The Radical Roots of Peruvian Seventh-day Adventism

by Charles Teel
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Charles Teel, professor of Christian ethics in the School of Religion, La Sierra University, and a member of the Ethics Center at Loma Linda University, has written liturgies and more than one essay in Spectrum *on the relationship of apocalyptic to social reform. In the late 1980s, Teel discovered that the revered missionaries, Fernando and Ana Stahl, had been such successful social reformers that they permanently transformed the social and political structure of Peru's highlands. In addition to taking study tours to Latin America, Teel established The Stahl Center for World Missions at La Sierra University, Riverside, California 92515 (909) 785-2041. It is currently involved in an international AIDS project for children.*

Four generations of Seventh-day Adventists: Seated right, with necklace, Marietta Walker Aldrich. At the age of 15, Marietta was hired by James White as one of the first three typesetters at the Review and Herald Publishing Association. Later, she was a kindergarten superintendent in the Battle Creek church. Her husband, Homer Aldrich, served as press foreman at the Review and Herald for 33 years, and her father, Eli S. Walker, was the first treasurer of the General Conference. Her father-in-law, Jotham M. Aldrich, chaired the meeting that organized the first General Conference session. Photo courtesy of Madeline Johnston. Vol. 20, No. 2 (December 1989).

Fernando and Ana Stahl, converts to Seventh-day Adventism as young adults in the midwestern United States, volunteered for a mission appointment to South America during the first decade of this century. When the church told them it could not finance their passage, the Stahls paid their own way and that of their two children. The family left Main Street, U.S.A., and landed in Bolivia in the year 1909. In the capital of Bolivia, La Paz, and its environs, Ana bartered her professional skills as a nurse to the social elite and served the destitute. Fernando stumbled about indigenous villages, intuitively exploring what it meant to be a missionary. He first attempted to missionize by selling religious magazines. He soon discovered that the indigenous population could not read. More importantly, he came to realize that the privileged classes, in order to maintain their social and economic advantages, had every reason to keep these peoples uneducated. By 1911 magazine peddling had taken a back seat to establishing schools. It was in this same year that the Stahls located on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca and linked up with Manuel Camacho, an indigenous visionary and early Adventist convert.

Cacique Amauta Manuel Zunega Camacho Alca lived no ordinary life. Accounts identifying him as a descendent of revolutionary Tupac Amaru are open to question, but that he embraced revolutionary causes, filed countless memorials, and led numerous delegations on behalf of the indigenous movement is beyond dispute. No less indisputable is the fact that his

early forays beyond the altiplano to Iquique, Arequipa, Meyieu, Culiluinia, and Chile offered contacts with Protestantism and education, reinforced his fiercely independent spirit, and fed his passion to mediate salvation to the peasants or campesinos of the altiplano: "The only sure way of salvation from the subjugation in which we find ourselves is learning to read," he wrote.

Accordingly, Camacho returned to the Platería soil of his early years to enact his vision. Immediately he faced fierce opposition from the *mestizo* overlords. In 1898 Camacho had the temerity to conduct classes for 25 adult indigenous peoples, albeit behind closed doors—"de una manera clandestina." About four years later he founded a free school in his Utawilaya, Platería, home. Valiantly but vainly he tried to keep the school open in the face of bribes, threats, terror, beatings, arrests, and imprisonments. (An Aymara-speaking Maryknoll priest in Platería—who assisted the local Adventist pastor at the funeral of Camacho's son, Victor—volunteered that contemporary Catholics as well as Adventists view Camacho as a "Christ-figure." They still vividly remember ecclesiastical and civil authorities confronting Camacho at his school and leading him to jail with his "hands lashed together behind his back.") Stahl's editor makes a spiritual as well as temporal statement in identifying this indigenous activist as "the beginning of the Lake Titicaca Mission." . . .

Stahl might not have been able to articulate a cogent academic definition of a "near-feudal social system," the term employed by historians to describe the altiplano at the beginning of the century. Yet in his book, *In the Land of the Incas*, published in 1920 in English and later in Spanish, Stahl clearly pinpoints an unholy and unjust alliance of town judge, village priest, and wealthy landowner. Leaving Ana in charge at Platería, assisted by Manuel Camacho and his young protégé Luciano Chambi, Fernando embraced the indigenous altiplano as his parish. For a full decade, the Stahls traveled by muleback, horseback, and later on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, to establish schools, chapels, clinics, and free-standing markets.

In the schools, only the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught. Still, as one chronicler pointed out: "That was enough to enable the Indians to read God's word and to avoid being cheated in the marketplace. In the clinics and in the mud huts of the Aymara and the Quechua peoples, the Stahls together set bones, soothed fevers, pulled teeth, lanced boils, amputated limbs, and delivered babies.

In the free-standing markets established by the Stahls, entrepreneurial students not only utilized their newly acquired mathematical skills, but also escaped the domination of their *mestizo* overlords and the hacienda company store. In the chapels, worshipers were invited to accept the Good News that God loved them on the basis of their own personhood, rather than on the merit of religious systems and intermediating functionaries. Imbibing alcohol at the fiestas and paying taxes to the village priests for feast days, baptisms, weddings, christening, and other rites, were replaced by clean living and simple worship.

The activities of Adventists in the Lake Titicaca basin provide valuable insights into how Protestantism has been a force for social change in Latin America, functioning as a reforming and progressive movement, which contributed to reordering the social and political structure of the Peruvian highlands.

A tabulation of students, schools, churches, and members suggests that vast numbers welcomed the Stahls' ministry. The Adventist educational system came to entirely encircle Lake Titicaca and include as many as 200 schools. These ranged from humble village home schools to large boarding institutions. By 1916, 2,000 students were registered in 19 schools; by 1924, 4,000 in 80 schools; and by 1947, a high of nearly 7,000 students in 109 schools. Stahls successor, E. H. Wilcox, reported that on one unforgettable day, 12 requests for schools arrived from indigenous villages. . . .

Numerous progressives remarked about the contrasts between the Stahl's method of evangelization and that of the priests'. Francisco Mostajo, a liberal spokesperson from Arequipa, observed that while Puno's priests planned religious feasts, their Protestant counterparts established clinics and schools. Mostajo's colleague Ernesto Reyna agreed that while the Protestant leaders taught and healed, their Catholic counterparts sang masses and planned fiestas. Anticlerical Manuel Gonzalez Prada—in a rare compliment to organized religion of any stripe—noted approvingly that whereas the Jesuits contented

themselves with teaching the wealthy elite while enjoying the comforts of Lima, the Adventists braved the rigors of the altiplano to teach the disinherited classes. Educator and politician José Antonio Encinas wryly observed that whereas the village priests worked to save souls, Stahl worked to save lives. And in 1916, after a particularly savage attack in which the Stahls barely escaped with their lives, Catholic citizens took to the press in the Stahls' defense. They disparagingly contrasted the "two Yankees, who generously cure sickness, dispense remedies, and teach the people to read, gratis," with "the priests [who] have kept the native race in the most deplorable and inhuman conditions" for more than three centuries. . . .

Near the end of the Stahls' tenure in the altiplano, José Antonio Encinas led the call for a commission to investigate local abuses and instigate reforms. The call was answered affirmatively by an executive decree of June 19, 1920. . . .

When the commission arrived in a tense Azangaro, they were met by fully 8,000 such greeters, also massed in military formation. Nervous landowners wired Lima for troop reinforcements and at least one local *Indigenista* leader was placed in preventive detention. Newspaper accounts report that the local power interests debated whether the same fate ought not to befall Fernando Stahl. . . .

In recent decades, researchers from South America, North America, and Europe have swarmed upon the altiplano to pursue research in disciplines ranging from anthropology to zoology. A number of these investigators, while pursuing their particular areas of study, have given more than a nod to Adventism's presence in Puno. Within the past decade, two researchers—Ted Lewellen, a University of Colorado anthropologist, and Dan Hazen, a Yale University Latin Americanist—have devoted the most extensive attention yet to the Adventist experience. . . .

In documenting Adventism's impact on Puno, Hazen asserts that "Adventists have consistently been in the forefront of change in the altiplano." Hazen thinks that Adventists enjoyed an edge in achieving reform because "the missionaries combined appeals for individual salvation with a broad-based program of medical, educational, and market facilities open to all." Moving from the subject of programs to implementation, Hazen cites the Adventist "organization, attitude, and ability to get things done" as factors that enabled Adventism to be" one of the major inputs for change in early-century Puno. He supports this assertion by explaining that: (1) the missionaries minimized imposition by only expanding on villager requests; (2) doctrinal controversies were played down in favor of new standards of hygiene, temperance, health care, and morality; (3) literacy was actively fostered as students read from the Bible and Peruvian texts; (4) religion was taught, but it did not dominate the curriculum; (5) Adventist instruction was generally better-regarded than state efforts; (6) native workers were quickly trained and put to work in schools and churches; and (7) finally,

> Adventist missionaries carried with them a willingness to seek new answers. They also embodied a less status-conscious life style than local *mestizos* and whites.

Hazen concludes simply: "The members addressed one another as 'hermano' and 'hermana' or 'brother' and 'sister.'" . . .

The activities of the Adventists in the Lake Titicaca basin provide valuable insights into how Protestantism has been a force for social change in predominantly Roman Catholic Latin America. Here, beginning with the leadership of Camacho and the Stahls, Adventism functioned as a reforming and progressive movement, which contributed to reordering the social and political structure of the Peruvian highlands. In effect, this altiplano Adventism—grounded in indigenous schooling—may demonstrate for Latin America an alternative to both an authoritarian status quo and violent revolution.

Large SDA Churches: Adventism's Silent Majority

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When we think of the standard local church experience for North American Adventists, most of us have a picture of a few dozen