheap or was contaminated by mixing with other traditions.

Reactions of this nature were to be expected from those who resisted the CEBs' ministry. However, it can also be found in internal debates, albeit in some cases

undertaken publicly. We will look at the internal debate about the CEBs' wider ecumenism of inter-religious and inter-cultural permeability and interpenetration.

Secondly this Chapter will also explore the positive responses of support and acceptance of the leading role the CEBs provide in the area of reaching out to other traditions and cultures as a way of evangelism. If there are detractors, there are also a great number of those who find in the CEBs' national gatherings' high profile wider-than-Christianity ecumenical celebrations an affirming and a proper Christian sign of the incarnation of the church in a particular context as part of the evangelization task of the church. The celebrations are marked by diversity and exchanges of influence, by respect and learning from each other, and by a shared sense of mission in seeking liberation. This way of relating is, for individuals and for some of the commissions that represent the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil (CNBB for example), a positive move and one that deserves support and encouragement as well as one that is recognized as leading the way in the task of evangelization.

Finally we will look for theological links with the official position of the Roman Catholic Church that would support the CEBs' practices. I hope to show and argue that there are signs confirming the CEBs' deep sense of faithfulness to their own tradition. Confirming that the CEBs have a great vocation towards the task of making what is universal relevant for particular situations/contexts. I would like to argue that permeability is a service to catholicity. Without this service the catholicity of the

Roman Church would be in jeopardy. Therefore permeability is a way for the church to continue being universal.

5.1. REACTIONS AGAINST THE WIDER ECUMENISM OF PERMEABILITY AND INTERPENETRATION OF THE CEBs: THE DEBATE WITHIN

Negative reactions against the CEBs can be traced back to their very beginning, and even before that, when the early seeds of the CEBs were already targeted by reactionary forces; I am referring to the fact that the MEB (*Movimento para Educação de Base*) of Paulo Freire was discontinued and its founder sent into exile (see Chapter 1; 1.2). Later there were the difficulties that the specific pastoral ministries of JEC, JOC, JUC, (the ministry amongst students in general, workers, and in Universities) incurred leading to the end of such liberationist-evangelistic and pastoral work. Further, persecution came also in the form of high profile cases, for example, the systematic and relentless campaign against Leonardo Boff imposed by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That meant in fact a campaign against the Church of the Poor, the liberation theology and the network of the CEBs. In that context of opposition, the bishops who supported the CEBs were put under immense political pressure: Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo Diocese amongst others; Dom Pedro Casaldáliga was summoned to the Vatican. These were signs of the continuous pressure from the more conservative parts of the church which imposed pressure on the CEBs' movement.

Most of the cases above, against the CEBs, were related to political and ideological matters although mixed with theological and ecclesiastical views. But there was also, as I intend to show, the resistance against the CEBs because of their ecumenism. I will focus below in particular on the internal debate about the CEBs' wider-than-Christianity ecumenism. This debate is well represented by an exchange of letters between Dom Ivo Lorscheiter and Frei Beto.

Dom Ivo Lorscheiter was the bishop of Santa Maria when the diocese was the hosting diocese for the eighth Inter-ecclesial in 1992. Although the gathering was hosted by the bishop's own diocese he still made some considerable criticisms of it. The criticism came in particular because of the wider-than-Christianity ecumenical expectations for that Inter-ecclesial. Despite the success of the Inter-ecclesial as a whole, the episcopal criticism was based on the fact that the bishop could not support the organizer's plan to bring the representatives of the Afro and Ava religions to the altar. The crisis at the end of the eighth Inter-ecclesial between the Inter-ecclesial organizers and the local hosting bishop (for more detail see 2.2) was about the level of permeability considered appropriate for a Roman Catholic Church event.

Dom Ivo gained his credentials with the liberation movement and the Church of the Poor at the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil. Despite the dangers of getting involved with those on the wrong side of the powers of the day, he went to visit those imprisoned because of their political activities, and spoke prophetically in their

favour. For a period, he also held a high profile post as President of the CNBB which was growing rapidly in terms of its influence on the national scene. And now, in the eyes of the CEBs he confirms his ministry to the Church of the Poor by extending an invitation to receive the CEBs' gathering in Santa Maria. It would not have been possible to host the gathering in Santa Maria if he wasn't personally supporting it and being proactive in making it happen. However, to be like-minded in political, ideological and liberationist terms does not mean to be in agreement about permeability and a *lato sensu* ecumenism.

The fact was that at the end of the eighth Gathering the committed Bishop resisted the wider ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration. He blocked the presence of the representatives of other cultures and religions on the altar/stage at the final Celebration in Santa Maria.

A few days after the Inter-ecclesial meeting he wrote an open and critical letter to all the Roman Catholic Bishops of Brazil giving his evaluation of the Inter-ecclesial meeting. The press published his letter. The criticism from Dom Ivo through an open letter was very much an internal affair, although in the public arena. The content of it is summarized below:

Firstly the Bishop offers support saying that, “the cause of the authentic CEBs should neither stop nor retrogress.”²⁸⁴ At first sight it sounds like a positive and supportive comment, however it conceals a harsh criticism in its use of the word ‘authentic’. It implies that there might be CEBs that are not authentic, pretending to be genuine, or usurping the place of the genuine CEBs and taking liberties in the name of the authentic CEBs. Dom Ivo continues to suggest that the CEBs seem to be “consolidating [their presence], in particular if we take into account the ardour and the joy of the presence and participation of the numerous Delegations.”²⁸⁵ He proceeds to suggest that, because of this fervour and the vibrancy of the CEBs, the CNBB should go back to the theological and pastoral study of the reality of the CEBs in Brazil. Here again there is a critical suggestion implying that there are reasons for concern and for an increase in the oversight that the bishops have over the CEBs’ movement.

Furthermore, the Bishop expresses a personal judgment on the CEBs’ national meetings: “because of the size and the shape that the Inter-ecclesial gatherings have taken, they deserve and need, in my view, a profound revision.”²⁸⁶ His target is becoming clearer in the letter as he develops his argument saying that the size of the Inter-ecclesial means that things are getting out of control; also because of the form, shape, character and disposition of the gathering as well as because of its size they

²⁸⁴ Dom Ivo Loscheiter. **Carta aos Bispos**. Santa Maria, 16 de setembro de 1992. (This letter has been published in the press, secular and religious. I work from a photocopy of the original letter signed by the Bishop on headed paper).

²⁸⁵ Dom Ivo, **Carta aos Bispos**.

²⁸⁶ Dom Ivo, **Carta aos Bispos**.

can become a template, a model for theological understanding and pastoral practice for the Roman Church in the country. One can read between the lines Dom Ivo's concern and advice for the other bishops: it is time to regain control of this movement. The letter continues to question with even more acute criticism of the Inter-ecclesial gatherings as he asks: "what is their true aim? Who should take part in them and what would be their responsibility? What is the process and how should the elaboration and eventual approval of their Letters, Messages and Motions take place?"²⁸⁷ And finally, he comes to the point of crucial disagreement, i.e., ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue: "How is the correct approach to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue in such gatherings of the Catholic communities guaranteed?"²⁸⁸

Evidently, the last question is at the heart of the Bishop's unease with the gathering that his diocese and he himself hosted with such passion and hard work. Only a few days after the gathering, he is reflecting on the difficulties that arose at the end of the gathering, when he found himself in a stand off situation with the organizers on the issue of permeability (as I put it). He is expressing to all the bishops of Brazil his concerns about the development of the practice of an ecumenism with other religions and cultures. This forces the bishop to retreat to a harder place where he is questioning the rights of some participants even to be there, if they are not Roman Catholic people. The Inter-ecclesial in his understanding and to all purposes is a Roman Catholic gathering. He raises the question: who should take part in it? He is

²⁸⁷ Dom Ivo, **Carta aos Bispos.**

²⁸⁸ Dom Ivo, **Carta aos Bispos.**

also concerned about its influence when he raises issues about the status of the customary Letter to the churches sent by the CEBs gathered in their Inter-ecclesial.

The Episcopal attack on the Inter-ecclesial continues as it gets more explicit and gets to the point of contention. Dom Ivo goes on the attack: “there were facts and even mistakes, that call attentive reflection, e.g., the role demanded for women to have access to all the functions in the church; the pretentious expectation of Afro-Brazilian cults of being, with their *País* and *Mães de Santo*, officially greeted and applauded by the assembly; the bitter tone regarding the *modus operandi* and the structure of our Church; the insufficient understanding of the meaning of inculturation, of its reach and its consequences; the general tenor of the Letter that I would prefer not personally to be a signatory of although written and approved on behalf of all participants.”²⁸⁹ Here the Bishop is really separating himself from the outcome of the eighth Gathering. As he seeks to communicate with other bishops, he is trying to counter-balance the possibilities for outreach that the national gatherings offer to the leaders of base communities throughout Brazil who attend them and then scatter countrywide. The Bishop is clearly and deeply concerned about and for the character and faithfulness of the CEBs to their Roman Catholic tradition. The role of women, inculturation and the wider-than-Christianity ecumenism are at the forefront of his criticism. It is interesting to notice that he is not questioning the engagement with social and economic issues that have always been part of the CEBs’ environment. He does not distance himself from the liberationist dimension of

²⁸⁹ Dom Ivo, **Carta aos Bispos**.

the CEBs. Maybe all would have been acceptable if it was not for the clash at the end of that gathering on the permeability and interpenetration front.

As shown above, the Bishop's letter represents a view that considers that there is a problem with the CEBs, in particular, as it was then represented at and by the eighth Inter-ecclesial Gathering. More explicitly, that there was a problem in the way that that church movement relates to its Roman roots. He gives the impression that the CEBs' commitment to inculturation opens them to the dangers and influences from other cultural traditions and religions, as if this would be alien to the nature of Roman Catholicism and more deeply alien to the Gospel and to the Christian incarnation model.

In contrast to the Bishop's intention of blocking such dangers and influences, that crisis at the end of the eighth Gathering led or instigated a definite shift in the ecumenism practised by the CEBs at their national Gatherings. This is explained in my proposed periodization (see Chapter 2, 2.1). In it, the shift towards a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism happened between the eighth and the ninth Gathering. Such a shift marked the transition to a third phase of inter-religious permeability. What was hinted at in the eighth Inter-ecclesial and resisted by the Bishop was actually fully developed at the ninth. Dom Ivo's restrictive reaction to the CEBs' proposal of inter-religious permeability at the eighth Gathering led perversely into a further and deeper transition towards including symbols, language and priests of other religions in Christian celebrations, in the context of the national gatherings. Ecumenism took on

other dimensions not yet seen in Roman Catholicism in Brazil. Registering that important shift in the wider-than-Christianity ecumenism practised by the CEBs in the national gatherings with a new phase in the periodization does not mean to say that the wider ecumenism came out of the blue. The basis for such ecumenism was already in place. A new phase in the periodization was due to a further stretch in the CEBs' ecumenism.

Let me present the other side of the argument as represented by Frei Betto, the Dominican Friar who is a renowned writer and journalist with an active political life. His reply has a fraternal tone, he was in prison back in the 1960's and 1970's and was one of the political prisoners that the Bishop went to visit during the time of the military dictatorship. Frei Betto tries to establish common ground as he praises the hospitality and activities of the local organizing groups in Santa Maria. He sees in them the spirit of first Christian communities of the Acts of the Apostles. There is also common ground in valuing the support and encouragement received in the form of a letter sent by the Vatican Secretary of State communicating papal greetings and blessings to the eighth Inter-ecclesial. This fact is also highlighted in Dom Ivo's letter. Frei Betto affirms that the Vatican letter helped "to clear the spirits that were contaminated by the prejudice against the CEBs, showing how important the 'new way of being church' is for new evangelization."²⁹⁰ Furthermore, he agrees and thinks opportune the suggestion that the CNBB looks again at their theological and pastoral understanding of the CEBs. However, regarding the cynical and critical

²⁹⁰ Frei Betto. **Carta a Dom Ivo Lorscheiter**. São Paulo, 12 de novembro de 1992. (I work from a photocopy of the original letter signed by Frei Beto).

remark in Dom Ivo's letter when he talked about 'authentic' CEBs (implying that there were inauthentic CEBs) Frei Betto refutes that saying that, "we should sow seeds of light and not of shadow and suspicion."²⁹¹

Now Frei Betto goes on the attack and will argue that there was a retrograde aspect in the eighth Gathering in relation to ecumenism, because they did not welcome the representatives of different religions in the way that was planned. He points out that ecumenism, and the presence of representatives of other churches have been a constant since the first Inter-ecclesial and that this is certainly supported by the documents of the Vatican, for example he names the Second Vatican Council document *Unitatis Redintegratio* as justifying an ecumenism that is within the limits of Christianity. He says that the Pope, John Paul II, had visited a Lutheran Parish in Rome. And now Frei Betto leads onto the sensitive point of pushing this ecumenism further, of stretching its limits. He affirms that there are precedents, as the Pope had accepted an invitation from the Israeli Government to visit Jerusalem. Also, that in June of 1992 there had been an inter-religious celebration at São Paulo's Cathedral (*Catedral da Sé*), in which "Cardinal Arns, the Dalai lama (Buddhist), Rabbi Sobel and the Presbyterian Minister Jaime Wright took part."²⁹² He continues to say that: "regarding Brazil, the inter-religious dimension of our catholicity cannot ignore the different religious expressions of our people, e.g., *Candomblé*, *Umbanda*, *Kardecism*, and the Indigenous traditions."²⁹³

²⁹¹ Frei Betto, **Carta a Dom Ivo.**

²⁹² Frei Betto, **Carta a Dom Ivo.**

²⁹³ Frei Betto, **Carta a Dom Ivo.**

Claiming that the ecumenism the CEBs practise is inspired and backed by the documents of the church and that Pope John Paul II had himself set an example of deepening inter-religious relations by accepting the invitation to be a guest in Jerusalem, Frei Betto certainly puts the ecumenism the Inter-ecclesial organizers want to implement firmly within the Roman Catholic tradition and not outside it, or in breach of it.

Furthering his opposition to Dom Ivo's points, Frei Betto defends the CEBs' emphasis on the role and the place of women in the church; their campaign for having access to all levels of ministry; and he defends also but in a slightly less emphatic manner lay ministry at the Eucharist. More fundamentally, Frei Betto, in his letter, equally stands up for the right of the *Pais* and *Mães de Santo* to be present and take part in the Inter-ecclesial.

The tensions present in the CEBs' movement are discernible in these two public and national letters at the turn of what I call in my periodization the second to the third phase of the national gatherings. The issue is the faithfulness of the CEBs to their Roman Catholic roots. To gain a more balanced view on this issue, let us see how other bishops view the life and ministry of the CEBs, their offer of support for the wider-than-Christianity ecumenism the CEBs practise, and for the CEBs' journey to be more and more relevant to the indigenous people's context.

5.2. BISHOPS SUPPORTING THE CEBs IN THEIR WAY OF BEING CHURCH IN RELATION TO OTHER FAITHS

The tensions about loyalty to the tradition against the permeability to indigenous cultures and religions referred to above can be put in context if we take into account the relationship between bishops and CEBs as co-pilgrims on the way: on the one hand there are the bishops representing Rome and on the other there are the CEBs representing the ministry to different religions and indigenous cultures. But they seem to be going along hand-in-hand. The CEBs' movement is "a movement lay-controlled and independent, but in communion with the hierarchy."²⁹⁴ It is part of the church. The majority of bishops and their dioceses support the Inter-ecclesial gatherings as is demonstrated for example in the numbers registered in the Letter from the tenth Gathering: "Of the 309 bishops of the Catholic Church, 63 were with us. Of the 267 Brazilian dioceses, 231 were represented."²⁹⁵ This was after the shift towards a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism had taken place. The bishops said in the year 2000 and in relation to the gathering in Bahia:

We felt how alive and active the CEBs are and we opened ourselves to hear the Spirit that is manifested in them. As pastors, we believe in the CEBs, we affirm their journey and reaffirm their importance for our churches in particular...
... in them (CEBs), we meet again the traces and the ecclesiology of the first communities described in the Acts of the Apostles as being perseverant in prayer, in the hearing of the Word, in the

²⁹⁴ McDonagh, F. (22/7/2000) Celebration in Brazil. **The Tablet**. p. 983.

²⁹⁵ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar. Ilhéus, 2000.** paragraph 1.

sharing of the bread and in the fraternal division of the goods (cf. Ac. 2. 24-25). In them, also, we find an answer to the guidance of the Second Vatican Council.²⁹⁶

The Catholic Bishops of Brazil and Latin America saw no reason whatsoever for the CEBs to undergo a retrogressive process. The opposite, they exhort them to sustain their original and present impetus: "We exhort the CEBs to persevere in their community living in the prayerful popular reading of the bible, in love for the Eucharist and in their political and social commitment... We want to support the CEBs in our dioceses, by being with them more."²⁹⁷ There is recognition by them of the new challenges that the present/future poses to the movement. Nonetheless, they are affirming, encouraging and pushing the CEBs towards new horizons.

We are conscious of the changes and the new challenges that demand transformations of the concrete expressions of the CEBs. We want to accompany them in their effort to intensify their work in the formation of lay Christians, in accordance with the guidelines given in Document 62 of CNBB (Mission and Ministry of the Lay Christians), to:

- struggle for the recognition of the dignity and equality of women, in all dimensions of life, church and society;
- consolidate the flowering of new ministries taken up equally by men and women, adults and young people;
- keep the fruitful methodology of work based in "seeing, judging, acting, celebrating, reviewing";
- deepen their spirituality and ecumenical practices and their inter-religious dialogue, deepen their missionary dimension and transforming presence in society, as well as deepening the inculturated expressions of their celebrations and their biblical theological and pastoral reflection.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Bispos Católicos do Brasil e da América Latina Presentes ao X Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base X Intereclesial: 11 'a 15 de julho de 2000.**

²⁹⁷ Idem.

²⁹⁸ Idem.

The bishops, differently from Dom Ivo, affirm the CEBs' radical ministry. In this feedback to the CEBs, there are identifiable areas for the CEBs to focus on: "(i) carry on in the processes of transformation of the CEBs themselves, the church and society; (ii) struggle to save women's dignity in life in general, in church and in society; (iii) consolidate the nascent new forms of ministry for women and young people; (iv) in the middle of all these transformations, keep the methodology of the CEB's work: see, judge, act, celebrate, review."²⁹⁹ And now in the next point there is recognition of the spirituality present in the CEBs that goes beyond boundaries of denominations or of religions, a form of Christian discipleship that pushes all the limits of traditional divisions into a plurality of commitment to faith and struggle: (v) "deepen... the ecumenical practices and inter-religious dialogue... transformation of society... and inculturated expressions of celebrations, biblical studies, theological studies and pastoral reflection."³⁰⁰ This is an important point, and it deserves highlighting because it is an official acknowledgement of the CEBs' inter-religious activities.

Furthermore, in terms of the relationship between different cultures, ethnicities and religions, the panoramic view of church and society that came out of the tenth Gathering in Ilhéus Bahia is one of "feeling the weight of the 500 years of Brazil to be certain that there are another 500 years which we desire."³⁰¹ In this mission of transformation from within church and society, the pastoral perspective of the

²⁹⁹ **Idem.**

³⁰⁰ **Idem.**

³⁰¹ Décimo Encontro Intereclesial de CEBs. (2000) **Carta 'as Comunidades. Ilhéus, July 2000 - Ano Jubilar. Ilhéus, 2000.** paragraph 40.

bishops is to support the CEBs, “to walk together with them, and to learn from their experience, because they have the secrets of the kingdom (Luke 12. 32).”³⁰² The bishops’ letter seems to suggest that the CEBs are strategically important to the life and ministry of the church and not outside or against its tradition and its mission. For the bishops, they are the heirs of the liberating mission of Jesus.

We want to support the CEBs in our dioceses with a bigger presence of ourselves at the grassroots as well as with a bigger presence of priests and theological students, nuns and monks, give the best of ourselves and of our churches for them to continue flowering as communities of faith, of proclamation, of communion, of dialogue and of service amongst the poorest (cf. *Guidelines for Evangelization of Brazil*). The CEBs are heirs of Jesus' dream and of his liberating mission, for which he gave up his life and to which he called us, giving us his Spirit and his grace. That Mary, present at Pentecost with the apostles and disciples - men and women -, invoked amongst us as Our Lady of the *Aparecida* and, in Latin America, as the Virgin of Guadalupe, accompanies and inspires, strengthens and animates.³⁰³

Now that I have shown the firm support of the Brazilian bishops to the way of being church the CEBs represent, including their ecumenical practices and inter-religious relationship of permeability and interpenetration, let me seek support from the Vatican to answer the concerns of the detractors of the movement in question.

³⁰² Bispos Católicos do Brasil e da América Latina Presentes ao X Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta ‘as CEBs.**

³⁰³ Bispos Católicos do Brasil e da América Latina Presentes ao X Intereclesial. (2000) **Carta ‘as CEBs.**

5.3. *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI*: THE PROBLEM OF PERMEABILITY AS A METHOD OF EVANGELIZATION

I turn now to the seminal work of Pope Paul VI on evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The importance of this work for our research rests in the fact that this is a papal Exhortation dealing directly and explicitly with the CEBs' experience. In paragraph 58, the Pope recognizes their contribution; although the Exhortation also points to the potential problems that the CEBs face in being permeable to the cultures they seek to reach out to. But on balance, the judgment is positive towards the CEBs:

The last Synod devoted considerable attention to these "small communities," or *communautes (sic) de base*... According to the various statements heard in the Synod, such communities flourish more or less throughout the Church... they spring from the need to live the Church's life more intensely... people who already happen to be united in the struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, human advancement. In still other cases they bring Christians together in places where the shortage of priests does not favour the normal life of a parish community. This is all presupposed within communities constituted by the Church, especially individual Churches and parishes.³⁰⁴

In this Chapter we are dealing with the problem of how the CEBs as a church movement relate to the tradition they belong to. The papal Exhortation raises the question by saying, "presupposed within communities constituted by the Church". The question is whether or not the fact that they are moving more and more towards

³⁰⁴ Paul VI. (1975) *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Rome. The Vatican web site. paragraph 58.

inculturation and permeability means that they are distancing themselves from their Roman Catholic roots?

At the moment this is clearly a speculative question, as the more recent support from the bishops in the letter above (5.2) shows evidently that the CEBs are firmly a part of the Roman Catholic Church, and more than that, as the bishops have said, that they are an inspiration for the church. But, despite the support from the bishops, does the process of becoming more indigenous necessarily distance the CEBs from the church institution?

In other terms, the dilemma for the CEBs is that their allegiance may be divided between their vocation towards inculturation/permeability and their loyalty to the established practice and teaching of the church. The risk is that because of undue pressure from the institutional Church to keep the CEBs in, the CEBs may lose their permeability and deep connection with local and indigenous cultures, traditions and religions. On the other hand, there is also a risk that the CEBs by committing themselves to be more and more permeable and engaged with the processes of inculturation may come to a point of disconnecting from the institutional Church.

This is certainly a problem not only for the CEBs. The church as a whole suffers the same difficulties: either allow permeability at the peril of a universal liturgical or doctrinal standard; or adhere to a universal and distant model (even if it is called

orthodoxy, or truth) at the peril of communication with and relevance for local contexts.

It is a slippery slope to keep faithfulness to both, being universal and part of the Catholic Church as well as being a church seeking inculturation and incarnation in a particular and specific cultural, geographical and sometimes diverse religious environment. The CEBs seem to have opted for a particular approach, which is to say, the more inculturated and permeable the church becomes the more relevant it becomes to that context, therefore guaranteeing its presence in the world, even at the cost of the traditional practices of the church. But perhaps the CEBs have not been able to explain in more theological and ecclesiastical language their conviction that, if each local, regional and, national church were able to be deeply inculturated then the church as a whole would, paradoxically, be really universal.

The papal Exhortation we turn to may suggest a different approach. That is to say that there are two demanding and contradictory masters of the practical evangelization that the church has to engage with, namely the universal truths uphold by the doctrinal body of the church on the one hand, and the permeable, sympathetic missionary dialogue on the other. The required loyalty to both may only be maintained if the individual church keeps faithfulness to these two masters submitting herself to being in a position of extreme tension, holding the two in tension and making that place its life of witness, struggle, suffering and fulfillment of

its vocation. This difficult balance is what the Exhortation from Paul VI suggests, that the church can be both:

Let us be very careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, if one can say so, the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different individual Churches. In the mind of the Lord, the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world.³⁰⁵

The Pope is arguing that both universality and particularity are essential for the life of the church. The catholicity of the church of Christ is dependent on both sides this is to say universality and particularity being lived out in courage and faith.

The experience of the CEBs, on the other hand, seems to be suggesting that an emphasis on permeability might be an essential quality in order to keep faithfulness to universality. They say, “ there is a rich exchange between identity and openness (to the other), between the affirmation of convictions and the welcome of differences. The experience of inter-religious dialogue doesn’t mean a rupture with memory and tradition, the opposite, it demands a firm anchor to their religious identity.”³⁰⁶

For the CEBs, Jesus Christ provides the example in his ministry of a radical commitment to a particular context. That is not to deny his life in relation to God and

³⁰⁵ Paul VI. (1975) **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. Rome. The Vatican web site. paragraph 62.

³⁰⁶ Teixeira, F. (2004) “Espiritualidade do Ecumenismo e do Diálogo Inter-Religioso.” In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 185.

the Holy Spirit. But to affirm that Jesus lived and ministered to a particular context and taking into account the needs of those who came to him for a word of salvation or a healing miracle.³⁰⁷

This can also be seen in the apostolic era in particular in the tensions between the church in Jerusalem and the missionary movement reaching out to the Gentiles. Throughout the life of the church this has been a constant dilemma although the church has always been leaning towards inculturation and permeability, this is what the CEBs would say. It is important to remember that by the Second Century the church was mostly a church of the Gentiles.

Aware of the dilemma for the Church of the Poor as represented by the CEBs, Pope Paul VI addresses it head on, taking the case of the CEBs and expanding on their crucial position. His exhortation is also relevant for and addressed to similar movements in the Church as well as to the institutional Church.

...each individual Church that would voluntarily cut itself off from the universal Church would lose its relationship to God's plan and would be impoverished in its ecclesial dimension. But, at the same time, a Church *toto orbe diffusa* would become an abstraction if she did not take body and life precisely through the individual Churches. Only continual attention to these two poles of the Church will enable us to perceive the richness of this relationship between the universal Church and the individual Church.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ **Idem.** pp. 182 and 186.

³⁰⁸ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi.** paragraph 62.

Furthermore, Pope Paul VI asserts the principle that should govern the permeability of any evangelizing movement: “Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addresses (*sic*), if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask.”³⁰⁹ This word of the Pope seems to be an encouragement to the CEBs’ ministry of inculturation and permeability, but it also seems to vindicate the move of the CEBs towards an increasingly wider-than-Christianity ecumenism as it encourages the local churches to use the language, the signs and symbols of the peoples and places where the church finds itself ministering.

Meanwhile, there is the papal warning directed to movements such as the CEBs, but not exclusively as it applies to any missionary outpost, any boundary situation for the Christian church that they should not lose their identity or compromise it. It applies to those exercising the church mission and ministry with sensitive permeability and without losing their roots. The Pope says: “Evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it; if, in other words, one sacrifices this reality and destroys the unity without which there is no universality, out of a wish to adapt a universal reality to a local situation.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 63.

³¹⁰ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 63.

The permeability practised by the CEBs does not fit this bill. They indeed embrace the presence of other religions within their midst and give them a place of privilege before the assembly, not because they are intending to lose their Christian faith and tradition but because, in their ministry of evangelization, they are aiming to: listen to the voices of the oppressed, and to bring to the light those who have to hide in the shadows of history.

Looking from outside, it seems that the concern of the parts involved, the papal Exhortation and the CEBs' defence of their wider-than-Christianity practices, should recognize that any permeability is not to deny the CEBs' message or identity, but that it actually demands their identity to be reinforced. Permeability, like a hinge, has two sides. In one of these, it allows faithfulness to the original identity of the church. It is dependent on this side being strong enough to cope with the encounter with the other side of the hinge. On the other hand, not to connect with the other side of the hinge is not to encounter the other. This would be a failure for the church and its future. The mission of the church is to connect with the other side of the hinge. Permeability allows openness to the context.

There is a word of caution against syncretism in the document from the Pope: "The message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation."³¹¹ Unfortunately, the warning comes without developing the subject enough to make it clear and distinct. It

³¹¹ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 5.

certainly sets some boundaries, and would satisfy some more concerned and cautious ears. The Exhortation does not go far enough to the point of separating the kind of sensitivity to local characteristics that the document as a whole advocates from the syncretism it criticizes.

In a critical manner one could say that the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration changes the equation carefully expressed by the Exhortation. They have proven able to be permeable to other religions and still profit from that as a reinforcement of their Catholic identity. The bishops' letter of support and praise to the CEBs corroborates this argument.

However in a more appreciative manner one could say also that the Exhortation from the Pope, although written earlier than the more recent wider-than-Christianity ecumenical moves from the CEBs, can be seen as directing the approach the CEBs have adopted. The spirit of the Exhortation is calling for ecumenism and the wider-than-Christianity ecumenism rather than criticizing it, as the Pope exhorts the church to relate to the particular context where it is. Or to put it chronologically, the CEBs could claim this official document as a justification from the magisterium of the daring permeability they have adopted. This would be a reasonable response to the detractors of the wider ecumenism they practise in their national Gatherings. They could indeed claim that they are following the pastoral instruction of their superior Pastor as, for example, when the Pope recognizes that evangelization implies also being evangelized. The Pope says that the church should only preserve the content

of the Gospel as “a precious living heritage, not in order to keep it hidden, but in order to communicate it.”³¹² The Exhortation hints at the very concept of permeability, or permeating, as it puts it. This reinforces the argument of this thesis that the ecumenism of permeability of the CEBs is a valid way of being faithful to the Gospel and to the tradition of the church:

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent with regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men (*sic*) who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.³¹³

It may be justifiable to say that the exhortation is a homily to convince all in the church about the dangers of the work the CEBs are doing, as well as the unconditional necessity of the kind of work that the CEBs are doing. With regard to the popular religiosity much beyond the doctrinal standards of the church, the Exhortation addresses the base communities directly: “Pastoral charity must dictate to all those whom the Lord has placed as leaders of the ecclesial communities the proper attitude in regard to this reality (popular religiosity), which is at the same time so rich and so vulnerable.”³¹⁴ And more directly linked with our concern in this research, which is the relationship with different religions, the Pope has to say: “the Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the

³¹² Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 15.

³¹³ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 20.

³¹⁴ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 48.

living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart.”³¹⁵

The text of the Pope reflecting on the experience of the Base Ecclesial Communities has certainly a magisterial tone to it. It could not be different. But it also certainly has plenty of room for manoeuvre and for the CEBs to argue that their *stricto* and *lato sensu* ecumenism remains within the boundaries of the Roman Catholic institutional Church.

In the next and last Chapter of this dissertation it seems logical that I should look at the singular contribution from the CEBs to inter-religious relations, in particular in relation to the sociology of religion that maps out the religious field, and also I should try and harness some of the theological implications of the CEBs’ ecumenism of permeability.

³¹⁵ Paul VI. **Evangelii Nuntiandi**. paragraph 53.

CHAPTER 6

PERMEABILITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Having looked at the debate between those in favour and the voices resistant to the contribution from the CEBs in Chapter 5, I would like to engage further with an attempt to appreciate the contribution of the CEBs in sociological and theological terms. I shall look, here in this Chapter, at the sociology of religion to try and understand the CEBs and their ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration. I will try and tap into some of the cumulative sociological knowledge about religious movements, to see if it would be possible to understand better the dynamics involved between the CEBs and the church and other religions.

I shall start with the sociologists who will help to understand the sociological dynamics within the religious field and the place of the CEBs' movement in articulating relations with other cultures and religions. I shall also seek to check the CEBs' claim of a prophetic ministry against the sociological understanding of the

prophet type. And, also, check the sociology of the CEBs' relationship with Afro and Ava religions in terms of the relationship between a prophetic movement and more magical traditions.

Later on in this Chapter, I shall look at the theological dimensions and implications that can be inferred from the CEBs' commitment to a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism. This is to say that we are after pointers or rudiments of a theology of permeability that generates or supports the CEBs' ecumenism. This will be an exploration, albeit limited, into the CEBs' inclusive understanding of the history of salvation, the CEBs' rediscovery of the bible for inter-religious relations, and the CEBs' emphasis on dialogue for permeability.

6.1. TWO CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIOLOGIES OF THE CEBs' ECUMENICAL PRACTICES

6.1.1. CEBs as a Prophetic and Diplomatic Community: Max Weber

Max Weber (1864-1920), who is considered to be one of the founders of sociology,³¹⁶ developed a theory of ideal-types to map the religious field. That theory helps to understand the complex representative and symbolic play amongst the main characters in the religious field: priest, prophet, sage, and the laity. Despite the criticism of more positivist approaches to sociology, Weber's theory is a classic in the

³¹⁶ Marshall, G. (editor). (1994) **The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology**. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 561.

sociology of religion. Weber described, in pure terms, the roles of the actors in the interplays in the realm of religion. The ideal-type of the prophet stands against the ideal-type of the priest. The fetish represented by ideal-type magic/sage disputes with the priest and prophet types the recognition and respect of the ideal-type lay. The three former characters struggle against each other in order to conquer the support of and the dominance over the laity. Weber describes the politics of these inter-relations in their minutiae. This is well known by the academic community and does not require further explanation here.³¹⁷ My objective is to see if Weber's ideal-types can help us to understand the CEBs and their role in the church, in society and the dynamics of the religious field in Brazil. This will hopefully help us to appreciate the CEBs' proposal and contribution in terms of the relationships amongst the different religions. It is important also to check how far the CEBs' claim of being a prophetic movement withstands scrutiny and whether there is something new about their way of exercising their prophetic vocation, in particular, in the face of the new wider-than-Christianity ecumenism that the CEBs practise in their national gatherings. Max Weber's work defined the relationship between prophet and magician ideal-types in terms of competition, but the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability questions that premise.

³¹⁷ A recent work representative of Weber's influence is: Camic, C., Gorski, P., Trubek, D. (eds.). (2005) **Max Weber, 'Economy and Society' A Critical Companion**. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. Other authors as, for example, Peter L. Berger and Pierre Bourdieu worked their sociological contributions in relation to, amongst others', Weber's theory.

Let us check in more detail how the claim of prophetic ministry fits with Weber's criteria.

i) Prophets versus Priests and Magicians³¹⁸ – The CEBs as a movement of lay prophetic people

The prophet ideal-type in Weber is the representative of the pure personal sense of a divine calling as well as the recipient of a special and direct charisma. The prophet type claims to be the legitimate representative of God. Prophets are bearers of new doctrine and in need of validation either in the form of recognition from the laity or from their own charismatic authentication. This tends to set them in opposition to the other representatives of the divine, e.g., the priests, who have received their charisma from an institution through training and are part of the rationale of the organization. The prophets are also operating in opposition to the sage/magician who claims to manipulate the forces of nature.³¹⁹ The prophets bring something new in terms of message, revelation and ethical demands.

We found in the CEBs' publications and in their national gatherings that indeed the CEBs bring a special and different understanding of the Gospel, i.e., as liberation; and also they venture into new ways of approaching the liturgy in terms of inculturation and permeability to other traditional religions in Brazil. However, in relation to more animist Afro and Ava religions the CEBs seem to be more

³¹⁸ I am using here part of the framework that Max Weber uses in describing the prophet ideal-type, see, Weber, M. (this edition 1978) **Economy and Society, an Outline of Interpretative Sociology**. London: University of California Press. pp 439-468.

³¹⁹ Weber, M. **Economy and**. pp 439-468.

accommodating and less defensive than the type prophet would allow for in Weber's analyses. (I will come back to this a little later, the CEBs as prophet-diplomats)

In Weber's description, the prophets, in opposition to priests and sages, represent pure ethical religion. The priests have a salary and an office. The prophets, on the contrary, would try not to take part in the religious institutions' favours. Prophets stand in opposition to those who offer religious services (priests) and manipulation of the natural forces in every day life in exchange for money (the magician/sage). Prophets would not accept payment for the deliverance of their oracles or eventual supernatural powers. The point of this for our study of the CEBs is the prophetic characteristic of questioning the *status quo* with an ethical demand for justice for the oppressed. The CEBs would recognize themselves as having a prophetic charisma in the terms Weber describes it; and if the comparison with Weber's ideal-types works, this locates the CEBs' social and religious function primarily in opposition to government and church. This can be seen, for example, in Dom Ivo's feeling of unease with the CEBs' critical attitude expressed in his letter of evaluation of the eighth Inter-ecclesial: "the bitterness [of the CEBs] in regard to the practice and the structure of our Church."³²⁰ (for more see Chapter 5; 5.1.). That bitterness is the exact connection, the link between the CEBs and Weber's prophet ideal-type. In the light of Weber's theory the evidently questioning charisma and nature of the CEBs sets them in contrast with the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church. This can be seen in the institutional resistance to the CEBs' position in relation to the role and

³²⁰ Dom Ivo Loscheiter. **Carta aos Bispos**. Santa Maria, 16 de setembro de 1992.

ministry of women and when there is regret for the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability to Afro and Ava cultures and religions. On the other hand, it is evident also in the CEBs' accusation of the institutional betrayals of the poor and the denial of justice. All the difficulties and the negotiations between the CEBs and the Roman Catholic hierarchy in relation to the CEBs' national gatherings go to show that the CEBs fit firmly within the sociological characteristics of Weber's prophet ideal-type.

But, at first sight there seems to be something peculiar about the CEBs in relation to Weber's prophet ideal-type because the CEBs are primarily a group of lay people. The CEBs are small groups of lay people generally supported by their local parish and dioceses although meeting away from the centres of the places more directly identified with the institutional church. The CEBs are led not by officially trained leaders, neither are they led by outsider charismatic figures. The relationship CEBs-prophet type appears paradoxical because the CEBs are evidently a lay led and lay-orientated movement. The CEBs are the prophets themselves. They are the lay folk who stand on the strength of their own charisma to demand an ethical transformation of church and society. Their strength of faith comes out of their struggle to guarantee their existence. The struggle impacts on their view of God and the Gospel. They have a new perspective (doctrine, revelation) regarding what salvation is (liberation) and a new perspective about the way they should relate to other traditions and religions (permeability). This represents a new departure, so the CEBs play the role of the prophet type. Being lay does not constitute a contradiction to Weber's criteria for the prophet type because Weber recognizes that the prophet is invariably a

layperson,³²¹ and is not from a priestly background. The prophet type is a lay person who has an experience of a new insight and revelation. This seems to be true in the CEBs' case (see Chapters 3 and 4).

ii) Ethical and Exemplary Prophecy, the CEBs as a prophetic church community

Another limitation to the use of Weber's ideal-type for the CEBs is the fact that they could not be said to be a spontaneous movement. The CEBs' movement is a highly organized enterprise. The CEBs are not simply an outburst of an individual charisma, but they are more like an organized community within an organized institutional body. This is confirmed by the way the CEBs are seeking to respond to their needs through symbolic/religious and political means, operating at a grassroots level and also at a national level as a network. But, clearly, the prophetic spirit is an essential component of the CEBs because of their unequivocal commitment to justice and transformation in society and the institution they are part of, as well as their commitment to new ways of relating to the different religions and cultures. Their prophetic characteristic is evident in the message of salvation they proclaim, as liberation and the new practice of a *lato sensu* ecumenism. This type of prophetic ministry Weber terms 'ethical prophet': "preaching as one who has received a commission from God, he demands obedience as an ethical duty."³²²

³²¹ Weber, M. **Economy and**. pp. 456 and 467.

³²² Weber, M. **Economy and**. p 447.

Notwithstanding the differences with the ideal-type prophet, I would like to suggest that the CEBs are a typical example of a prophetic movement operating from within a structured institutional church. The gap between the ideal-type prophet practically outside the institutional aura of the church and the actual reality of the CEBs as part and parcel of the church institution brings us to the more current sociological studies that seek to illustrate the inter-dependence and more complex relationship between the “charismatic” and the “institutional” dynamics in the exercise of the prophetic role.

One example of these more current sociological studies is an applied research of the problem of charisma and authority in ancient Israelite Society. Rodney Hutton pushes Weber’s ideal-types, the prophet and the priest, to be more closely related in the interwoven dynamics of the religious field and religious institutions. He suggests that the prophet might have a more complex and nuanced identity. The prophet identity is based on the duality of being an intimate-outsider. This implies that the prophet has a charisma that belongs within the institution, although lived in a tense relationship with it. A different set of values and vision makes him an outsider. But he uses the language and the symbols of the religion he received his education from. He is an intimate person.

Hutton’s work criticizes any tidy separation between the charismatic quality and the institutional form. He suggests that to speak about the prophets as simple “social disrupters trivializes their mission.”³²³ He argues that the role of the prophets is best

³²³ Hutton, R. R. (1994) **Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society**. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p. 129

described as “their ability to articulate the ‘mystic consciousness’ of their people... Their job was to extrapolate out the truth of the old myth in order to overcome its limitations and to reshape it into a new myth that would articulate God’s graciousness in the midst of the people.”³²⁴ The CEBs did and still do that in relation to political liberation and they are also doing that in relation to ecumenical and inter-religious permeability as they extrapolate the established patterns and bring new practices to bear.

The prophetic role so understood by the sociology of Max Weber sets the criterion to judge sociologically the CEBs’ claim of a prophetic mission. The outcome of such judgment should be positive, in particular because of the CEBs’ insistent work pressing for changes from within the church and the tradition they belong to incorporating new perspectives more open to other denominations and religions. The Weberian and post-Weberian views give a framework that confirms, from the perspective of the sociology of religion, the prophetic vocation of the CEBs. This prophetic characteristic of the CEBs explains the persistent tensions present in the CEBs’ relationship to the institutional church. The CEBs are a prophetic church movement, and a movement within the church. They claim a place and a role for themselves within the Roman Catholic Church and they also claim that they have the *status* of being a legitimate part of the church, although as ‘an intimate outsider’, doing things that don’t quite fit within, but not being outside of it either.

³²⁴ Hutton, R. R. **Charisma and Authority**. p. 130.

Furthermore such view of the CEBs as prophet explains the fact that their faith and vocation have been lived from within the Roman Church regardless of the many tensions and problems and the endless negotiations. This prophetic ministry being exercised from within but stretching-the-boundaries manifests a further role of the CEBs.

iii) CEBs and a new ideal-type: prophet-diplomat

The CEBs have taken upon themselves in their national gatherings to represent the church in a new different way, that is, in relating to the Afro and Ava traditions/religions. The prophet ideal-type helps to understand the CEBs' liberty in reinterpreting their tradition, allowing room for an ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration. However, it seems that there is more going on in the CEBs than just the role of a Weberian ideal-type prophet of questioning the *status quo*. The CEBs criticize a traditional and established way of doing things as a prophet would do, and as a prophet they propose new ways of going about things, but then the CEBs become the agents of a new frontier in terms of church relations to other traditions. The CEBs become like diplomats allowing the slotting in and symbolic exchange in the encounter between the church and other different traditions.

In Weber's sociological approach one can find the components that confirm the prophetic vocation that the CEBs have. What does not quite fit with a straight view of the CEBs as a prophetic movement only is that the CEBs behave as if they represent the church and Christianity as they implement inclusive micro and macro

ecumenical practice. In this way they seem to be acting more than just as prophets in their role in the religious field, for they seem to be operating as diplomats, placing themselves at the forefront of inter-denominational and inter-religious/cultural encounters.

This suggests that in the case of the CEBs it is necessary to make an addition to the categories identified by Weber. Weber classified the prophet types as Lawgiver,³²⁵ Teacher of Ethics,³²⁶ Mystagogue and teacher.³²⁷ Observing the CEBs' experience in their national gatherings it suggests that a further category to that of Weber's would be appropriate. I term it: Prophet-Diplomat, and this is because of their assertiveness in seeking a permeable relationship with different religions. This questions Weber's assertion of the competition between prophet and magician, as we saw the CEBs were able to incorporate the more animist dimensions of *Ava* and *Afro* religions into Christian worship.

In the biblical tradition the CEBs' calling could be compared to that of Jeremiah who was appointed as a prophet to the nations and was summoned to destroy and to rebuild (Jeremiah 1. 5 and 10). Jeremiah also encouraged the exiles to settle down in Babylon seeking to relate, receiving and sharing influence: "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters... Seek the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jeremiah 29. 5-7).

³²⁵ Weber, M. **Economy and**. p. 442.

³²⁶ Weber, M. **Economy and**. p. 444.

³²⁷ Weber, M. **Economy and**. p. 446.

The assertiveness of the CEBs points to a strong and definite belief in the new perspective they have; what Weber calls a new message of salvation.

iv) The prophetic message of the CEBs: an inclusive salvation

Weber sees the nature of the prophetic revelation as a way of bringing a sense of meaningful totality to the world. The unifying sense of meaning demands a conduct coherent with it and oriented to bring salvation or the new vision to fruition.³²⁸ The struggle of the CEBs in the last three or four national gatherings to bring to light new ritualized ways of relating to the Afro and Ava traditions and religions in the context of Christian worship was meant to supplant the church's traditional way of relating to those religions and cultures. The liturgical innovations (see Chapter 3) and the political campaigning (see Chapter 4) are manifestations of a belief in a different doctrine of salvation.

The essential belief of the CEBs might not be immediately evident. There are the two perspectives we have pointed out as evidence of the CEBs' ethical prophetic dimension. These two dimensions are liturgical (Chapter 3) and political (Chapter 4). They are well exposed in this thesis and are a manifestation of a faith and a meaningful totality. In other words, the CEBs have a message and a faith they proclaim and try to implement with their actions. That faith is expressed in the words in the *Texto-Base* published in preparation for the eleventh Gathering:

³²⁸ Weber, M. **Economy and**. p. 450.

The ecumenical and inter-religious ecumenical spirituality present in the CEBs are a consequence of following Jesus Christ... There is no possibility of human self-realization without the perspective of dialogue with the other, because it is in the face of the relationship with the other that the human being affirms their personal reality... Dialogue is an attitude, and style of action and a spirit that ought to permeate the whole of the existential dynamic.³²⁹

The fact that the CEBs have this all-embracing view of the importance of dialogue and relationship with the different other as a way to human realization is the same as to say that dialogue with the other is a salvific means of grace that allows human beings to find fulfillment. This confirms that the CEBs have a new perspective on salvation. This places them in the prophetic role as defined by Weber. Dialogue as a meaningful totalizing belief is manifested in the gatherings, in the CEBs' ecumenical practices and their wider-than-Christianity ecumenism.³³⁰

The CEBs' understanding of salvation that allows scope for an ecumenism of permeability needs explanation in theological terms. I shall come back to this a little later in this Chapter.

6.1.2. CEBs promoting Permeability and Interpenetration of Different Traditions and Religions: Roger Bastide

³²⁹ Teixeira, F. (2004) "Espiritualidade do Ecumenismo e do Diálogo Inter-Religioso." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. pp 182, 183 and 184.

³³⁰ This view of dialogue as a soteriological element goes in the same direction, but perhaps a little further than the categories that Jacques Dupuis identifies and debates in Chapter 14 of his systematic work: 'dialogue is evangelization' and 'mission is dialogue?', see, Dupuis, J. (1997) **Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism**. New York: Orbis Books.

Another way of looking at the CEBs' distinctive ecumenical and inter-religious practices can be derived from the anthropological/sociological work of Roger Bastide, in particular as articulated in *The African Religions of Brazil*, which is regarded as a classic of its genre. In this major work, Bastide develops a theory of the interpenetration of the diverse cultures in Brazil: Afro, Ava and Portuguese. He deals in particular with the religious dimension of them, showing how permeable the religions are to each other's influence. Bastide works in particular with *Candomblé* and other forms of Afro religions, and traditional and popular Catholicism. His is a detailed anthropological and sociological study deserving the attention of a whole doctoral dissertation. Bastide will help us in understanding the implications of the hinge-kind of relationship that is lived by Afro-Ava-European cultures and religions brought together by historical and geographical incidents and events. Our problem now is not so much whether the CEBs stand outside their tradition but what are the implications of their way of relating to other cultural and religious traditions, more specifically, if the consequence of the CEBs' wider-than-Christianity ecumenism puts their faith beyond recognition from the mainstream church.

This question is even more complicated when considered in the light of old suspicions. Bastide shows the gulf that separates the diverse cultural and religious elements in Brazil, in particular that between the Afro animist and the White Christian world. Their social and economic situation, their cultural and religious symbolic universe generate fear and distrust:

Unable to comprehend a religion so different from his own, the white man wrote off black religion as “demonic” just because it was not Christian... In his eyes, the blacks’ religious dances around stones bathed in the blood of sacrificial animals justified the social gap that separated him from them. Writing off the African civilizations as diabolical was a rationalization of the brutality and inhumanity of slavery.³³¹

What was true for the times of slavery in Brazil drags on. The continued attacks on Afro-descendents and their cultures have not been completely overcome in contemporary times. Bastide will argue that if the Afro-Brazilian has managed to retain and in a sense expand the traits of the African religion and cultures it can only be because of their persistence shaped by an African cultural *milieu*.³³² Obviously, this African *milieu* is what the Brazilian society is, at least in part. The tenacious attack the African traditions suffered in the New World has not been able to destroy them. Bastide will argue that there is an emotional attitude that leads the Afro people to resist the attacks on them. He also argues that there is a mentality that led to their survival and not to their being completely absorbed. More, that there are categories of thought they use to deal with their complex cultural identity. Bastide points out that all of this originated not in the black family but in their religion: *Candomblé*.³³³

The discrimination against Afro-descendents, the more direct persecution by the police in the past until a few decades ago, and the persecution by the ecclesiastical authorities and by more fundamentalist and Pentecostal denominations up to the

³³¹ Bastide, R. (originally published in Paris, 1960, this edition 2007) translated by Helen Sebba **The African Religions of Brazil, toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations**. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 139.

³³² Bastide, R. **The African Religions of Brazil**. p. 164.

³³³ Bastide, R. **The African Religions of Brazil**. p. 164.

present day have never been able to break the resistance of the Afro people and the religions born out of their background. Also, *Candomblé* goes much beyond ethnic lines now. It has crossed cultural and socio-economic divides. This shows how deep the Afro-Brazilian roots are. The fact is that either underground or in open terms *Candomblé* continues. It is a significant religious tradition in Brazil. The relationship with *Candomblé* is of fundamental importance in shaping the encounter between Christianity and Brazilian People. Many Brazilians would consider themselves both Catholics and also part of *Candomblé*. But that is not talked about or acknowledged openly. The acceptance of this fact is in general very much doubted. On the other hand, many *Candomblé* members consider themselves good Catholics. *Candomblé* has also infiltrated/penetrated the Roman Catholic Church in many ways. There are saints shared by both religions. There are mixed rites and religious festivals. It is possible even to see Roman Catholic Priests that have undergone *Candomblé*'s rites of initiation. I know one good friend, a Roman Catholic priest, who has been initiated. In history we have this in the person of Padre Adão of Recife, who went to Africa to undergo initiation rites. The simple fact is that *Candomblé*, as well as other Afro Religions are living faiths in Brazil just as much as is Roman Catholicism, although in a smaller scale. And wanting it or not, Roman Catholicism and Afro religions are connected to each other by the history, geography and sociology of the country.

Although underground, there is a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism lived out in practical terms by Roman Catholics who are also active members of Afro-Brazilian religions. This is not exclusive to the CEBs. It is common to find people who belong

both to the world of *Candomblé* and to the Christian world. It is inevitable that there would be some syncretism in a situation such as this. However, it is interesting to register what Roger Bastide noticed about syncretism:

... syncretism, which was originally merely a mask, a means of distracting the white man's attention and evading his watchful eye, is transformed into the system of equivalences, of correspondences between saints and orixás... The saints and orixás are not confused; they are not identified – or at any rate not completely... But they are linked, as the blacks are linked with the whites without completely merging with them... Yet the blacks are Catholics too... correspondence was established, facilitated by the blacks' participation in the festivals of the Rosary, although never to the point where saints and *orixás* were merged. To put it briefly, the more closely integration adheres to the community type, or the greater the social or cultural encystment within which it occurs, the less profound the syncretism.³³⁴

The ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration lived by the CEBs comes from that old cultural process of accommodation and respect expressed culturally and religiously. It stems from the survival of the Afro traditions of Brazil and the resilience of Roman Catholicism to remain distinct. The two religions have been able, not without difficulties, to live and to let live. In this way, the CEBs and *Candomblé* share in a manner that goes beyond syncretism. Obviously, there is some exchange and one can see elements that are the product of mixing the religious rites and symbolism. But more importantly, there is plenty of what is distinctively from *Camdomblé* without compromising what is distinctly Roman Catholic. This is what was happening in the Celebrations at the CEBs' national gatherings when the CEBs allowed permeability to be taken to center stage. The two religions are linked by a

³³⁴ Bastide, R. **The African Religions of Brazil**. p. 283.

historical margin of tolerance that has generated some permeability, slotting in and interpenetration. Perhaps, in the quotation above, Bastide could have been more aware of European White presence within *Candomblé*.

The religions survived together and that is despite the persecutions and discriminations in particular in relation to the Afro religions. These two distinct religions are linked by cultural and religious elements but not mixed syncretistically. The ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration present in the CEBs' national gatherings is a testimony to that. Instead of insidious mixing, there is a celebration of diversity. There is religious tolerance, as there is cordiality and welcome. The symbol of which is the invitation to the Afro and the *Avas'* representatives to share the stage/altar in the national gatherings. Pentecostalism is the other extreme of the historical processes in Brazil. The CEBs are able to allow positive permeability, not without cost. In the meantime Pentecostalism rejects and enters into a holy war against Afro religions and cultures.

There are other elements at stake in the ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration lived by the CEBs. From the beginning Bastide warns that the difference between the situation in the United States and in Brazil is that it was impossible to introduce racial (ethnic) barriers in the churches in Brazil. "In Brazil ecumenicism (*sic*) always proved stronger than separatism."³³⁵ This is a quote I have already mentioned earlier. This means that Christianity in Brazil, Roman Catholic or

³³⁵ Bastide, R. **The African Religions of Brazil**. p. 368.

otherwise, has an element that distinguishes it from its European origin because it has accommodated influences from other cultures and religions. Again, an Afro presence is felt even when Afro religions are taken as the enemy to be fought against, as is the case of some of the Pentecostal Churches, in particular, the independent Brazilian-born Pentecostalism. In the Pentecostal context, *orixás* are invoked in Christian services, but just to be cast out minutes later. In any case, the rejected Afro dimension would have made it to the altar although in a negative manner.

What is new in the CEBs' practice is that there is a dignity in the ecumenism they are defending. It is as if the CEBs had understood Roger Bastide's studies and had come to terms with their multiple religious identities being able to preserve the distinct identities as autonomous yet positively connected. The ecumenism of permeability, of slotting in, allows scope for relationships, yet preserving the identity of each religion and resisting syncretism. Roger Bastide explained that the interpenetration of cultures and religions was deep, but the deeper it was the more respectful to and appreciative of differences it was also. This is what we found happening at the CEBs' national gatherings. The closer they get to Afro and *Avas* traditions the more the CEBs seem to want to respect and appreciate the other. This ecumenism of permeability and respect added to the liberation perspective of the CEBs seems not to be seen as a threat to their faith. This goes some way to explain the reasons why the CEBs continue - to a certain extent - to be popular and their national gatherings well attended. Their message of political liberation and religious

and cultural proximity with respect for difference seems to make sense for groups of people, parishes and dioceses.

6.2. PERMEABILITY AS THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE ECUMENISM OF THE CEBS

I said above that there was a need for a theological explanation of the CEBS' faith in an inclusive salvation. It is time now to move to it. This will be done in three ways. Firstly, we will look at the widening of the understanding of the history of salvation. Secondly, we will try to demonstrate the biblical bases for such an inclusive approach. Thirdly, there will be an attempt to demonstrate that the CEBS' emphasis on dialogue is the very nature and substance of the permeability of their macro ecumenism. It is hard to say what comes first, whether it is the permeability of the CEBS' practices that bring about an inclusive theology, or whether it is an inclusive theology that serves as foundation for their ecumenism of permeability and interpenetration. In any case, permeability seems to be the key to their practice as well as to their theology.

6.2.1. A History of Salvation for Permeability and Interpenetration

A theology of permeability ought to start with a belief in the universality of the promise and history of salvation. The wider-than-Christianity ecumenical practices of the CEBS must be based on that belief. The belief and the prophetic message of the CEBS are present in their ecumenism of permeability and would only be consistent

with their practice if they were based on a wider view of salvation. That belief is well expressed in the words of the preparatory material for the last of the CEBs' national gatherings: "God has a project for the whole world. The prophetic spirituality consists of living and working for such a project and to make it fully true and real."³³⁶ The soteriological project the CEBs are referring to is the salvation of the whole Earth and of all cultures and peoples. It goes much beyond the church or Christianity. It is not the monopoly of the church either. The same preparatory text refers to the theological views of Brazilian Bishops in a document from the CNBB: "The church does not have the monopoly of the Kingdom. This is wider than her and extends to all human beings of good will."³³⁷

Here again the CEBs have taken a further perspective on the understanding of a wider salvation. First stands the well-known perspective the CEBs have of political, social and economic liberation. This is reaffirmed in the *Texto-Base* for the eleventh Gathering: "The CEBs live a prophetic spirituality by having a relationship with God, a love for the Word but with a clear social commitment, being obedient to the Word of God that commands the transformation of the World."³³⁸ This is already wider than just a religious sense of salvation, clearly connected with the redemption of social illnesses, inequalities, oppression, poverty, etc.

³³⁶ Barros, M. (2004) "O Sopro da Profecia nas Comunidades: A Espiritualidade Profética das CEBs." *In* Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 60.

³³⁷ *Idem.* p. 60.

³³⁸ *Idem.* p. 56.

Secondly, there is the plural perspective on salvation that has been growing and developing within the CEBs and made manifest in the stance the CEBs have taken in their national gatherings by including representatives of different cultures and religions in their assemblies and worship sessions. The *Textto-Base* I have been referring to says: “the groups of Indigenous and Black cultures have the right to demand that their customs be respected, and demand also that they should not be considered less honourable, or less sacred than the customs of the White people.”³³⁹ This is a plea that Afro and Ava religious and culturally distinct traditions be considered as sacred as the Christian tradition. To put it again in the terms in which the *Textto-Base* presents the issue to the participants of the eleventh Gathering: “And is it not so that pluralism is a positive factor that helps the communities and the world to deepen their spirituality and their path towards peace?”³⁴⁰

The *Textto-Base* continues to advocate inter-religious dialogue and an understanding of salvation inclusive of different traditions: “to live together with other cultures and religions demands of us that we are prepared for dialogue and that we are open to collaboration with one another.”³⁴¹ And then the text moves towards a wider perspective on salvation itself: “It is a prophetic challenge to work on the permanent humanization of each one of us as human beings and to help make more Christ-like (*Cristificar*) all that constitute things human.”³⁴² Although the language of the *Textto-Base* is unapologetically Christian, it is still very inclusive in its content. Salvation is

³³⁹ *Idem.* p. 70.

³⁴⁰ *Idem.* p. 71.

³⁴¹ *Idem.* p. 71.

³⁴² *Idem.* p. 71.

interpreted in terms of recovery of all that is human: "the CEBs' Paschal witness will be to contribute to all that favour life to become more fulfilling and people more humane."³⁴³

There is an effort made by the CEBs to widen a narrower understanding of salvation in a way of incorporating in it Afro and Ava traditions. A British Methodist theologian, Kenneth Cracknell, calls in his book *In Good and Generous Faith*³⁴⁴ for a correction to the omissions in the lectionary readings and church teaching schemes that have led to a particular way in which the salvation history has been told. In that work he tries to recover some of the texts/themes and demonstrate their importance for a different kind of understanding of the salvation history.³⁴⁵ Our research has shown that the CEBs have been able to respond positively to their plural religious context by widening their interpretation and understanding of the history of salvation. Cracknell does not mention the CEBs' practices although he makes a plea for a new approach, "the plea therefore is for another version of salvation history, that affirms God's presence throughout creation."³⁴⁶ He works through biblical and theological material, even with the Old Testament, to try and incorporate in the history of salvation all the nations and not only Israel.³⁴⁷ Then he moves into the sphere of the New Testament, from the Gospel to Revelation, to find an inclusive history of salvation.³⁴⁸ It seems

³⁴³ *Idem.* p. 71.

³⁴⁴ Cracknell, K. (2005) *In Good and Generous Faith, Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. Epworth: Peterborough.

³⁴⁵ Cracknell, K. *In Good and*. Epworth: Peterborough. p. 1.

³⁴⁶ Cracknell, K. *In Good and*, Epworth: Peterborough. p. 5.

³⁴⁷ Cracknell, K. *In Good and*, Epworth: Peterborough. pp. 13-24.

³⁴⁸ Cracknell, K. *In Good and*, Epworth: Peterborough. pp. 25-38.

that the CEBs would have no difficulty in affirming with Cracknell that: "...all human history, from creation to end-time, in every phase and among all nations and peoples, must be understood as a single 'history of salvation'. Embedded in the purpose of creation is the reconciliation of all humankind to God."³⁴⁹

But how would an ecumenism of permeability influence the choice of biblical text and the way of interpreting them? I will propose a few examples of how the biblical material could support and inspire a theology of permeability.

6.2.2. The Bible and Permeability

The corollary of a more inclusive view of salvation should imply an effort to overcome the very exclusive parts of the biblical text. This effort is evident in the *Texto-Base* for the most recent of the CEBs' national gatherings: "The people of the bible, as well as many other people of the earth, had a clear notion that all that live and all that exists have their origin in the gratuitous love of God."³⁵⁰ And because of that "all beings that breathe should praise the Lord" (Psalm 150. 6). The sensitivity of the CEBs in their efforts to relate and be open to Afro and Ava cultures and religions in Brazil are affirmed in the *Texto-Base*: "We can perceive gestures of gratitude similar (to that of the Jewish People in the Old Testament) in our people, in particular in the Black

³⁴⁹ Cracknell, K. In **Good and**, Epworth: Peterborough. p. 38.

³⁵⁰ Cavalcanti, T. (2004) "A Sabedoria que vem da Simplicidade: Espiritualidade do Cotidiano – Livros Sapienciais." In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 80.

people who have the custom of offering sacrifices to their “saints”, as a form of paying, giving thanks for blessings received, or also asking for protection.”³⁵¹

With this kind of statement the CEBs seem to be trying to build bridges in which the symbolic exchange present in the permeability of one tradition to another can be recognized in the bible. The attempt is to overcome the exclusion in which such relations were wrapped up. I will give another example in which even the strange-to-White-Catholics religious custom of offering libation could actually be accepted. “The custom of spitting the first sip of alcoholic drink on the floor, as an offering to the worshipped divinity, is also an action of giving thanks and of reverence. This is not very distant from the cultural roots of the bible.”³⁵² This is an attempt to overcome what is exclusive in the bible.

But, although the preparatory material –*Texto-Base* – is rich in ecumenical reflection, it still feels that there is room for other efforts dedicated to registering and better understanding the method that the CEBs are using to read the bible as inspiration for their ecumenism of permeability. *The Defenseless Flower, a New Reading of the Bible*,³⁵³ the famous book by Carlos Mesters on the method of the CEBs to read the bible for liberation purposes, did not cover any of the present issues of a wider-than-Christianity ecumenism and the biblical tradition. Further work is needed on the

³⁵¹ *Idem.* p. 80.

³⁵² *Idem.* p. 81.

³⁵³ Mesters, C. (1989) **Defenseless Flower, A New Reading of the Bible**. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations.

CEBs' rediscovering of the bible for a theology of permeability and for their inter-religious relations.

There is a challenge for the wider ecumenism of the CEBs to be articulated in biblical terms. I would say that in a biblical language the CEBs have made a transition from the laws of exclusion found in Deuteronomy 23 to the inclusion of Isaiah 56. In the former, the law prevents the foreigners from being able to participate in the Assembly and excludes them from worship for several generations down the line. In the latter, there is inclusion and acceptance of the foreigner and different one as well as of the sexually different. The CEBs could easily have paraphrased the prophet saying that: "There will be a memorial within the Lord's temple and its walls for the Afro and the Ava, with all their diversity of language, cultures and rituals. Their names will be everlasting and their identity will not be cut off. They will worship together with those who are more obviously counted as insiders" (Isaiah 56). The CEBs' ecumenism of permeability, bringing in those who were excluded, seems absolutely in line with the prophetic inclusive view of Isaiah.

There is ample scope in the bible for an inclusive view of the church with respect to difference. In Acts 8 at the encounter between the Ethiopian Eunuch and the apostle Philip the different one is accepted in by baptism and soon after the foreigner is left on his own to get on with his faith in his own way. Such space for diverse identity is found in the CEBs' approach to inter-cultural relations. Sometimes the CEBs' approach could be said to be the same as that of Philip's. In the story he

demonstrated such willingness for inclusion without very much care for catechism. This is similar to the CEBs' approach that seeks inclusion of the other without very much care for further checks or serious consideration for specific criteria for such inclusion. Philip baptized the Eunuch very soon. The CEBs serve the Eucharist to all regardless of differences in confessionality.

Perhaps, more relevant to the way the CEBs are relating to representatives of different religions in their national gatherings are the biblical stories about the priesthood that is above the Abrahamic religious traditions. I am referring to the stories and sayings about Melchizedek, who was a priest of God Most High, in an order above the Aaronic priesthood (Genesis 14. 18-21; Hebrews 7. 11; Psalm 110. 4). The fact that Melchizedek welcomed and blessed Abram, and Abram in his turn recognized his priesthood by giving him ten percent of all Abram had, suggests a relationship above particular cultural and religious traditions. Jesus being of the Order of Melchizedek seems to suggest some scope for a theological defense of similar approach, i.e., to suggest that Christians could have openness to others who are representatives of other traditions, just as the CEBs do in their national gatherings.

Whatever argument is put forward, the fact is that the CEBs are seeking to support their ecumenical and inter-religious relations with an inclusive understanding of salvation and that ought to influence the way they read the bible. They say: "The Ministry of the Word is a privileged moment in the dialogue/covenant between God

and his people at the service of the salvation of the whole of humanity and of the whole of creation. It is the proclamation of the universal salvation!”³⁵⁴ The *lato sensu* ecumenism of the CEBs calls for biblical and theological work that is inclusive in nature and bridging in intentionality, without compromising difference but linking different traditions and religions.

6.2.3. Dialogue for Permeability

The CEBs’ universal understanding of salvation, and the CEBs’ rediscovery of the bible for a theology of permeability are both important dimensions in grasping their inclusive spirituality and their permeability in inter-religious relations. However, they are not the only emphases that have shaped the CEBs’ inter-religious practices. Dialogue is the other emphasis that has been added to the well-established political liberationist agenda of the CEBs.

Dialogue for permeability has a significant place in the theological mindset of the CEBs. A *stricto sensu* ecumenism and an inter-religious spirituality are both based on a conversation with the other. In the words of the *Texto-Base*, the purpose of the dialogue is “the search of unity in diversity, or the search of similarities within differences.”³⁵⁵ In the dialogue with other Christian denominations the commonality

³⁵⁴ Buyst, I. (2004) “Beba da Fonte: Sobre o Lugar da Liturgia na Espiritualidade Cristã.” In Secretariado Nacional do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Seguir Jesus no compromisso com os excluídos - Texto Base**. Belo Horizonte: Editora, O Lutador. p. 153.

³⁵⁵ Teixeira, F. (2004) “Espiritualidade do Ecumenismo e do Diálogo Inter-religioso.” In Secretariado do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Texto Base**. p. 184.

is “the faith in Jesus Christ as sent by the Father.”³⁵⁶ In inter-religious encounters, there is something else that is similar: “a common aspiration to an ultimate reality... a search for a liberation of all that prevents humanity to flourish... (There is also) a reciprocal communication, and a sharing of (experiences) of life when experiences of life and the reflection about them is done by believers of different religions.”³⁵⁷

The above applied to ecological concerns will result in this:

We can and we should learn from the Indigenous people and with the Black people... The *Karajás* understand that their origin comes from the depths of the river Araguaia. Therefore, they preserve the river. Black people understand that in a particular tree or in a particular spring lives an *Orixá*. Therefore that tree or that spring becomes untouchable. In this way the sacredness of life is preserved.³⁵⁸

Perhaps the above quotation exemplifies what Dom Pedro Casaldáliga means when he says in response to the request to summarize the CEBs’ spirituality. Amongst other characteristics, he says that the spirituality of the CEBs is: “a spirituality of dialogue with all other religions, and with all other cultures, with all other words or human anxiety. It is in communion with all truth and all beauty. The CEBs are pilgrims of the macro-ecumenical road.”³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ *Idem.* p. 184.

³⁵⁷ *Idem.* p. 184.

³⁵⁸ Malvezzi, R. (2004) “Espiritualidade Ecológica.” In Secretariado do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Texto Base.** p 223 and 224.

³⁵⁹ Dom Pedro Casaldáliga. (2004) “Orando e Caminhando.” In Secretariado do 11 Intereclesial das CEBs. **CEBs: Espiritualidade Libertadora - Texto Base.** p 252.

There is something of a *meta* dimension to dialogue in the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability. Sometimes it is theologically spelled out and sometimes it is not. But the kind of dialogue portrayed by the CEBs enables and points to participation without threatening difference and identity. That is what we call ecumenism of permeability.

CONCLUSION

“Be certain, in the religion of Love, there are no believers or unbelievers. Love
embraces all”³⁶⁰ (Rumi)

The point has been made that the student of theology is not always after clarity and distinction; they are always after meaning, redemption, salvation, liberation, and participation (see 1.1.4). This approach has led to the discovery of the CEBs’ ecumenism of permeability and its potential in terms of inter-religious theory and practice. The research has shown that the story of the CEBs did not stop with Liberation Theology. It has shown that the CEBs are also a movement within the

³⁶⁰ Rumi, M. J. M. (1999) **Rumi, Whispers of the Beloved, Quatrains**. Selected and translated by Maryam Mafi and Azima Melita Kolin. London: Thorsons-Harper Collins Publishers. p. 71.

church for dialogue and inter-religious relations. At the core of the CEBs' theological concern is the Gospel of/for the poor. And also a concern with the question of how Christianity relates to ancient traditions of Africa and of *Ava* origins. In this way, the CEBs have been able to be permeable to traditions other than Christianity. In this there is meaning for their plural context; there is redemption for the way *Afro* and *Ava* have been treated in the history of Colonization; there is salvation for all; there is liberation of old prejudices, oppression and exclusion; and there is participation and communion where before there was prohibition and marginalization.

The CEBs is a movement of small groups. And each CEB is this, but the CEBs are also a network of those small groups; they are an organized movement within the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. We have looked at the efforts of the CEBs to continue within the Catholic Church. To that end they dealt politically with issues of naming their national gathering (as Inter-ecclesial of CEBs), and protocols of invitation and responsibilities for the gatherings. These were manoeuvres to avoid structural difficulties with the hierarchy. They recognized the political difficulties but they also acknowledged that in fact the Inter-ecclesial meetings are national events. The political consequence of this is the degree of autonomy of the CEBs. There is an ambiguity in the relationships between the CEBs and their tradition. That gives them some freedom and keeps them in communion with the bishops.

One conclusion possible from this is that the CEBs are heirs of the medieval religious order in the Roman Catholic Church. In their DNA there is a hint of the old

religious orders. The CEBs have relative autonomy, which permits the sort of internal life that can be found in the religious orders that are still present in the life of the church. The CEBs have a particular charisma, as has been demonstrated in this research. The CEBs have a particular emphasis on a spirituality linked with the struggles of life. They have a particular take on evangelization (see 5.3). They have their own internal organization, although still in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Part of their charisma is to call on the church for a reform directed to a more inclusive and permeable nature.

The comparison with a religious order seems appropriate, although the CEBs would be dissimilar to a religious order mainly because they do not have a rule of life or a discipline to keep them together. The fact that they are a lay movement and are dispersed in the world may distinguish them from religious orders, but not from other religious communities such as the *Iona Community*. Being dispersed and being of a lay charisma has led them to develop a much less hierarchical manner, with a horizontal way of being organized. This is manifest clearly in the lay leadership exercised in the national gatherings. In this sense they could not be considered a religious order within the church, but the point is that the relative autonomy they so carefully seek is no different from the relative autonomy a religious order would have. They operate within the same creative tension that can be found in religious orders in relation to the parish, the diocese, the bishop, and the Vatican.

This relationship of creative tension has at times descended into misunderstandings with some bishops (5.1), and in some extreme cases fear of persecution from the Vatican. Time and persistence from both parts suggest that there isn't anything heretical to justify animosity. From apostolic times, the life of the church in its many manifestations has been enriched by these creative movements of the Spirit that have their relative autonomy born out of the evangelization and inculturation processes, and out of inter-religious permeability. Although not always recognized, the church has historically related to local cultures, local struggles, and religions. This commitment to local contexts is what makes the church a universal and catholic movement. In this sense the CEBs are a movement that helps to preserve the catholicity of Christianity.

There is a cunning similarity to Methodism almost 300 years ago: small groups, a national (and international) network of small groups or societies, emphasis on social holiness or social justice, some difficulties in being accepted by the church authorities of the time, risk of pushing autonomy to becoming a rupture with the main body of the ecclesiastical structure. The difference is that John Wesley had two difficulties that he was unable to deal with without breaking away from the Anglican Church: the bishops and the parish structure. He could not convince most of the bishops to support Methodism. And he could not stretch the parish structure to cope with a movement that was more like a network threatening the boundaries of the parish system.

Geoffrey Wainwright, a Methodist who has chaired the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the World Methodist Council's Committee on Ecumenism and Dialogue, dealing with ecumenism within institutional Christianity in his book on *Methodism and Dialog (sic)*, describes dialogue as either: bilateral or multilateral dialogue. He points out that partners involved in "bilateral dialogue have discovered that they need a forum in which to compare and contrast progress and results." This is provided only by multilateral dialogue. He suggests that positive signs of good results in dialogue "are the borrowing of material which take place in multilateral dialogues."³⁶¹ I would suggest that 'borrowing of material' is precisely what is going on with the CEBs. But in the CEBs' case this is not of a doctrinal nature but of a symbolic and representational dimension. In the wider ecumenism of the CEBs, it is the usage of words, symbols, and gestures that are borrowed for a moment. This experience brings religious richness to those moments and leaves seeds for future exchange and cooperation. The charisma of the CEBs is two-fold on the Church of the Poor and also on the ability/spirituality to relate to other cultures and religions in a permeable way.

Wainwright further identifies four main features necessary for dialogue and relationship to take place. They are as follows:

"First, the partners must perceive from the start that a certain common ground exists between them in faith and practice." This common ground, Wainwright explains, may

³⁶¹ Wainwright, G. (1995) **Methodists in Dialog (sic)**. Nashville: Kingswood Books. p. 32.

vary and change in different cases, but “without a conceptual and a real meeting area” dialogue would not be possible, and part of the ecumenical task is to “map such territories, with a view to developing mutual recognition and joint action.”³⁶²

Wainwright continues, saying that “second, dialogue presupposes that there are interesting and important differences between the parties that require definition and resolution.” The dialogue in this case may help to show that these differences might be born of misunderstandings or that some of the differences are of a genuine and fundamental nature, dialogue can reveal that. Dialogue can also show perhaps that difference might be kept and used as a complementary feature. Whilst welcoming difference in these terms, Wainwright suggests that: “incompatible with dialogue is a pure unbounded pluralism that assumes the various positions to be either incommensurable or all without epistemic significance or salutary importance.”³⁶³

This is a cautious word against the diluting of identity and difference.

He asserts, thirdly, that for dialogue to be relevant, “the partners must have a goal in view.” The goal in formal dialogue - be it multilateral or bilateral - has specific and clearly defined purposes. He predicts that, “only as the dialogue progresses can the contours of the goal become sharpened.”³⁶⁴

³⁶² Wainwright, G. **Methodists**. p. 31.

³⁶³ Wainwright, G. **Methodists**. p. 31.

³⁶⁴ Wainwright, G. **Methodists**. p. 31.

Wainwright concludes this list by saying that the churches engaged in different ecumenical dialogues “need a forum in which to compare and contrast progress and results.”³⁶⁵

The experience of the CEBs, shown in this thesis, firstly leads us to enquire whether there is an extra feature to Wainwright’s categories, i.e., the necessary permeability to absorb at times significant symbols, rites, names, stories from other different groups be they cultural, linguistic, or religious. Taking this into account, I would suggest that the concept of permeability supersedes the four features described by Wainwright. Permeability supersedes his four categories because there is no need of any sort of more involved agreement in doctrinal forms. An ecumenism of permeability just allows interpenetration that is temporary and topical.

Our research suggests, secondly, that ecumenism of permeability is dependent on saving difference, celebrating diversity and enjoying spiritual richness. Wainwright’s concerns do not apply directly here because there is no diluting of identity, the opposite. Elements can be learned, can be incorporated, and indeed used from each other without meaning a long term ‘marriage’. The links can be tenuous and both partners still be renewed by each other’s strength, symbols and rites. There is no intention of any form of unity in question.

³⁶⁵ Wainwright, G. **Methodists**. p. 31.

Thirdly, in the case of the CEBs, permeability has indeed, and in agreement with Wainwright's points, a sharp aim and objective. In the relationship between CEBs and *Ava-Brazilian* traditions as well as with Afro-Brazilian religions there is an evident aim at hand: liberation, the struggle for justice and end to poverty and redistribution of land. Justice is their aim. Equality of rights is their real common ground. But this aim would be half of the experience of the CEBs, because the other half testifies to objectives and aims that have to do with participation, respect, and recognition of spiritual and religious riches (see 4.1). That leads to a distinctive ecumenism: the ecumenism of permeability.

The comparison with Wainwright might not be completely adequate as he is working with ecumenism within Christianity only. A well-known classification for inter-religious dialogue comes from the work of Alan Race, who has coined the triple nomenclature for the patterns in the Christian theology of inter-religious engagement: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism. He suggests that "Pluralism in the Christian theology of religions seeks to draw the faiths of the world's religious past into a mutual recognition of one another's truths and values."³⁶⁶ This research has shown that the CEBs have taken a step forward beyond that mutual recognition. The CEBs have been able to go beyond pluralism, beyond recognizing other religion's truths and values, as the CEBs allowed Afro and the *Ava* traditions and popular religiosity to slot into the Christian Liturgy. Furthermore, the CEBs have allowed priests and representatives of those different religions and traditions to be present in their

³⁶⁶ Race, A. (1983) **Christians and Religious Pluralism, Patterns in the Christian theology of religions**. London: SCM. p. 148.

national gatherings and contribute to parts of the liturgy. These priests and representatives were welcomed and given the chance to be at the altar, to perform some of the dances and sing the songs, and to give blessings in their particular way (see 3.1.1, 3.1.2). In that manner the CEBs have gone beyond a pluralistic approach to different religions. They have entered into a relationship of permeability and interpenetration. In it, the CEBs have retained their identity and allowed space for the others to retain theirs. They have been able to celebrate their faiths together, and to receive and give in symbolic exchange and in an accepting environment.

Race warns against the dangers of identifying religion with race and encourages inter-religious dialogue to cross barriers of race (I prefer the term ethnicity) and reach cross-cultural dimensions.³⁶⁷ This cross-cultural dimension is present in the religious field in Brazil. Some of the features of conviviality of difference amongst the cultures of Afro-Ava-White Portuguese religiosity had been incubating in the Brazilian context for centuries, but it is only now with the CEBs' ecumenism of permeability that it has been able to come to the light of day. The three stages identified in the periodization of the CEBs' national gatherings shows the complex processes involved before the achievement of such a development (see 2.1). This research also reveals a simple model for ecumenical encounters of permeability: welcome, celebrating cultural differences, allowing slotting in of symbolic contributions, seeking commonality in the struggles, sharing blessing and peace (see 3.1.1).

³⁶⁷ See, Race, A. **Christians and Religious Pluralism**. London: SCM. The Chapter on Pluralism. pp. 70-105.

This ecumenism of permeability is a further contribution from the CEBs to the world church in addition to the well-known Theology of Liberation. There is more to be learned from the CEBs' ecumenical practices than it was possible to explore in this thesis. If the theological community could engage with what is happening in terms of the ecumenism of permeability in the national gatherings of the CEBs in Brazil, albeit critically, perhaps this could be a seed for pointing ways ahead in terms of inter-religious dialogue.

The CEBs' practices suggest also permeability as an added category to those of Alan Race. The CEBs prove themselves to be permeable in relation to other religions and cultural spheres, and also in relation to secular political ideologies. A permeable attitude to other religions learns from the other, comprehends things, and embraces what can be incorporated. On the other hand, the logic of impermeability is the opposite, it rejects, judges, and excludes. Its main principle is suspicion. It accuses others of not being or having any truth in them. An ecumenism of permeability accepts differences and allows faith hospitality and welcome. This ecumenism of permeability practised by the CEBs has biblical roots (see 6.2.2). It denotes also a wider history of salvation (see 6.2.1). A perception of an inclusive history of salvation is the starting point for an ecumenism of permeability.

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