

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY IN LATIN AMERICA*

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ABSTRACT

The public face of religion in Latin America has been transformed in the last half century, with important implications for the future. The Christianity of the future will be marked by vigorous competition and growing pluralism in an increasingly open and competitive civil society and political order. The origins of this diversity are located in changes within the region's long dominant Catholicism, combined with the surge of new Protestant and in particular Pentecostal churches. Both of these trends make sense in the context of social and political transformations that have moved major countries of the region out of civil war and authoritarianism into civil and competitive politics which draw the churches into public space in new ways. The impact of violence on the churches is visible in their new openness to issues of rights and freedom of organization, but also in a withdrawal from direct political engagement and a diversification of political positions in all the churches.

RESUMEN

La cara pública de la religión en América Latina ha sido transformada en la última mitad de siglo, con importantes implicancias para el futuro. La cristiandad del futuro estará marcada por una competición vigorosa y un creciente pluralismo en una sociedad civil y un orden político cada vez más abiertos y competitivos. Los orígenes de esta diversidad se encuentran en los cambios dentro del Catolicismo largamente dominante de la región, combinado con el surgimiento de nuevas iglesias Protestantes, en particular, Pentecostales. Ambas tendencias adquieren sentido en el contexto de transformaciones sociales y políticas que han desplazado a países importantes de la región de la guerra civil y el autoritarismo hacia la política competitiva, lo que atrae a las iglesias hacia el espacio público en nuevas formas. El impacto de la violencia sobre las iglesias se ve en la nueva apertura hacia cuestiones de derechos y libertad de organización, pero también en un retiro del compromiso político directo y una diversificación de las posiciones políticas de todas las iglesias.

Writing about the future of Christianity in Latin America reminds me of a comment by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez who some time ago wrote: “At present we are in the position of those trying to decide whom a newborn child resembles. Some will say the father, others the mother. Some will even find that the child has this grandfather’s nose or that aunt’s eyes, whereas still others will be of the opinion that the child does not remind them of any family features known to them. Better to photograph the child and decide later on whom it resembles” (Gutiérrez, 1984, 92). A photograph I took almost forty years ago may be a good place to start.



The photograph records my first encounter with an evangelical street preacher in Latin America, which came in 1968, in the Guatemalan market town of Solalá. The market was in full swing, and in the midst of people buying, selling, and bargaining, a Protestant preacher was working the crowd. The majority of Guatemalans are Indians, the audience was entirely made up of Indian men and women, and the speaker, I remember, was preaching the Gospel in Kakchiquel, the language of the region. Holding a Bible in his hands, he illustrated his sermon by pointing to a hand-painted canvas that depicted

heaven, hell, the judgment of the nations, the temptations of this world, and the ways of the righteous and of the sinner. I found the scene stirring enough to save the slide for more than three decades, but at the time it seemed little more than an interesting sideshow. The religious experience was new, as was the leadership: ordinary, often non-white,¹ and barely lettered men using a popular language, who recall the circuit-riding preachers of nineteenth-century North America. The signs were there, but they slipped by most observers. None of it fitted into the accepted scheme of things at the time.

From the vantage point of 2007, it is easy to see this preacher as a precursor of the wave of Protestant, especially Pentecostal Protestant religion that swept Guatemala and all of Central America in subsequent years (Chesnut, 1997, 2003; Garrard-Burnett, 1998, 2004; Steigenga, 2001; Stoll, 1990, 1993). He and others like him have since then gone on to transform the religious landscape and the public presence of religion throughout Latin America. The five-hundred-year monopoly of Catholicism has been replaced by religious pluralism. Particularly in the big cities (and Latin America is a heavily urban continent), the religious scene is a blooming confusion of churches, chapels, street preachers, and television and radio evangelists competing for attention and vying for members and a share of public goods and public space. To make sense of this dramatic change, it helps to be clear about our starting point. I begin therefore with a look at Catholicism in Latin America, where it came from and how it got to be the way it is today.

CATHOLICISM IN LATIN AMERICA

Catholicism came to Latin America through conquest and occupation by the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms. The extension of the faith to newly conquered territories is in a real sense a continuation of the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors, which terminated with the surrender of Granada to the Catholic Kings in 1492. It was in Granada that Ferdinand and Isabella met Columbus and authorized his voyage. This excerpt from the documents that accompanied Columbus on his first voyage (preserved in the monastery of La Rábida in Spain²) conveys the fusion of faith and political power present from the beginning:

Mandamos estas tres carabellas armadas	We send these three armed caravels
Por mares oceános	On the ocean seas in pursuit
Por causa de algunos negocios concernientes	Of certain interests relating to
A la difusión de la palabra divina	The spread of the divine word
Y aumento de la fé ortodoxa	And increase of the orthodox faith
Y también en provecho y utilidad nuestros	And also for our benefit and profit

Yo el rey	I the King
Yo la reina	I the Queen

This foundational link between religion and political power meant that for at least four-fifths of its more than 500-year history, Catholicism in Latin America has been a religion of domination, of entrenched power, privilege, and property, which monopolized religious expression, suppressed other forms of worship (or incorporated them through syncretic adaptations),³ wielded extensive influence over governments and education, and occupied or at least competed with other elite groups to occupy many key social roles. The close ties between the Church and royal power continued with independence as most new national governments claimed for themselves the rights of patronage (control over appointment of bishops), and made official provision for the support of clergy and the maintenance of churches. Church-state conflict was a frequent theme of political conflict in the nineteenth century as, for example, in Liberals-Conservative struggles in Colombia, Mexico, or much of Central America,⁴ but these were often as much about property as about the proper role of the Church in the new states.

Transformations over time in the situation, the self-perception, and the organizational context of the Catholic Church and how they shape its relations to different challengers become clear if we look over the whole historical period. In juridical terms, the Church was closely linked with and subordinate to royal power throughout the colonial period. In return for guarantees of religious monopoly and support of its institutions, the Church returned cultural affirmation and loyalty to the established authority.⁵ This alliance begins to crack with independence. In some areas, lower clergy were prominent in the independence movements (Mexico is a notable example) but almost everywhere independence ushered in a struggle for control over church privileges and properties, often conflated with the political conflict of Liberals and Conservatives that dominated much of the nineteenth century.

The Catholic Church remained dominant well into the twentieth century and its monopoly had official sanction in most places. But to borrow the language of economics, the absence of competition made the Catholic Church a lazy monopolist, one that did little to ensure the vitality of its day-to-day operations, leaving it vulnerable to new forms of competition—including innovative religious expression—that begin to appear with growing force as the twentieth century passed its midpoint. Although this broad-brush portrait is generally true, it is excessively monochromatic and obscures important differences within the Catholic community (between bishops and central Church officials on the one hand, and religious orders on the other, for example) across nations and regions and over time.

Latin American Catholicism entered the twentieth century still a monopolist but internally weak and vulnerable. New challenges arose: the aggressive anticlericalism of the Mexican Revolution, the birth and extension of socialism, and new versions of liberalism that competed with the Church for the loyalties of elites and masses alike. The Catholic Church's initial response was much like its reaction to the loss of the working class in Europe: a combination of the aggressive promotion of Catholic Action movements among professionals, students, unions, and peasant groups with an attempt to reaffirm political ties with elites, either through existing Conservative parties or through the promotion of new integralist movements. After World War II and with growing force beginning in the late 1960s, these movements and alliances entered into terminal decline.

There are three principal reasons. First, Catholic Action movements were no longer able to command the loyalty of an increasingly urban, educated, and media-soaked population while maintaining the kind of close clerical control and supervision insisted on by the hierarchy. At the same time, new ideological currents began to appear within the Church itself, inspired by the changes initiated at the Second Vatican Council and carried forward with great innovative vigor in Latin America itself by a new generation of theologians, clerical leaders, and lay activists. Christian Democratic parties, although often created in earlier years, consolidated in this period as a place where an alliance between Catholic activists and democracy could be sustained. Such parties managed to gain power in several countries.⁶ More radical movements, with Christian Marxist alliances and roots in what came to be known as liberation theology, followed soon after.⁷

These tendencies were given added impetus by political changes that destroyed democracy in major countries, closing ordinary pathways to civil organization and politics. The result was to drive many into the churches in search of protection and a place (often literally) to meet.

Combined with ideological and organizational changes already underway within the Church, the net result was to make Catholic institutions in key countries like Chile, Brazil, or Peru into major proponents of civil society, protectors of democracy and defenders of human rights.⁸ With the restoration of democracies across the region in the late 1980s and the 1990s, many in the Church hierarchy withdrew from this role in order to focus on rebuilding their own structures, consolidating their base (in order to compete more effectively with Protestants), and reemphasizing traditional elements of piety and morality. The result was to cut many grassroots groups off from the support on which they had long depended (Levine, 2005; Stewart-Gambino, 2005).

The appearance of vigorous new religious competitors altered the equation for many in the Church hierarchy. As Protestant and especially Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches begin to gain notable strength across the region starting in the late 1970s, Catholic leadership (including hierarchies as well as those active in Church-sponsored or related institutions) worked on several lines: they strove to reinforce the Church's own institutions and "purify" practices of syncretic accretions; they searched for forms of religious practice that would be less dependent on the presence of clergy; and in conscious response to the techniques that were visibly associated with the success of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches, they made efforts to move into mass media and created new movements centered on charismatic practice. The next section sets these efforts in context.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE OLD AND NEW

In terms of worship, belief systems, and ordinary practices, the most general characteristic of Latin American Catholicism over the long span of its history is a pattern of occasional practice, heavy devotion to saints and shrines, and syncretism manifest in everything from the incorporation of preconquest calendars or deities into Catholic devotions, the persistence of traditional beliefs about healing, and sporadic bouts of

reform. Such reform movements typically strove to control antinomian behavior (especially alcoholism) associated with the ritual cycle of fiestas and saints' days, to ensure a more Christocentric worship in place of "excessive" devotion to saints, and to purify "popular" religion and syncretic practices. Over the centuries such campaigns had at best partial and short-lived success. The fact that Catholic practice remained dependent on the availability of ordained clergy, and that ordained clergy were scarce in most countries and very unevenly distributed in the best of cases, reinforced the pattern of occasional practice.

Devotion to saints and commemoration of apparitions is of course widespread in Catholicism and in the case of Latin America dates back as far as the Virgin of Guadalupe, who appeared miraculously to Juan Diego on a hill outside of what is now Mexico City on December 12, 1531, not long after the conquest of Mexico by Cortez. Long venerated as the patron saint of Mexico, this brown-skinned virgin is a perfect incarnation of the absorption of the faith into the life and culture of subordinate peasant masses. In addition to promoting devotions, the conquering Spaniards and Portuguese also freely resorted to forced conversions, and destruction of traditional worship sites and sacred books, the most famous cases being the burning of Mayan codices and the melting of Incan images into gold ingots. But within a century of the conquest, a more regular pattern was consolidated that depended above all on administrative control and ordinary coercion rather than extraordinary acts of conquest. A related element deeply entrenched in the traditional Catholicism of the region was racism, with clerical status everywhere restricted to whites of legitimate birth, a pattern that persisted well into the twentieth century.

To the portrait sketched out here—of a white clerical elite allied with state power and administering religion in sporadic doses to a subordinate non-white [Indian, mixed, African American] mass—two elements must be added. The first concerns the development of institutions affiliated with the Church, above all schools at all levels and health services. The Catholic Church early staked a claim to a key role in education, both as provider and overseer, and has continued to claim that role up to the present day. This entailed the pressing of demands on the state for financial and material support of all kinds, and for arrangements that permitted the unhindered importation of clergy and

religious personnel. The Church was very reliant on state support for the livelihood of its personnel and the maintenance of its buildings. The second element has to do with the maldistribution of clergy noted earlier. Clergy and religious personnel (nuns and brothers) were and are heavily concentrated in educational and health institutions, and in a network of elite secondary schools and Catholic higher education developed on the continent that was a consistent source of elite training and status. Even in the period when most of Latin America remained rural, these facilities tended to be concentrated in the major cities. As the region urbanized at an ever more rapid pace through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this urban and class bias of personnel and institutions grew more marked. By the 1960s and 1970s it became a source of contention within the Church as major elements in the clergy, inspired in one form or another by liberation theology, made a conscious decision to “opt for the people,” leaving institutional life. In Latin America as elsewhere in the Catholic world, clergy numbers took a substantial hit in these decades.

The effort to craft alternative, less clerically dependent forms of practice has had sporadic success. Two specific cases warrant attention here: base ecclesial communities and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Beginning in the 1970s, small group-based practices based on lay leadership begin to appear throughout the region. These go by different names but are commonly referred to as base ecclesial communities or CEBs (from the Spanish, *comunidades eclesiales de base*).⁹ In theory, such communities recreate aspects of the primitive church (“wherever two or three are gathered in my name”) and despite differences they share a common pattern of reading the Bible, reflecting on its meaning, and organizing some form of community action out of the solidarities and shared understandings derived from those readings. The groups are at bottom religious, of course, but in the social and political context of the time, they were seen by many as a potential source for new forms of social and political action and a seedbed for new leadership. There is an enormous literature that examines the theory and reality of CEBs and their links to liberation theology (Hewitt, 1986, 1991; Levine 1992) and this is not the place for a detailed discussion. For present purposes, it suffices to make three points. First, because the concept of the CEB was so vague (community groups centered on the Bible), there was a tendency to count almost any small group as

part of the category. The result is that numbers are exceptionally unreliable. Further, because the groups were and remained at root religious in inspiration, they often failed to meet the expectations of secular analysts or political figures who saw them above all as potential allies. At bottom these expectations rested on the idea that something like a congregational model of religion was emerging here with small groups reading and discussing the Bible, and in the process learning valuable civic and social skills (social capital). The newly emerging citizen was nurtured here and in religiously related social movements and could then put the new skills and activist dispositions to work in broader areas. The trends applied both to Catholics and, as we shall see, later to the newly visible Protestant sector. The perspective is deeply Tocquevillian and inspiring (Levine, 1992; Ireland, 1999). David Martin (1990), among others, found echoes of the cultural transformations associated with the Reformation.

The passage of time and the accumulation of empirical research has cast doubt on the validity of these expectations. As Harris reminds us in his work on African American religion and politics, participatory ideals can find it hard to survive within theocratic structures (Harris, 1999, 183). Many of the movements created in recent years failed and many activists found their expectations blocked, both within the Church and, ironically, by the restoration of democracy that led activists to turn to more direct political action and Church leaders to retreat from open support (Drogus and Stewart-Gambino, 2005; Levine and Romero, 2004). At the same time, the strong growth of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches, often led by a new generation of religious entrepreneurs running notoriously tight and hierarchical ships, has undermined the belief that the growth of Protestantism would necessarily mean the spread of congregational forms of religious practice, and its associated impact on the democratization of culture and religion, not to mention politics. French sociologist Jean Pierre Bastian (1997) takes the argument further. He argues that far from laying the bases of a new Reformation with democratizing cultural and political elements, the expansion of Pentecostal Christianity in Latin America has reinforced existing cultural and political strains of authoritarianism. In his view, the prominent role of leader-founders of the new churches—such as Brazil's Edir Macedo of the Universal Church of the Reign of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, or IURD)—works with and exemplifies conventional currents of authoritarian

leadership in the culture, reinforcing them with new and highly effective tools including creative use of the mass media. The powerful dramaturgy of much Neopentecostal practice, and the way in which it reinforces the power of priests and cuts down on spaces for congregational practice and experience reinforce this view. In this vein, Kramer (2005, 104) quotes an IURD bishop describing the priest as “super hero of the people,” “an example of Christian prosperity and dominion [who] wields the universal power of Christian prayer on behalf of the community.”¹⁰

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) appears in Latin America as early as the 1970s, but did not gain strength for some time.¹¹ The movement stemmed from initiatives in the United States that combined Pentecostal practices of baptism in the Holy Spirit with core Catholic devotions such as to the Virgin Mary and the saints. As the Vatican and local episcopal conferences began to be alarmed by the spread of Pentecostal Protestantism, initial caution among the hierarchy turned to support and sponsorship that was more open, if still tempered with concerns about the need to maintain hierarchical control and clerical supervision. The movement has spread rapidly in the last twenty years, bringing what Chesnut refers to as “pneumacentric” experiences and practices common among Pentecostals (including divine healing, exorcisms, and glossolalia) into a prominent place in Catholic experience. The CCR has also moved into television, challenging Pentecostals on the small screen with televised masses as well as religious dramas. The next section looks closely at the emergence of Protestant, Pentecostal, and Neopentecostal Christianity in Latin America.

RELIGIOUS ALTERNATIVES TO CATHOLICISM

From the beginning, there have been religious alternatives to Catholicism, but for the reasons outlined earlier, they were often suppressed, hidden, or incorporated with syncretic Catholic practices. Three alternatives with noteworthy visibility in the twentieth century are Spiritism (in Brazil), Afro Brazilian (*Macumba*, *Umbanda*, *Candomblé*) and Afro Caribbean devotions (*Santeria*), and of course Protestantism, which itself has gone through at least three waves of change. Apart from the Brazilian cases, there has been no significant non-Christian religious alternative (unless one includes the recent growth of Mormonism, whose classification as Christian is a matter of some dispute). There is a

small Jewish community scattered across the region (with large communities only in Argentina) and insignificant numbers of Muslims and Hindus, mostly attached to immigrant communities. Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a sector self-described as “Catholic in my own way” (*católico en mi manera*) and of those declaring no religion at all (Parker, 2005; Mallimaci 2005). I concentrate below on the evolution of Protestantism, which displays spectacular growth patterns beginning at the end of the last century.

The emergence of Protestantism as an alternative and significant competitor to the longstanding Catholic monopoly has taken various forms. The Protestant presence in Latin America dates well back into the nineteenth century, but for many years remained limited to churches that serviced immigrant communities—English Anglicans or Methodists, German Lutherans and the like. Protestant churches and missionaries were also invited in particular cases by notably anticlerical governments, as part of their dual campaign against the local power of the Catholic Church and their desire to “civilize” their own country by making it more appealing to Northern European (white and Protestant) immigrants.¹² There were also longstanding Protestant missionary efforts, mostly directed at remote, rural, and primarily Indian populations, either in the Amazon or Orinoco basins or in Mesoamerican or Andean mountain ranges. In the course of the twentieth century, and with growing emphasis during the post–World War II period, Protestant churches and missionary groups redirected their attention to populations in urban areas, which is, after all, where the people are.

Some of these efforts begin much earlier than is commonly realized. The birth of the Pentecostal movement, following the Asuza Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906, was brought to Latin America not long after, with Swedish missionaries of the Assemblies of God arriving in the city of Belém in northern Brazil in 1910. The name of Pará (a state in the north of Brazil) appeared to Daniel Berg and Gunner Vingren in a vision, and after finding it on a map, they moved to fulfill the prophecy and, “arrayed in wool suits, the two Swedish missionaries arrived in the torrid climate of Belém on November, 19, 1910” (Chesnut, 1997, 26).¹³ Pentecostal Christianity has experienced its own waves of change. As Kramer noted for Brazil, each wave came with a distinctive style: the first wave (1910–1950), arriving with early Swedish missionaries of the

Assemblies of God, stressed speaking in tongues; the second wave (1950–1970) emphasized gifts of divine healing; and the third wave, including the hugely influential Church of the Universal Reign of God (IURD), which has moved massively and with great success into the use of television, “privileges the concept of spiritual warfare (visibly enacted through exorcistic ritual) and prosperity theology” (Kramer 2005, 97).

All across the region, the last three decades or so have witnessed substantial growth of homegrown churches, with local leaders and local resources. Several of the most well-known instances come from Brazil.¹⁴ There is the IURD, founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1977 by Edir Macedo. The Universal is generally viewed as Neopentecostal and syncretic, combining elements of local religious practice (such as Umbanda) with classic Pentecostal beliefs and practices, with heavy emphasis on health and healing, exorcism of demons, and a promise of prosperity through faith. The IURD has grown rapidly in its thirty years of existence to the point where it controls major media resources and now has begun to send missionaries to other countries. The IURD is not alone among Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches in Brazil: other large foundations include the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular), established in 1955 with links to the famous North American evangelist Aimée Semple McPherson; Brazil for Christ (Brasil Para Cristo, or BPC) established in 1955; and God is Love (Deus É Amor) established in 1962. These churches, and others that began to appear and gain adherents (albeit in less spectacular fashion) in other countries, have several elements in common: an astute use of the media, radio, and particularly television to promote crusades and evangelization campaigns; incorporation of local music, intense use of exorcism (referred to in the IURD as *libertação* or liberation) as a central element in ritual practice; emphasis on divine cure; and in cases like the IURD or the Foursquare, an explicit rejection of the separation of the community of the pure, asceticism, and limits in favor of achievement and integration into the rhythms of ordinary urban life.¹⁵

The dramatic staging characteristic of some Neopentecostal churches is a significant part of their public impact. This is compounded by astute use of the media and regular public rituals of exorcism (in Portuguese, *descarreço*—literally discharging or unlocking, that is, releasing a person from a spiritual affliction caused by possession). All of these elements greatly enhance the power of the pastor who is the medium for

channeling, through the congregation, the divine power that makes release possible (Kramer, 2005).

Earlier I noted the creation and growth of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Catholicism's own version of the appeal and techniques that have driven the success of Pentecostal rivals. But more than imitation is at issue here. Steigenga (2001) has documented a general pattern of "Pentecostalization" of religious belief and practice. He finds elements like the direct experience of charismatic power, a judgmental image of God, premillenarian beliefs, speaking in tongues, and certain kinds of music to be widely diffused in the Christian community. There are also characteristic patterns of group organization and leadership, with emphasis on equal access to the gifts of the spirit for all, men and women alike. The spread of such churches throughout the region is both a product of deregulation of the religious sphere and a spur to further competition in the more open social and cultural market that has accompanied accelerated urbanization, the diffusion of radio and television, and the return to democracy with associated lower barriers to organization.

The resulting pluralization of religious offerings is part of the emergence of a public space that is more open and diverse than ever before. It is now common in major cities to see old cinemas converted into new Pentecostal churches while at the same time the churches themselves construct massive, new purpose-built places of worship. Protestant expansion has also benefited from a byproduct of global political change. One consequence of the end of the Cold War has been to turn the evangelizing energies of many North American churches to building organizations and winning souls in the former socialist bloc. Resources were directed away from Latin America, making it easier for local leaders and local foundations, already emergent, to consolidate their positions. (Chesnut, 1997, 2003; López, 1998, 2004; Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2005)

The obvious question to ask is why Protestantism, and in particular this specific form of Protestantism, should have enjoyed such a boom. Why here (in these countries and among these populations) and why at this moment in history? From many competing explanations, I want to focus on three.¹⁶ There is the continuing appeal of divine healing and the possibility of a change in the way life is lived for women and men with urgent physical and emotional needs, suffering from what Chesnut calls the pathogens of

poverty—alcoholism, violence (including domestic violence), gastrointestinal disease, and status marginality. There is the further appeal of literacy and new forms of community to populations literally on the move, above all recent migrants to the periphery of major cities all across the continent. These must be set in the context of the appeal of new faiths and the community they bring as a way of opting out of the extremes of violence associated with internal war (as in Central America or Peru), state repression, or simply with the precarious conditions of the life that poor people lead in urban slums and squatter settlements, including gang warfare, the constant threat of assault, and drugs. Sometimes these go together, but whether joined or separate, the common thread to note is that conversion to the new churches is a bridge to a different life, a kind of forward-looking contract between the convert and the church (and its leaders). *Pare de Sufrir*, Stop Suffering, as the signs visible everywhere say, is a powerful call to people who are in fact suffering the effects of poverty, dislocation, and violence.¹⁷ I return to the impact of violence below.

The experience of Guatemala, a leading case of Protestant growth in the region, is apposite here. Garrard-Burnett, whose book on Protestantism in Guatemala (1998) is subtitled “Living in the New Jerusalem,” sees the explosive growth in the number and variety of small, independent (and heavily Pentecostal) churches following the devastating Guatemalan earthquake of 1976 and the onslaught of violence in the subsequent decade as a response to the surrounding chaos and violence. In this context, she writes, “premillenarianism offered an explanation and a rationale for the appalling destruction and promised the believer a better life in the next world—which in Guatemala in the early 1980s, seemed very close at hand” (Garrard-Burnett, 1998, 155). Under the brief but bloody rule of the Protestant president General Efraín Ríos Montt, she continues:

The howling forces of modernization, violence and community disintegration that drove people into Protestant churches accelerated dramatically. Where political and economic change had weakened the power of local sources of authority as the century progressed, Ríos Montt sometimes eliminated them entirely. Where the Catholic Church’s spiritual hegemony ebbed through the twentieth century and fragmented into competing bits, Ríos Montt’s very public membership [in The Church of the Word, a North American Pentecostal

import] served notice that new types of religious membership were there to fill the void.” (161)

The extreme quality of violence in a case like Guatemala should not lead us to see conversion as no more than an escapist response to dislocation. There is also a sense of healing through atonement, “which roughly translates into empowerment on earth through proper faith in God. Closely related is the belief that material prosperity is the entitlement of the faithful: money, good health, and security are all tangible evidence of God’s benediction” (Garrard-Burnett, 1998, 164).¹⁸ Within this context of crisis (generalized or personal, stemming from war, disease, domestic strife, alcoholism or injury), those who convert do so in a way that reaches forward, linking personal transformation to a religious narrative that motivates and legitimizes while providing at the same time a supportive network of contacts. Smilde describes conversion as a self-moved process, a way for individuals to “get a cognitive fix on processes that are affecting their lives, gain control over their selves, reformulate social relationships, and overcome obstacles to associational mobilization” (2007, 28). In this light, conversion is not escape, but rather a forward-looking project of self and family reform. Smilde continues:

Among Venezuelan evangelicals, religious meaning can be predicated of pressing life problems such as addiction, violence, and family conflict and addressing those problems becomes a religious goal. Seeking to address them through religious practice is no more instrumental than seeking eternal life through religious practice. ...Religious concepts can be just as easily used to conceptualize the way people adopt religion. The convert’s biography is described as a long-term hegemonic battle between Satan and God that culminates in the conversion period. God has chosen the convert, actively reaches through an evangelical preacher or witness, and the as yet unconverted soul merely assents to the outreach. (2007, 216–17)

Any attempt to explain the growth of Protestantism in Latin America, be it psychological, demographic, cultural, or political, must acknowledge the impact of changes within Catholicism that opened the door to Protestant expansion. Let me be precise—they opened the door but they do not and cannot fully account for it. To begin with there is no one to one correspondence between defections from Catholicism and the growth of Protestantism. A more appropriate portrait would find new religious

competitors reaching and mobilizing groups that might be nominally Catholic but who received only sporadic attention from the “lazy monopolist.” At the same time, despite the incorporation of elements of traditional Protestant practice (stress on reading the Bible in CEBs, for example) and the newfound legitimacy of charismatic practices in the CCR, such tendencies are contained within Catholic institutional structures and as a practical matter, groups inspired by them remain dependent on the presence of sympathetic clergy. In any event, however the numbers were calculated, CEBs never reached masses of the population, and their ties to social and political movements turned out to be much more vulnerable and sporadic than early scholarship supposed (Levine, 1992; Levine and Romero, 2004; Hewitt, 1991).

How to make sense of the succession of changes and strategies within the Catholic Church itself? The question is controverted and once again there are several competing explanations. One prominent explanation has been that as an institution the Catholic Church is concerned above all to maintain and extend influence. In an influential book published in 1970, Ivan Vallier identified the core challenge facing the Church as the need to move from influence attained via laws, treaties, and elite ties to forms of influence more appropriate to a democratic society. In his view, such influence, to be effective and endure, could only stem from the inculcation of generally accepted moral values and orientations. To stick with the old alliances was to tie the Church’s fate to elites in decline, a mistake made in Europe centuries earlier. I shall have more to say about Vallier in the next section. The point I wish to underscore here is that he construed the concept of influence very broadly and in terms that underscored the Church’s pretension to continued cultural hegemony, while assuming that only through cultural consensus—to be supplied by the Church—could modernization proceed smoothly.¹⁹ Those who work with concepts of influence (e.g., Bruneau, 1982) have lately been joined by scholars inspired by rational choice theory, who see the church in terms derived from economics, as competing to sell its product and consolidate brand loyalty in an increasingly open market. Gill (1998) argues that fear of losing members to Protestants explains the decision by Catholic leaders to make human rights, social justice, and opposition to military rule central to their message. His argument is flawed by weak data and a concept of “the Church” which leaves it wholly monolithic and identified

exclusively with the hierarchy. More recent rational-choice-inspired work, in particular Chesnut's *Competitive Spirits* (2003), provides a richer and more convincing account of what competition is really like.

An alternative point of view, which I have described elsewhere as "Gramscian" (Levine 2006) attributes the pattern of change within Catholicism to the impact of popular needs and desires that "erupt" into the churches during the period of repression and closed politics noted earlier. Religions are in a continuous process of interchange with the surrounding world acquiring and trying out ideas and models of organization and action that make sense to changing populations. From this perspective, it is impossible to understand either religious experience or the churches as institutions in isolation from the social and political context in which they exist. The effort to draw a strict line between religion and politics is thus illusory, when not simply hypocritical.

The reference to Gramsci, of course, comes from his notion that domination is rooted as much in cultural hegemony as in coercion. In the same way, a counter hegemony can emerge when those who Gramsci referred to as "organic intellectuals" appear to craft new understandings and lead and inspire new social formations. The argument is that the study of religious change should center attention on the "base," or on what is commonly referred to in Latin America as "popular groups," which will provide the generative basis for change. By the same logic, organic intellectuals may also be found here at the base, as well as among younger clergy and certain religious orders that take a leading role in the process.²⁰ There is much to commend this perspective, which provides an important correction to the temptation to identify the Catholic Church with hierarchy and institutional structures. But this is not to say that institutions—and loyalties to them, along with veneration for their leaders—do not matter at all. As noted here, the accumulation of empirical work has made it clear that popular Catholic groups like CEBs were neither as autonomous nor as uniformly radical as much early writing had supposed (Levine 1990, 1992).

A more satisfactory explanation has to combine analysis of changes within the church—including leadership, ideological and theological tendencies, and new organizational forms—with attention to context and membership. The prevailing self-concept that motivates leaders and activists (Catholic and Protestant alike) and which

gives meaning to whatever influence they seek to maintain and wield, is central to any effort to explain where change arises, why energies and resources are invested in particular ways, and what the probabilities of success and failure are (Levine 1992, Mainwaring, 1986). Without attention to religious self-concepts, and the way they reflect, reinforce, and strive to change culture, society, and politics, we cannot hope to grasp the origins and pathways of religious transformation, much less have a sense of what the future may be like.

For those involved, these self-concepts do not vary in their sense of being “Catholic” or belonging to some particular Protestant or Pentecostal church but rather in what the primary emphasis of practice is to be, how resources are best situated and used, and by whom, and how patterns of authority within the church are conceived and justified. Within Latin American Catholicism, and compressing greatly, one can identify continued tension over time (sometimes amplified by political contexts or struggles) along the following dimensions: pastoral care vs. prophetic leadership; resources devoted to buildings, schools, and institutional maintenance and managed by the official church hierarchy vs. resources distributed at the base for the base to decide on; and stress on hierarchy, rank, and legal status vs. a more horizontal and egalitarian view of authority. Let me elaborate briefly.

The contrast between pastoral care and prophetic action identifies a classic polarity in most religions. As discussed by sociologists from Weber to Warner (with many in between) this distinction points up the difference between a focus on the routines of religious practice related to worship, ritual, “care of the soul,” and sanctification of critical milestones in most lives (birth, education, marriage, death) and with prime concern for maintenance as opposed to prophetic roles, in which, following the model of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, or Amos, one leads by word and by example, advancing a critique that encompasses social and political order along with the established structures of religion. The call is for action that complies with God’s vision of justice, not maintenance and comfort. Prophetic roles and models are central to the logic and discourse of liberation theology and gained particular prominence in the political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, when church people and organizations often found

themselves at the center of conflicts. As noted here, with the return of “normal” politics, these models have faded and often been explicitly abandoned by the hierarchy.

Many Latin American churches are in fact resource poor, and depend heavily on material and human resources (money and people, texts, equipment) that comes either from governments or from transnational sources. The matter of resources has to do with their source, their distribution, and with who gets to decide how they are used. A prime example is schools and buildings, which require and use money from the state and tuition payments by parents, as opposed to funding directed at vicariates that work on particular issues or regions (housing, land, squatter settlements, and resources given to or institutions opened for use by the poor).

With respect to the theory and practice of authority, the key point is that although the church—any church, indeed any organization—has some pattern, explicit or implicit, of authority, not all authority is equally authoritarian. Within the Catholic Church, one of the most notable impacts of the Second Vatican Council was to legitimize and encourage a range of ideas and working models that operated on the basis of an idea of the church as less a hierarchical structure than a “People of God Moving Through History.” The working model of authority here is less a cascade, with authority and legitimacy running from top to bottom, than a convergence of sources, with a heightened role for initiatives and leadership by lay people. Many of these initiatives have a distinctly Protestant tone (in the sense in which Protestantism embraces “the priesthood of all believers”) and many have been consciously reined in by Catholic hierarchs in recent years. As to Protestant and Pentecostal groups, as we have seen, one key distinction concerns the ways in which models of authority and church management (authoritarian vs. more egalitarian, congregational vs. hierarchical) interact with the effects of mass media and the adoption of elements central to Neopentecostals, above all the stress on divine cures and prosperity, with access to these and other desired states mediated by the pastors. In these cases, (epitomized by Brazil’s Universal Church but visible everywhere) the self-concept of the church hinges on its capacity to mediate between believers and their desired end states of health or safety or prosperity. Despite differences in content, the parallels to the traditional mediating claims of the Catholic Church are noteworthy.

POLITICS AND RELIGION, RELIGION AND POLITICS: THREE DIMENSIONS

I referred earlier to Vallier's argument that for Catholicism to retain influence and a capacity to shape Latin American culture, society, and politics in the future, the institutional church had to withdraw from politics. Breaking the mutual dependence with power and privilege would free the church to provide the kind of cultural and ideological consensus that in his view were a prerequisite to modernization. Vallier's work (1970) was influential in bringing a social science perspective to the study of Catholicism in Latin America which had been dominated by legal historians. His work was both empirical and normative: he believed that the path he outlined was measurable and already in progress, and he also argued strongly that it was a good thing, an essential element in the process of development and modernization. Setting aside the evident functionalist predilections of this kind of analysis (the dubious notion that social order and "modernization" require cultural consensus), Vallier's analysis quickly came up against a more practical difficulty. In the very moment that he called for withdrawal from politics in the pursuit of unified cultural leadership, a powerful movement emerged within the region's Catholicism that demanded political engagement, but political engagement of a new sort: not with established power and in support of existing institutions, but rather in opposition to established power, in pursuit of social justice, and in alliance with movements and parties seeking to create new institutions. As this position evolved, elements in the churches along with related groups and activists moved to the center of the very political conflicts that Vallier hoped to supersede. Indeed, it was conflict, not consensus, that came to dominate the relation between religion and politics in the decades after Vallier wrote.

This movement referred to above became known as "liberation theology" (from the title of a foundational book by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published in 1971) and found reflection in several notable forms throughout the region in the next two decades: in the authorship of Church documents critical of injustice, in the establishment, staffing, and legitimation of important Church institutions directed to issues like land, housing, or human rights; and in general in the articulation and justification of a position

that brought churches and their leaders and activists into direct, often violent conflict with increasingly fearful and repressive military regimes. As this brief account suggests, the concept of influence articulated by Vallier (1970) and those who followed his lead (such as Bruneau, 1982, 1985; or Gill, 1998) turned out to be too undifferentiated: influence for what? The simplest way for Church leaders to retain traditional forms of influence would have been to maintain good relations with elites and governments. But in repeated cases they turned instead to the promotion of social justice, not only in documents and speeches but also through the provision of material and organizational support. Such a stance reveals less a search for influence as conventionally defined than a new sense of mission (centered on ideas about social justice) and a new openness to initiative and leadership by lay persons. An escalating cycle of conflict emerged in case after case with fearful and repressive governments attacking grassroots groups sponsored by the church, church leaders defending them and denouncing the government, official repression, and so forth.²¹

One could argue that the preceding is too much about politics, and not enough about the “core” of religion, which has to do with worship, ritual practices, and the development and spread of the message in enduring organizations. But the truth is that from the beginning Catholicism has been so entangled with institutions and symbols of power in Latin America that the line between religion and politics is easily blurred and in any case, difficult to specify or maintain with clarity. To put the matter differently, the issue is not so much separation or distinction of religion from politics as it is to identify evolving and changing syntheses and how different forms of synthesis affect both politics and religion considered separately. Newly confident and growing Protestant and Pentecostal churches have in most cases followed the paths laid down long ago by their Catholic predecessors—making deals with government, exchanging political support for material help and legitimation, and, lately, reaching for direct political access and power through the nomination and election of candidates specifically linked to their churches and communities (Freston, 2001, forthcoming).

A few aspects of this process have had particular significance in shaping the pattern of change within religion and in this way affecting the content and potential

direction of the future of Christianity in the region. These are the character of violence, the restoration of democracy, and the emergence of civil society.

Violence

The last forty years have witnessed exceptional violence in Latin America, and the specific character of the violence has helped to shape the pattern of religious change both for Catholics and Protestants. To begin with Catholicism, the move of the Church and many key institutions from pillar of the established order to public critic, defender of democracy, and provider of legitimation and resources to contestational groups of all kinds meant that the Church itself became a target of violence. Bishops, priests, nuns, and lay activists were abducted, jailed, tortured, killed, “disappeared,” and exiled in substantial numbers everywhere, but with particular significance in Central America and the countries of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay). The impact of this violence combined with the diffusion of concepts derived from liberation theology to reinforce an identification of the Church with the victims of violence, and to underscore the “option for the poor” enshrined in the documents of the region’s Catholic bishops at their 1979 meeting in Puebla, Mexico (Lernoux, 1982; Levine 2005; Peterson, 1997; Wechsler, 1990).

These converging influences opened the Catholic Church to new ideas about rights and helped turn it (and its institutions) into major defenders and promoters of human rights. In key cases like Brazil, Chile, Peru, and El Salvador, the Catholic Church, with support from others and access to important transnational networks, put resources behind the promotion of human rights and defense of the victims of repression—helping families, providing legal defense, locating the bodies of the “disappeared.” The defense of classic human rights (freedom from torture or arbitrary arrest) was accompanied by promotion of organizing efforts and of the right to participation by those without resources. With the settlement of civil wars across the region and the restoration of open democratic politics, the prominence of commitment to rights and open support of organizations working in this area has come into question. With not-so-subtle nudging from the Vatican, the Catholic hierarchy in key cases has moved away from confrontational stances, preferring to concentrate resources on more conventional moral

issues and on responding effectively to Protestant competition. The decision (1992) to close Chile's famous Vicariate of Solidarity, which had been a central source of support and leadership in this area, marked an important milestone.

The commitment to rights as an element of religious discourse and action has been studied for the most part in the context of Catholicism, but there are comparable developments within Protestantism, as specific churches and grassroots groups joined in ecumenical efforts (in grassroots communities and national organizations) to defend rights in the context of extreme violence. The experience of Peru is a case in point. In Peru, rapid growth and diversification of Protestant and Pentecostal churches through the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by massive violence, in which Protestant and Catholic activists alike found themselves caught between the violence of the Shining Path guerrillas and the repressive actions of the state and military. As the count of victims rose, the National Council of Evangelicals (Concilio Nacional de Evangélicos del Perú, or CONEP) created structures and took public positions in support of human rights, as local churches and activists collaborated with Catholic groups in grassroots efforts. Echoing the moves by the Catholic Church noted above, in the Peruvian case the ebbing of the threat of violence and the settlement of civil war spurred pressures within the Pentecostal churches to restore emphasis on evangelization (spreading of the word) as the primary task of the churches (López, 1998).

The impact of violence on the life of religion in Latin America is not limited to issues of rights. One consequence of the pattern of violence, particularly in Central America, Peru, and Colombia, has been the way in which internal war accelerated internal migration with a flood of refugees, as individuals, families, and sometimes whole communities fled to the relatively safer circumstances of the cities. The very intensity of the violence made millenarian ideas about the end of times seem very proximate to many caught in the middle of the struggle (Garrard-Burnett, 1998; Stoll, 1993; Peterson, 1997; Steigenga, 2001). The settlements at the urban periphery where most internal migrants end up have also been prime recruiting grounds for the new churches. Other kinds of violence—no longer political but now driven by gangs, drugs and crime—of course remain a central fact of the urban life of the poor. Opting out of this violence by opting

into a new community of the saved has been understandably attractive to many (Smilde, 2007).

Democracy

The restoration (or in some cases the creation) of democracy was accomplished almost everywhere in Latin America in a ten-year period that began in the mid-1980s.²² Militaries withdrew from office (if not from power), civil wars were concluded, political parties reestablished, and open politics reinstated. The impact of these transformations on religion is not easy to boil down to a few points, but several issues are of particular importance. Although it took a long time, it is now fair to say that the churches are committed to the legitimacy of democracy in theory and practice. This is a major cultural change, and has been accompanied by an uncoupling of specific churches (national Catholic churches or particular Protestant churches) from predetermined political alliances and positions. In the new democratic political orders now in place in the region, Catholic hierarchs have tended to withdraw from direct political action, leaving politics to the professional politicians.

The Catholic Church is no longer a reliable supporter of conservative politics: the bishops defend democracy in general terms (Levine and Smilde, 2006) and substantially reduce the institution's role as sponsor and defender of civil society (Stewart-Gambino, 2005). For their part, Protestant and Pentecostal churches are no longer confined in political terms to the obsessive anti-leftism of the past. The end of the global Cold War freed them in this regard, while the sheer pace of their expansion has pulled a broad range of people with already formed careers, skills, and orientations into the churches. The result has been a much more diverse political presence. The very idea of a confessional state, which resonates strongly in some fundamentalist circles around the world (Freston, 2001) finds little echo in Latin American Protestantism. In some cases, Pentecostal churches have moved aggressively to seek direct political representation (through specifically Protestant parties or alliances), with mixed results to date. In Peru, early alliances with Alberto Fujimori proved chastening and collapsed with the collapse of his regime. In Brazil, the Assemblies of God have been supplanted as the key Pentecostal political force by the rapid growth of the IURD (Burity and Machado, 2005). New

leadership groups and utterly new leadership styles have emerged in the churches. Media skills are notable and careers in religious or other broadcasting are increasingly common stepping stones to political candidacies (Fonseca, forthcoming; Freston, forthcoming).

Civil society

The emergence of plural and open civil society impacts the content and trajectory of religious change in Latin America in two principal ways: by the transformation of the Catholic Church from monopolist to competitor in an open market, and by the slow construction of rules of coexistence among the churches. For the Catholic Church, the change away from unquestioned domination and monopoly can be wrenching. In Casanova's terms, the church is no longer *church*—a religious institution with an official or semiofficial monopoly in a given territory—but rather one actor among many in an open civil society. In his view, only when religions abandon the status of “church” can they be fully compatible with a modern society. “The conception of modern public religion that is consistent with liberal freedoms and modern structural and cultural differentiations,” he writes, “is one that builds on notions of civil society” (Casanova, 1994, 217). He further suggests that in a public sphere open to all, it is in the interests of all to keep it open (217). In the long run, this can reinforce the commitment of any group to maintaining an open political life.

Although interchurch competition remains intense, the diffusion of evangelicals and their institutions throughout the society has also dampened the edge of alienation and difference between Catholics and Protestants, particularly in large urban areas where most Latin Americans live. Most of the empirical work of which I am aware affirms that evangelicals (the preferred umbrella term for Protestants in Latin America) are much like their Catholic neighbors in everything but churchgoing—they participate in organizations in similar ways, they live in the same neighborhoods, and they consume in comparable patterns. These are concrete changes that lay a basis for cooperation in meeting the ordinary needs of community life.

It is important to note the role of gender. Much of the day-to-day practice and presence of religion in civil society is carried out by women. This is not because women are necessarily more pious or more spiritual than men. Religion has long served as a

culturally approved form of activity for women outside the home and beyond the reach and control of male family members. The appeal of Protestant and Pentecostal churches to women in Latin America is well documented. Women are often the first to convert and they then bring male partners and family members along. The appeal to women rests on the promise to control male drunkenness and promiscuity, enhance stable family life, and provide access to education, literacy, sociability, and (in the Pentecostal churches) to gifts of the Holy Spirit in equal measure with men.²³

Catholic groups are also predominantly female, and the social movements that peaked in the 1980s commonly relied on women for the bulk of their activists and resources. Drogus has argued that Catholic groups, particularly those inspired by liberation theology, emphasize action in the public sphere while Pentecostals may have appealed precisely because they enhance the private sphere, offering equality and solutions to pressing and immediate problems such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, and economic stress (Drogus, 1997b, 1999; Drogus and Stewart-Gambino, 2005). The logic of activism runs counter to cultural norms for women that reject conflict and politics as “men’s work” tainted by violence, with the result being that many members filter the messages and in effect refocus the activism to the local level.²⁴ Participation, much less leadership and activism, is costly and difficult, and often runs afoul of obligations to family not to mention open pressure from male relations. Women commonly encounter a glass ceiling in many churches with positions of influence and authority effectively closed to them.²⁵

If to this broad analysis of gender we add the considerations outlined earlier about the way shifting political contexts have impacted the policies promoted by Church leaders, the picture that emerges is not at all like the one anticipated by progressive and liberationist activists and scholars. Although many social movements inspired by or linked to the Catholic Church survive and in some cases even prosper (French, 2007), overall such groups, particularly those of “popular” social composition, have lost ground with members and lost their centrality in the plans of the Church hierarchy. Members get tired, burned out, and either withdraw or move into the more distinctly civil and political outlets that are now open. At the same time, Church leaders cut off resources, including access to transnational resources, to concentrate on more malleable groups and safer,

more conventional issue areas (Drogus and Stewart-Gambino 2005, Ottmann, 2002). In the Protestant churches, the alluvial character of growth has brought enormous numbers and varieties of persons into the new churches where many, including women, have assumed leadership roles in ways that bring their new faith and their earlier careers together.

THE FUTURE OF THE FUTURE

Christianity will remain dominant but the Christianity in question will clearly be very different from the past. Despite elements of continuity—not least the presence of the Catholic Church which remains everywhere the single largest and most powerfully institutionalized religion—the pluralization of religious options, the spreading Pentecostalization of religious experience, the prominent role of mass media, and intensifying competition among religious groups for legitimate access to public space suggest a dynamic and open future. Latin America is not so much “turning Pentecostal” or even “turning Protestant” as it is “turning pluralist” for the first time in modern history. This suggests that expectations of a thoroughgoing transformation of Latin American societies stemming from religion—something like a new Reformation with comparable consequences in economic and political life—are to say the least, premature.²⁶

In the agenda and routines of most of the new churches, such political and economic issues are secondary to those of conversion, salvation, and personal transformation. As these work out in practice, there are clear spinoffs in changing patterns of family life and economics (if only by the constraint they impose on what anthropologists refer to as the “male prestige” pattern of serial monogamy, as well as on irresponsible parenthood, drunkenness, and promiscuity) but these are not the specific goal (Chesnut, 1997; Steigenga, 2001). To borrow the terminology used by Warner (1988), these are spirit-filled and nascent forms of religion, more focused in the short term on intensity and directness of experience than on the structure of the movement itself. Their very intensity is what provides the driving edge of growth.

In recent work, Robert Orsi underscores how difficult it is for scholars of religion to enter into the logic and appeal of spirit-filled religious movements. They are committed, he argues, to an ameliorative and benign view of religion, and thus to themes

like empowerment, transcendence, movement building, and civil society. He suggests replacing these with a more complex and less optimistic portrait in which the engagements that religions frame with the world may proceed in ways that are not so easily channeled into beneficial effects (Orsi, 2004, 170). As the academic study of religion evolved in the United States, he writes,

It was inconceivable that religion would be anything but good religion in this social and intellectual setting, good meaning acceptable in belief and practice to this domesticated modern civic Protestantism. Proponents of the academic study of religion claimed a place in university culture by asserting that the study of “religion”—meaning the denominationally neutral version of Christianity recast as an ethical system—as good and even necessary for American democracy. Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious madness howled (in the view of those inside)—fire baptized people ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. Religion, as it took shape in the academy, was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them. (186)

Orsi’s comment reminds me of an experience of my own with academic blinders. A few years ago, I attended a conference on religion, culture, and politics in which respectful attention was paid to mock ups of *Candomblé* shrines and to videos of Afro Cuban dance and its relation to the traditions of Afro Cuban *Santería*. But a film that recorded exorcisms at a huge meeting of an IURD congregation in Brazil, with the raw emotional power of thousands urging on the pastor with shouts of *Sai* (Begone!) or *Fora o Demônio* (Out with the Devil!) elicited little more than nervous titters. If we are to grasp the power of the spirit-filled religions growing now in Latin America, and their tamer versions in the Catholic Charismatic movement, we have to get past the difficulties that such experience presents to rationalist academics, and grasp the reasons for their appeal. It is striking how much of the change discussed in this chapter was unanticipated. Scholars missed it, some because of commitments to theories of secularization and the presumed inevitable decline and privatization of religion, others because of fascination with progressive liberationist tendencies, others perhaps, as Orsi suggests, because of their inability to capture the nascent, spirit-driven character of new Pentecostal churches within conventional academic categories.²⁷

If the dominance of Christianity per se in the region is not in question, what remains to be worked out is just how the churches and their followers will fill the less regulated and more democratic public spaces that Latin America is likely to present in the future. Religions are present in the public spaces of Latin America now in very different ways from the past. There is a notable popularization of language and a diffusion of arenas for religious experience that parallels the “storming heaven by the back door,” that Nathan Hatch points to in his work *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989). This is evident not only in classic evangelical “campaigns and crusades” but also in the effective use of mass media, radio and especially television. The process has been most advanced and most developed in Brazil but is visible everywhere with a clear incorporation of contemporary language and musical themes and the prominent role played by individuals with media careers in the new churches in Brazil.

Although it is always risky to extrapolate from current trends into the future, some elements of continued transformation seem well established. There will be continued intense competition among churches and denominations in an ever-broadening range of arenas and media, continued diffusion of intense, spirit-filled forms of religious practice, growing independence of Latin American Protestant churches from northern sponsors, and growing projection out of Latin America by these same churches as they carry their message elsewhere in the global South, and also to the North. There will be no successful reconstruction of Catholic monopoly, and no major new confessional political parties of any affiliation. The association of intense religious change with a return to democracy and civic opening that has followed periods of widespread violence and repression suggests a pullback from confrontational politics and a renewed public stress on conventional moral issues including education, censorship, family, sexuality, and reproduction,²⁸ along with competition for state subsidies and privileges which are both markers of legitimacy and indispensable tools for growth.

Does the pattern of religious change outlined here contribute in some measurable way to “modernization” or “development,” however these notoriously unclear terms may be defined? As asked, the question has no clear or unequivocal answer. The expectation that religious change in Latin America would provide the cultural foundations for democracy, entrepreneurship, or related phenomena on the lines of the Protestant

Reformation are at best exaggerated, at worst a misleading and mechanical application of models derived from one historical experience to other, quite different contexts. This is not to say that Latin American societies, or their varied religious experience, are therefore properly classified as *traditional* or *nonmodern*, much less *nonwestern*. Latin America has been part of the Western world from the very beginning, but of course it is the Iberian version of that world that set the tone and established the dominant institutional patterns. Latin America is nothing if not varied, and concepts like tradition or traditional are clearly inadequate for a continent that displays such accelerated urbanization, relatively high literacy, education, and media penetration, and which includes the eighth largest economy in the world (Brazil).

The question is perhaps better phrased as one that addresses the specific ways in which religious change participates in—drawing strength, accelerating, and in some instances providing shelter from—the overall pattern of economic, demographic, social and political transformations commonly conflated under the heading of “modernization and development.” When “all that is solid melts into air,”²⁹ religion need not disappear (as classical secularization theory anticipated) but can itself change in ways that use the tools of modernity and mass communication to continue the core religious project placing individual and proximate acts in contexts of ultimate significance and building meaningful communities in a world that is very different from the one Columbus imagined he was finding when he searched for the Indies, but landed in what came to be called America.

APPENDIX: A COMMENT ON NUMBERS

Too many works on religious change in Latin America begin and end with uncritical projections of astonishing patterns of growth, in a celebratory or depressed tone depending on the perspective and affiliation of the commentator. There is general agreement on the overall pattern and projection of religious growth: churches defined as Protestant have gained ground throughout the region, reaching as high as a quarter of the population in Guatemala, and laying claim to between 15 and 25 % in a handful of other countries. Parker (2005, 19) states that “it cannot be maintained however that Latin America is no longer Catholic and that it has become Protestant. And neither can it be claimed that Latin America continues to be Catholic in the same sense that it was at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, at the beginning of the 20th century, Catholics represented 92.3% of the population, towards the 1970s they represented 89.7% of the population, and in 2000 these estimates had decreased to 85% and some sources suggest 81.01%.”

There is also broad consensus that Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches constitute the leading edge of growth above all in two kinds of contexts—the growing cities and poor barrios that surround all major urban areas, and countries that have been through massive violence and civil war (Chesnut, 1997, 2003; Freston 2001; Garrard-Burnett, 1998; López, 1998; Steigenga, 2001; Stoll 1990, 1993). But consensus disappears once attention turns from general trends to specifics: specific growth numbers for a given group or denomination, persistence or slippage over time, conversion vs. losses, or precisely how recruitment works (Cleary 2004).

Hagopian (2005) has done important work in collecting and comparing statistics on church growth and change in Latin America with particular emphasis on the mobilizing capacity that the numbers display. She makes a few points worth noting. There is considerable variation among sources (World Values Survey, national censuses, World Christian Database) and given the enormous variation within and across Latin America, overall regional statistics are not all that meaningful. Nonetheless, some basic trends are clear enough and one can isolate families of cases. The most pronounced general trend is a decline of Catholic monopoly, although Hagopian notes some rebound

in the institutional strength of the Catholic Church in recent years. As noted, Catholics have also generated local leadership groups and in some cases begun outreach beyond their borders. Brazilian churches, most notably the IURD, have been particularly vigorous in planting new churches elsewhere in Latin America as well as in Africa and the global north.

Edward Cleary, a careful and experienced student of the issues, suggests the need for great caution in projecting growth trends into the future (2004). There is too much inconsistency between sources, a lot of double counting, slippage, and misinterpretation of statistics on conversion. In their forthcoming book, Cleary and Timothy Steigenga present a range of studies and approaches to the issue of religious growth and change. They state: "...counting religious adherents and measuring religious change in Latin America is no easy task. While census data and some academic studies produce reliable estimates, it is frequently only well after major shifts have taken place that the data become available to confirm these religious changes. The issue is further complicated by the fact that static counts and estimates cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of religious change. Recent data on disaffiliation and recidivism illustrate these complications, but also lead to important insights for the study of conversion" (Cleary and Steigenga, 2007, 12).

ENDNOTES

¹ In other words, non-white in a majority non-white population where whites have traditionally dominated.

² La Rábida is a Franciscan monastery located in the small port of Palos de la Frontera, near Huelva in the south of Spain. Columbus and his son lived with the monks for some years while he was making repeated appeals for an audience with the kings in search of royal sponsorship. The monks helped him in his efforts, and collaborated with him in his geographical work. The crew for his first voyages was drawn from sailors of this southern region.

³ On the nature of the initial contact between Spaniards and the civilizations they found in the new world, see, among others, MacCormack (1992).

⁴ On Colombia, Palacios (2006), Abel (1987), or Levine (1992); on Mexico and Central America, Bricker (1986), Brintnall (1979), Oakes (1951), Reina (1966), Wasserstrom (1983); on Bolivia, Nash (1979); on Peru, Marzal, (1988), López (2004), Gutiérrez Sánchez (2005).

⁵ There were conflicts to be sure, for example over treatment of the indigenous population, but the dominant relation was one of mutual support. On the issue of how indigenous peoples were to be defined (did they have a soul, and rights?) and treated, see Gustavo Gutiérrez's massive work on Bartolomé de las Casas, the sixteenth-century defender of the Indians (1992). See also Hanke.

⁶ Not all Christian Democratic parties are identical, but despite considerable ideological variation, the common commitment to democracy and civil rule is evident.

⁷ Liberation theology is discussed in detail at several points below.

⁸ On this general trend, see Levine (2005). Not all Catholic churches or institutions followed this path. A notable case of support for dictatorship was Argentina (Mallimaci, 2005).

⁹ It is important to be clear on the meaning of the title. To call these communities ecclesial (as was the case in Latin America) is to evoke the original sense of "church" in Greek, which is *ekklesia*, or to convoke or call together. It is therefore a profound misunderstanding to refer to such groups as ecclesiastical (evoking images of hierarchical institutions. Although to be sure they arose within the Catholic Church, their basic self understanding is community oriented, not juridical. They were never conceived as mini parishes.

¹⁰ Kramer's description of these leaders, and of the dramatic staging and spectacle that surrounds them, recalls Gifford's account (2004) of prophetic and charismatic leaders in Ghana.

¹¹ This account relies on Chesnut (2003, chapter 4). He compares the CCR with Neopentecostal groups like Brazil's Universal Church of the Reign of God in terms of their specific methods and class appeal.

¹² Garrard-Burnett (1998) details the extent to which Guatemala was divided up into mission zones allocated to distinct Protestant groups.

¹³ Chesnut (1997, chapter 1) provides a fascinating history of the foundation and growth of the Assemblies of God in Belém.

¹⁴ See also López (2004) on Peru.

¹⁵ Chesnut (1997, 46) quotes Edir Macedo, who contrasts his church with traditional Pentecostals: "We have few relations because other Pentecostals are too fanatical mixing faith with customs. One thing has nothing to do with the other. Traditional Pentecostals for example, base themselves on doctrine rooted in the time of Jesus. We, on the contrary, do not prohibit anything. In the IURD it is prohibited to prohibit. People are free to do what they understand to be right. Our obligation is to teach them that they, on their own accord, have to make the decision whether or not to do this or that" (quoting a document entitled "*O dinheiro é um bem*," or "money is a good thing").

¹⁶ I explicitly reject arguments that rely on suppositions of anomie, "loss of culture," or dislocation. See Levine (1995) for a fuller statement.

¹⁷ This is similar to the general thesis advanced by Inglehart and Norris (2004) that religious belief is tied to levels of existential security, but makes the argument in much more fine-grained terms.

¹⁸ See also Stoll (1990) and his 1993 book on the war in Guatemala, especially chapter 6, “The Holy Ghost in Northern Quiché,” which details the growth of Pentecostal churches in the town.

¹⁹ The title of Vallier’s book, *Catholicism, Social Control and Modernization in Latin America* (1970), reveals the functionalist suppositions with which the author was working. These may be summarized as follows: a core of common values is essential to social order; those common values are best provided in the future, as in the past, by the Catholic Church; the Church can achieve this goal and thus ensure modernization only if it disengages from old alliances and thus frees itself to provide general orientations to the whole society.

²⁰ In this view, distance from control by the hierarchy plays a role in freeing groups and individuals to take up this kind of leadership.

²¹ There are, to be sure, exceptions. One notable case in point was Argentina, where the Catholic hierarchy collaborated with and legitimated the military’s “dirty war” against subversion through the 1970s (Mignone, 1988).

²² To be sure there were precursors. Democracy was restored in the Dominican Republic in 1978, in Ecuador in 1979, and Peru in 1980. The last two cases proved less enduring than the first.

²³ In many of these churches, long assumed to be irredeemably patriarchal, recent studies suggest greater openness to gender equality than is often supposed (Smilde 2003, Steigenga, 2001).

²⁴ As Drogus puts it (1999, 41), “The specifically gendered basis of the movements might also reinforce a tendency toward cyclical decline. The mobilization of women around issues related to motherhood and social and family reproduction tends to generate a pattern whereby women mobilize but later withdraw from politics.”

²⁵ Of course this is not limited to Latin America. Harris (1999) details the glass ceiling women encounter in African American churches, where they are essential to the day-to-day operation of the church and its organizations, but barred from positions of prestige and power.

²⁶ As, for example, in Martin (1990) or Sherman (1997).

²⁷ For too many academics, Orsi (2004, 188) writes, “True religion, then, is epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated, and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit, not body and nature. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things. Students of mine over the past twenty years in classrooms in New York City, Indiana, and Massachusetts have unfailingly refused to acknowledge as ‘religious’ the practice of putting holy water into an automobile’s transmission (as pilgrims to a Bronx Lourdes shrine commonly do). Whatever this is, it is not ‘good religion’? All the complex dynamism of religion is thus stripped away, its boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities eliminated. Not surprisingly, there is only one methodology and one epistemology for studying this ‘religion’—critical, analytical, and ‘objective’ (as opposed to subjective, existentially engaged, or participatory).”

²⁸ For an account of the changing relations between churches and different kinds of regimes around issues of sexuality and, in particular, abortion, see Htun (2003).

²⁹ The phrase comes from Marx’s description of the impact of capitalism on traditional life. See Berman (1982) for a stimulating discussion of the cultural aspects of modernity.

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