

2010

# Religion in Latin America

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# Religion in Latin America

## **Abstract**

This issue, edited by LACC Director of Research and Colombian Studies Institute Director, Ana Maria Bidegain, presents today's Latin American and Caribbean religious landscape through different lenses: country profiles (Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia); sub-regional monographs (River Plate and the Caribbean); vignettes on the evolution of particular religious denominations (Christian, Islamic, and Judaic), communities (indigenous Pentecostals) and practices (New World African religion). The feature article, authored by leading US expert on Latin American religion, Daniel Levine, examines the relationship between religion and politics in the region after thirty years of democratic rule. Different perspectives are represented: from the North and South of the Americas, as well as Europe.

# *Hemisphere*

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**Religion in Latin America**



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### COVER IMAGE:

Members of Argentina's Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic, and Jewish communities attend an interfaith service and pray for peace in the Middle East at San Nicolas de Bari Basilica in Buenos Aires. Photo: Juan Mabromata/AFP/Getty Images.

# FROM THE EDITOR

Dear *Hemisphere* readers:

It is with great pride that I write you this letter. Such a great issue warrants immodesty; our guest editors Ana María Bidegain and Juan Sánchez have done a magnificent job putting together this volume on Religion in Latin America and I thank them for their effort, hard work, and commitment. I am pleased to have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Mark Rosenberg and Eduardo Gamarra, both distinguished scholars and accomplished academicians, as well as my predecessors as editors of *Hemisphere* and directors of the Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University.

Latin American and Caribbean religious landscapes have dramatically changed over the last twenty years, becoming more diverse by the day. In the span of one generation, Latin Americans, who used to be identified as mainly Roman Catholic, have rediscovered the religious practices of their indigenous and African ancestors and have also converted in droves to Protestantism while joining evangelical churches at record pace. Given the current rate of conversions, countries such as Guatemala and even Brazil, which was considered the world's largest Catholic country in 1970, will be mainly protestant by 2020. Jewish communities have had a unique and significant socio-economic and historical presence in many parts of the region, while Muslim communities constitute important segments of the populations in former British colonies in the Caribbean. Islamic populations, although relatively small have increased due to migration from the Middle East and growing rates of conversion throughout Latin America.

Increased numbers of those taking a “do-it-yourself” approach to Catholicism, agnostics, and atheists have caused a spike in the numbers of self-identifying non-religious individuals and the secularization of Latin America has had a perceivable impact on Latin American society. The year in Latin America is no longer defined by religious holidays. Although Semana Santa continues to be “sacred” in most countries, Mexican and Central American middle classes tend to celebrate the religious holiday by vacationing at beaches and preparing traditional dishes, rather than piously observing the holiday and attending church services. Not unlike for the rest of the world, Christmas in the Southern Cone evokes shopping and enjoying leisurely warm evenings while dining and socializing outdoors.

In this issue, the editors succinctly present today's Latin American and Caribbean religious landscape through different lenses: country profiles (Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia); sub-regional monographs (River Plate and the Caribbean); vignettes on the evolution of particular religious denominations (Christian, Islamic, and Judaic), communities (indigenous Pentecostals) and practices (New World African religion). The feature article, authored by one of the leading US experts on Latin American religion, Daniel Levine, examines the relationship between religion and politics in the region after thirty years of democratic rule. Different perspectives are represented: from the North and South of the Americas, as well as Europe and established and burgeoning scholars alike have shared their research and perspectives.

The panoramic tableau provided by this volume is very broad for obvious reasons and is intended to invite readers to learn more about a phenomenon that profoundly impacts all people throughout the region and the diaspora, regardless of individual beliefs. I encourage readers to further explore other scholarly works on Latin American religion by the contributors and welcome them to cross disciplines, country boundaries, and communities in an attempt to more completely understand the complexity of religion in present-day Latin America and the Caribbean.

As with everything at LACC, this publication of *Hemisphere* was truly a team effort. I would like to thank my colleagues and *Hemisphere* Associate Editors, Liesl Picard, Pedro Botta, and Alisa Newman for their valuable contributions related to the translating, copyediting, formatting, and all of the additional little and not-so-little things involved in publishing. I have already thanked Ana María Bidegain and Juan Sánchez for their superb job; allow me to commend them on their excellent work once again.

Finally, I would like to thank all the *Hemisphere* readers who, during the past year hiatus of the magazine, repeatedly came to us requesting another issue of the magazine and to John Stack, the director of the FIU School for International and Public Affairs, who gave us the green light to resume the publication, as we continue to provide insightful research and commentary on contemporary issues in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Thank you,

Cristina Eguizábal, Ph.D.  
Director, Latin American and Caribbean Center  
Florida International University





# Religion in Latin America

By Ana María Bidegain and Juan Jennis Sánchez Soler

The religious field, with its multifarious inter-relations with the social, cultural, economic and political fabric, is indeed a privileged locus for exploring the contemporary Latin American process. Particularly pressing in this issue of *Hemisphere* are questions pertaining to the place of religions within still-in-the-making non-confessional states, within democracy, and vis-à-vis the official recognition of pluralism and religious freedom. Far from surveying the subject matter exhaustively, the reports and analyses included simply underscore the inherent complexity, dynamism, plurality, vastness and contemporary relevance of religions in Latin America. They feature historical and ethnographic sketches, up-to-date quantitative data, descriptions of current trends and future projections.

The contributors live and work in different Latin American countries, as well as in the US and Europe, and represent different academic disciplines and areas of specialty. Some of the texts were written originally in English, while others were translated from Spanish, Portuguese and French. The contributors inform us about the rapid re-composition now undergoing Southern religious fields, while they present us with cases that problematize many commonly held misconceptions, and no longer operant academic taxonomies. Religious identities and their respective roles within the polis are thus shown to behave like complex, mutating, and hardly predictable processes rather than like natural or fixed essences.

Treating the region as a whole under the heading of religion is not the same as averaging out or blend-

ing together its distinct localized realities. No homogenous Latin American whole emerges from the addition of its disparate parts. Simplistically correlating the multiple patches of religious diversity with compartments such as particular nation-states, territories, ethnic groups, races, social classes, genders, ideological persuasions and confessions would falsify the messiness that we often encounter in the field, where an indigenous group may simultaneously advocate for the official recognition of its ancestral cultural traits and militate as Pentecostal believers... where many white Cubans now seek initiation within Santería and other African Diaspora religions. Furthermore, communities from Latin America have brought their religions and cultures beyond borders with massive migration and widespread transnational practices. Bi-dimensional technologies of representation such as maps need to be extremely nuanced to provide credible information. Or rather, no single religious map can anymore convey a reality that we recognize as multi-dimensional and shifting. The cultural, political, economic, religious and geopolitical maps of Latin America are simply not coextensive.

History and culture in Latin America defy the all-too-neat binary Western vs. Non-Western civilization. The region is not intelligible unless one sees how it has been historically constituted, over the past five centuries, by centrally defining features of European cultures as well as by defining traits stemming from countless Amerindian and African original cultures. The historical confrontation between the tri-continental forces in the region is complex to

the point of eluding any single descriptive pattern. In this respect, there are radical differences both between countries and within countries, with distinct cases of both cultural conjunction and disjunction. Cuban Santería presents us with a classic case of African-European conjunction, while Buenos Aires and Montevideo reproduce largely European lifestyles and multiple Amazonian peoples still represent almost pure forms of Pre-Columbian life. Many lines of memory and identity traits converge, diverge, struggle, run parallel, clash and merge within Latin America's cultural substratum. That is why in the same historical epoch we can identify contrasting phenomena that in other parts of the world emerge as more homogeneous and unidirectional processes. Today, broad social and cultural segments of Latin America follow trends akin to European counterparts (urban secularization), others resemble trends in other parts of the global South (the Christian Charismatic and Pentecostal explosion, and its institutionalization in independent churches), and yet other phenomena resonate with analogous processes in the US (activism regarding the national recognition of distinct indigenous and African cultural identities).

In part, today's multiplication of religious trends in Latin America stem from a historical *de jure* situation of religious uniformity that never managed to become *de facto*. All the studies in this issue coincide in their assessments regarding the definite end of Christendom-type Catholic hegemony as a definite mark of the religious horizon of the

region, for now and for the foreseeable future. Their observations imply that hegemonic Christendom has been fractured: 1) From the outside, by the visibility of exogenous traditions, extraneous to the construed colonial homogeneity (Jewish presence, studied here by Damián Setton and Muslim presence, by María del Mar Logroño Narbona); 2) from the deep within, by the vindication of ancestral religious systems of Amerindians and African Descendants, historically made endogenous through the cultural-religious negotiations of these traditions and Catholic homogeneity (Terry Rey, Pablo Wright, and Laennec Hurbon); 3) from the institutional consolidation, acculturation and coming of age of Historical Protestantism (Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Mennonites, etc.) in the different countries of the region; 4) from the increasing visibility of minority New Religious Movements such as Hare Krishna, and the different manifestations of interest on New Age literature and rituals, and “spiritual but not religious” proposals; 5) from the emergence of centers associated with ancient world religions, such as centers of Zen Buddhism (more common in large metropolitan areas such as Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo, and prevalent above all among the educated and affluent strata of society); 6) from the explosion of Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal groups; 7) from the internal polarization of divergent ideological trends within the Catholic Church and a growing number of de-institutionalized Catholics (Mallimaci’s *católico a mi manera*); 8) and finally, from an increasingly noticeable segment of citizens who define themselves as non-religious (post-Christian secularists, agnostics and atheists and never evangelized persons). The end of the Catholic Church’s uncontested homogeneity in

the religious field is, therefore, one of the most crucial processes at work in the region, against the backdrop of a centenary tradition of Church-state symbiosis, refurbished in several countries throughout their republican history.

The cases presented in this issue indicate that we must be cautious with assertions to the effect that a future Christendom is emerging from the South. Applied to Latin America, such a prediction is questionable. Author Philip Jenkins explains that the next Christendom is gaining momentum now under the aegis of the rapidly expanding Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity throughout the global South. However, in the context of Latin America, the most tangible result of Pentecostal growth has been a more conspicuous assertion of the region’s religious diversity. This effect, in turn, deepens the fracture of any Christendom whatsoever. In their respective articles, Daniel Levine and Fortunato Mallimaci explore the implications of a religiously plural society for the consolidation of democracy. However, a reasonable concern about the consistency with democracy of many present day Southern grass-roots religious movements is their characteristic anti-modern outlook. This is manifested in terms of excessive supernaturalism, biblical fundamentalism, and theological and moral ultraconservatism. The political awakening of Pentecostals will likely imply a stronger concerted lobby of religious groups to push for conservative moral and religious agendas affecting the general public, as is the case with issues of sexual morality, contraception, and the definition of marriage. These agendas would be advanced through regular legislative processes, in which case the religious activists and their followers would formally participate as citizens. In fact, many

of the newer Neopentecostal churches have behaved very assertively in this regard, leaving in the past the traditional political quietism associated with these denominations, defining their political platforms, seeking ideological allies in the larger political space, forming their own political parties and succeeding in getting their candidates elected. These features place Pentecostals away from the emancipation promises of modernity, in contrast to the positions embraced by the Protestant World Council of Churches and by the Vatican Council II. On the other hand, many historical subjects traditionally marginal to the body politic have been empowered via new religious affiliation, and are now conscious of their potential for leadership, especially poor and undereducated charismatic women. As Catholic ecclesial base communities (CEBs), Pentecostal churches create a space for participation and discourse for persons otherwise marginalized from national life and citizenry. For now, the question of how much and in what precise sense the Pentecostal phenomenon will impact Latin American reality remains undecidable.

The authors in this issue tend to focus mainly on the political impact of the numerical growth of Pentecostalism; that is, the contribution of this growth to the legal definition of Latin American societies as religiously plural and to the deeper secularization of the state. As the question stands now, it is risky to make predictions, especially in light of the rapidly mutating nature of small churches, which now behave as sects (in the sociological, Weberian sense), but may soon age into more mainstream denominations. Furthermore, despite its tremendous growth, Pentecostalism remains a regional religious minority. We must also take into account these accom-

panying facts: Amerindian and Afro revival movements are also emerging as important players in the religious, social and political fields; within the historical churches, especially within Catholicism, consciousness of internal diversity has heightened, as contrasting ideological and theological trends come to sharp-relive (Da Costa even suggests the advantage of the plural term “Catholicisms”), and therefore a position of hegemony or privilege would necessarily affect a portion of the faithful negatively; finally, the numbers of secular and non-religious citizens are increasing as well.

The official recognition of the multi-religious character of the nations seems to generate centrifugal and centripetal forces causing internal revitalization within the religions as well as interesting patterns of interaction between them. Some authors, such as Andrew Chesnut, analyze this aspect through the analogy of religious markets competing for members. Hurbon illustrates this phenomenon for the Caribbean case, where African Diaspora expressions have become more visible and accepted out of a process of assertion vis-à-vis the institutionalization of minority evangelical groups. By contrast, Terry Rey and Ricardo Mariano show that Evangelical growth has decimated African religions in Haiti and Brazil respectively. An analogous pattern happens among Amerindians (Wright). An underlying hypothesis is that, just as in prior ages ancestral indigenous and African systems found affinities with symbolic, narrative, ritual and plastic components of Iberian Catholicism, today those affinities are being transferred to performative components of Pentecostal praxis (Spirit possession and faith healing).

The boundaries of Latin America are elusive, and become more fluid in the Caribbean and into the terri-

torial US. Thus, Laennec Hurbon's text reports not only on religious developments within the “Latin” portion of the insular Caribbean basin, but also within the Anglophone territory. The shared postcolonial situations of these islanders and Latin America at large sustain cultural and historical links that go beyond the criterion of a macro-linguistic community.

Likewise, the sheer number of people of Latin American stock living in the US constitutes today a decisive historical force. Trespassing into the Northern half of the half-sphere, Gastón Espinosa presents quantitative evidence regarding both the importance of the Hispanic electorate in US politics, and the importance of religion informing their political options. However, Hispanic comportment during the 2008 elections indicates that they are represented across the American religious and political spectrums, and no obvious correlation exists between their denominational affiliation and their partisan political leanings.

Finally, we need to take into account that a project such as the one undertaken for this issue demands a mature analysis of data and sound conceptual frameworks. Nevertheless, the changes in the religious and political fields in the region are so rapid, that our analysis of the *contemporary*, requiring some decantation of lived reality into workable categories, some prudent distance from sources and phenomena, tends to be referred to the recent past rather than to the immediate present. The accumulation of facts corresponding to the latest developments runs parallel to the tracking of observations and the devising of newer models of interpretation by scholars in the relevant fields. However, meaningful assessments of the church-state issues vis-à-vis the latest political re-configu-

ration of the continent are not mature yet. Nevertheless, the main processes and trends charted in this issue of *Hemisphere*, such as the expansion of a plural religious field and its recognition by the state, are not likely to be reversed by drastic changes in the political field in the foreseeable future. ■

<sup>1</sup> Chesnut, Andrew. *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

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# Religious Transformation in Brazil

By Ricardo Mariano; Translated by Alisa Newman

From 1500 to 1822 Brazil was under the colonial domination of Portugal, which, like Spain, imposed and propagated Catholicism in the lands it conquered in the “New World.” With independence and the foundation of empire in 1882, Brazil adopted Catholicism as its state religion and, under the system of *padroado* (imperial patronage), defended the institution against the entry and expansion of other faiths, allowing it to maintain a near monopoly on religious life. The advent of the Republic in 1889 led to the legal separation of church and state, but left the Catholic Church many privileges and allowed for state discrimination against other religious groups, which in any case represented a tiny minority of the population. Although the clergy opposed the separation, in practice it freed the church from state tutelage, allowing it to become closer to the Vatican, discipline and moralize its ranks, repress liberal clergy, rein in popular Catholicism, recruit and train new clergy, and expand its

infrastructure and network of seminaries, parishes, dioceses and schools. In sum, the separation strengthened the church as a religious institution, as well as its political power.

For most of the twentieth century, the Brazilian religious landscape remained dominated by Catholicism, with very little religious diversity. Until 1970, according to census data (Table 1), the world’s largest Catholic country was 91.1% Catholic, accounting for a total of 85.8 million people. Thirty years later, this majority had fallen to 73.8%, with the largest declines in urban and developed areas, which tended toward secularization. Thanks to overall demographic growth, however, Catholics still accounted for 125.5 million of Brazil’s total population of 170 million, almost 100 million more than Evangelical sects.

Evangelical movements (Reformist Protestant, Adventist and Pentecostal denominations), Afro-Brazilian religions (Candomblé and Umbanda) and Kardecism (a form of Spiritism based on the writings of France’s Allan Kardec) began to gain follow-

ers and visibility in the second half of the twentieth century, but it wasn’t until the 1980s, in the context of urbanization, industrialization, cultural modernization and a return to democracy, that the numbers of Evangelicals—especially Pentecostals—and those professing no religion began to grow rapidly.

In 1970, 4,833,106 Brazilians (5.2% of the population) were Evangelical. This number rose to 7,885,650 (6.6%) by 1980, 13,157,094 (9%) in 1991 and 26,452,174 (15.6%) in 2000. Pentecostals were the main group responsible for this extraordinary expansion. Protestant denominations, with the exception of the Baptist and Adventist churches, recorded little growth in this period. From 1980 to 2000 Pentecostals doubled in number every decade, from 3.9 million in 1980 to 8.8 million in 1991 and 17.7 million in 2000, accounting for almost 80% of all Evangelicals. Five Pentecostal denominations made up 85% of the total; by far the largest was the Assembly of God, whose 8,418,154 congregants in 2000 made it the largest Pentecostal church in the world and represented almost half (47.5%) of the members of this faith. In the same period, Pentecostals gained increased visibility, social legitimacy and enormous spaces on radio and TV, entered political parties, broadened their political power and changed the nation’s landscape with their temples and congregations. They became a powerful religious minority, proselytizing aggressively and increasingly active in politics.

Table 1 – Brazilian Religions from 1940 to 2000, by Percentage of Population

Religion	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1991	2000
Catholics	95.2	93.7	93.1	91.1	89.2	83.3	73.8
Evangelicals	2.6	3.4	4.0	5.2	6.6	9	15.4
Other Religions	1.9	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.5	2.9	3.5
No religion	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.8	1.6	4.8	7.3
Total (*)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(\*) Does not include undeclared or undetermined religions.  
**SOURCE:** IBGE, *demographic census data*



*Brazilian Evangelist Christians pray during a ritual group baptism.  
Photo: Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images.*

The fastest growing religious movement in Brazil and the rest of Latin America, Pentecostalism has its base in poverty and urban centers, at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Its followers tend to have little education and earn the minimum wage (465 reais, or US\$230 a month) in jobs as domestic help or other unstable occupations. It attracts more women than men and more black, mixed race and indigenous people than whites. With rare exceptions, the middle classes shun Pentecostalism, whether out of moral conservatism or sectarianism.

Until 1970 people with no religion—those claiming to have no religious affiliation—were a tiny group (0.8%). Their numbers jumped to 2 million in 1980, 7 million in 1991 and 12.5 million in 2000, at which

point they represented 7.3% of the population. This enormous growth is a strong indicator of the trend toward secularization and is concentrated mostly in urban areas and among young adult males.

In contrast, Afro-Brazilian religions declined sharply over the last few decades. The percentage of Brazilians professing these religions fell from 0.6% in 1980 to 0.4% in 1991 and 0.3% in 2000 (for a total of 571,329 followers), a loss of 101,000 followers in 20 years. From 1991 to 2000 Umbanda, a syncretic religion born in the 1920s in Rio de Janeiro and influenced to varying degrees by Candomblé, Catholicism, Pajelança (Afro-Amerindian beliefs) and Kardecism, also lost more than 100,000 adherents, falling from 541,518 to 432,001 members.

Candomblé—a polytheistic religion brought to Brazil by African slaves with cults organized around African gods and goddesses (*orixás*) and welcoming members from all ethnic groups—grew from 106,957 to 139,329 faithful in the same decade but still represented only 0.08% of the population.

Both the tiny demographic share of Afro-Brazilian religions (0.3% in total) and the decline of Umbanda are surprising. Until very recently North American Protestant missionaries and Brazilian pastors described a Brazil dominated by Spiritism and African sorcery. Social scientists discoursed solemnly on the continuing expansion of these cults. By 2000, however, there were only about half as many people practicing African religions in Brazil as there were Jehovah's Witnesses. Several factors explain this decline, not least of which is the fact that African-based religions are demonized and targeted for proselytism by the country's rapidly growing Pentecostal churches. Added to this is their lack of power in political or media circles, their dispersal in a myriad of small groups, the absence of an organizational structure for collective representation and the continued social stigma of their identification with black sorcery.

In 2000 Brazil remained overwhelmingly Christian, with 89.2% of the population Catholic or Evangelical. Christians and the non-religious accounted for 96.5% of all Brazilians, leaving only 3.5% affiliated with other religions. In the entire country there were only 18,559 Muslims, 2,979 Hindus, 101,062 Jews, 67,288 Esoterics and 10,723 followers of indigenous traditions. The largest groups were Spiritists (2,337,432), Afro-Brazilian religions (571,329), Jehovah's Witnesses (1,104,879) and Mormons (199,641). Small and little-known

groups such as Santo Daime, born in the Amazon region in the early twentieth century and making ritual use of the hallucinogenic drink ayahuasca, fell into the category of “other religiosities.” An important caveat, however, is the limitations of quantitative data for understanding religious dynamics and diversity. Tens of millions of Catholics, for example, practice their own religion infrequently and turn to others for cures or solutions to their daily problems.

The most recent quantitative data on religion in Brazil was compiled by the Datafolha Institute in 2007 based on a broad survey of Brazilians over the age of 16. It found a country that is 64% Catholic (56% in the state capitals), 22% Evangelical (17% Pentecostal and 5% Protestant) and 7% non-religious. With the exception of the non-religious, whose percentage remained about the same, these numbers reflect the main trends of the preceding two decades: the strong decline in Catholicism and rapid growth of Pentecostalism. Other religious groups accounted for 7% of the population. Of its 190 million inhabitants, therefore, Brazil has close to 121 million Catholics and more than 40 million Evangelicals, of whom almost 30 million are Pentecostal, giving it the largest number of Pentecostals of any country in the world.

During the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Brazilian Catholic Church has been in sharp decline. At the same time, however, it has become more diverse, created new communities, encouraged the Charismatic Renewal movement to compete with Pentecostalism, stem the loss of congregants and adapt to the popular demand for more dynamic clergy and rituals, and become more conservative morally, politically, theologically and ecclesias-

tically. Despite the repression of Liberation Theology, the church has also encouraged its clergy to be active in social movements, defend human rights and work toward the social inclusion of the poor.

Acknowledging new social and religious realities, it has abandoned its old pretensions to national identity without submitting entirely to the new sociocultural context: The church continues to battle ongoing trends toward cultural relativism, individualism and hedonism—in vain, in light of the growing pluralization of identities, the multiplication of social affiliations and the increasing autonomy of individuals from religious authorities, especially with regard to morality and sexual behavior.

In the last third of the twentieth century, in a context of high unemployment and the growth of the informal economy, social inequality,

an explosion of criminality and violence, the decline of traditional religion, and the rapid spread of Pentecostalism and religious pluralism to create a competitive market for religion, the link between national identity and Catholicism has been broken. Political leaders now find themselves obliged to consider the interests and demands of other religious groups, especially Evangelicals. ■

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## Aparecida: Quo Vadis? Edited by Robert S. Pelton



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More than a mere critical evaluation of the event, this book takes the fifth general meeting of CELAM at Aparecida, Brazil, as the historical vantage point from which the different contemporary issues facing Church and society in Latin America are probed.

The articles in this collection tackle the ecclesial trajectory from Medellín to the present (Robert S. Pelton); the reality of Hispanics in the US (Virgilio Elizondo); the situation of the poor (Gustavo Gutierrez), of Amerindians (Sergio Torres), of base communities (Jose Marins), of economics (Javier Maria Iguiniz Echeverria), and of global markets (Ernest Bartell, C.S.C.); and the Pentecostal boom (Edward L. Cleary, O.P.). Bishop Ricardo Ramirez reflects on discipleship and mission and Margaret R. Pfeil on structural sin.

The book closes with an article by Daniel Levine which traces the political and social trajectory of religion in Latin America and imagines its future.

# Religious Diversity in Colombia

By Sandra Ríos

In 1991, Colombia's new constitution established the lay character of the state, spurring a reconfiguration of a religious landscape previously monopolized by the Catholic Church.

Catholic hegemony—interrupted by the first Church—State separation attempt (1854) by Liberals—was legitimized with the establishment in 1886 of a centralized, conservative and Catholic state and an 1887 Concordat with the Vatican. Furthermore, in 1902 the country was consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Colombia's religious landscape has never been static, however; it has always been dynamic, with periodic struggles among different trends, positions, practices and beliefs, all in the context of a history characterized by violent socio-political conflict. Present-day Colombia is not very different from most other Latin American countries in terms of religion: It has a Catholic majority, a growing Pentecostal population, approximately 100,000 Muslims, a small Jewish community, and an indigenous population that accounts for 1.5% of the total population, while Afro-descendants make up 20%.

## A History of Violence

During the period of Liberal radicalism, Presbyterians were called from England to breakdown the Catholic hegemony. By the end of the nineteenth century, Colombia was home to a number of Christian churches and even some Protestant missions. Initial Protestant missionary efforts were not widely successful and in some areas there was no clear distinction between Protestants and Catholics, due to poor Catholic cate-



A Colombian soldier holds a placard which reads 'XII - Jesus Dies on the Cross,' indicating the 12th station of the Cross, during the Good Friday procession along the streets of Bogotá. Photo: Rodrigo Arangua/AFP/Getty Images.

chization; indeed, Protestants were sometimes called "Catholics with Bible." In the twentieth century, they gained some influence through the creation of schools, temples and societies, but they did not attract a wide following and remained a minority. They drew the most attention for their identification with Liberal ideas, resulting in persecution by conservatives. Expressions like the one coined by Felix Sardà i Salvany in Spain in 1884 and in Colombia by San Ezequiel Moreno (1848-1906)—"*El liberalismo es pecado*" (Liberalism is a sin) were widely popularized. Moreno went even further, proclaiming: "to kill Liberals is not a sin." Pope John Paul II canonized Moreno in 1992.

As Gonzalo Sánchez, director of the Commission for Historical Memory in Colombia, has noted, in Colombia "war often makes people live politics as a religious war, and to live religion as politics." This tendency to demonize the *other* was at its height during the period of *La*

*Violencia*, in the 1950s. During this war or series of small regional wars, membership in one of the parties in the dispute was mostly defined in terms of place and heritage. The political discourse was unclear but religion served to identify the enemy. In this way, the confrontation between Liberals and Conservatives masked a hidden religious agenda. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, conservative pan-Hispanist Catholic factions had identified Protestants with American imperialism, and President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla linked them with Communism. All in all, the confrontation led to anywhere between 116 and 1216 murders directly related to religious reasons. As late as the 1960s and 70s some Colombian social scientist were still branding Protestants as imperialists.

## Growing Religious Diversity

In contrast to Protestants, who often did not differentiate themselves strongly from Catholics, Pentecostal

converts adopted their new identity at least in part in opposition to Catholicism. Along Colombia's northern coast and in the main cities, Pentecostalism grew out of foreign missions but soon adapted to the local culture as local leaders appeared and split to form their own churches. Initially, Pentecostals were politically apathetic, regarding authority as coming from God and politics as part of the mundane sphere. Many of them were committed to a millenarian discourse, which distanced them even more from politics. In Colombia's armed conflict (in its most simple terms, between leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries), this position won them favor in the eyes of the paramilitaries, who had carried out a "cleansing" of ecclesial base communities.

Under the new constitution, Pentecostal groups have gained more visibility in the public arena. They have launched four political parties and a range of associations and have even signed agreements with the government ("small concordats") granting them recognition and some benefits. Currently, approximately 7% of Colombia's population is Pentecostal. In some municipalities in the "banana axis" (Chigorodó, Apartadó, Turbo and Necoclí), they are the majority. As is the case in Brazil, Evangelical political participation in Colombia is mostly mainstream, emphasizing the same traditional values of family and morality as the most conservative trends of the Catholic Church.

Of course, the Catholic Church too is hardly a static or monolithic institution. The development of different trends within Catholicism has responded to concrete historical circumstances. On the one hand, in the 1960s and 70s some elements of the Church were close to a dialogue with the political left. Catholics then were influenced by Vatican Council

II and the Episcopal Conference at Medellín and their discourse focused on the needs of the people. Important figures included the group of priests of La Golconda, the SAL group and CINEP, and Catholic clergy such as Father Camilo Torres and Bishop Gerardo Valencia Cano adopted the perspective of Liberation Theology. (Protestants had a similar movement, La Rosca group formed by Orlando Fals Borda and Augusto Libreros, among others.) The next decade saw the consolidation of a strong Conservative trend focused on rebuilding the moral order and promoting spiritual movements such as the Charismatic Catholic Renewal as well as the Pentecostal Movement.

### **Religious Symbols in Peacemaking**

During the second half of the 1980s, the Catholic hierarchy changed its position toward the armed conflict and became a strong defender of human rights. At the hierarchical level, ecclesiastical peacemaking efforts consist of attempts to promote dialogue at the national level, while at the local level pastoral organizations work with victims of the violence. Catholics also cooperate in ecumenical initiatives for peace alongside Mennonites, other historical Protestants and selected groups of Pentecostals. Unfortunately, the human cost for churches of peacemaking has been high; among Catholics, one archbishop, three bishops, more than 50 priests, nine religious men, two missionaries, three religious women and many lay members of the church have been killed in the last 10 years. Many more have been kidnapped and threatened. The situation is no better for Protestants; in the same period, more than 50 pastors have been killed and many others kidnapped. According to the Vatican news agency, Colombia has the highest rate of religious murder in the world.

Beyond the work of religious institutions in peacemaking attempts, religion has influenced victims' interpretations of their experiences, as well as how the conflict is understood. For instance, Colombia's national branding campaign, "Marca Pasión," is symbolized by the Sacred Heart. The deliberate use of this image draws on a principle of unity based on a religious idea, and it is controversial because of the violent story behind the figure of the bleeding heart of Jesus. The icon represents silent resignation before a painful fate that finds redemption in the suffering heart of Jesus, and through its resigned acceptance of tragedy it helps to normalize the reception of violence. This kind of symbolic use of religious referents is often well received by the public, as the popularity of President Uribe demonstrates. Uribe has mined a rich symbolic capital for his charismatic political appeal based on exhibitionist religious practices and alliances with conservative religious institutions.

Rodolfo de Roux has argued that religion can become unconscious in a secular society in which elements of religious language are reproduced even if their religious content has been emptied. Values such as orthodoxy, demonization of the adversary, surrogate victim or scapegoat, dogmatism and blind obedience to authority appear frequently in daily public discourse in Colombia, as does the magic ritual of language that makes tragic realities disappear. On a positive note, the enduring power of religious language and symbols underlines the importance of the work that religious and pastoral organizations, and all religious traditions in Colombia, can do to transform old discourses of intolerance. ■

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# Mexico: Religious Tensions in Latin America's First Secular State

By Carlos Garma

Religion has traditionally been a source of conflict in Mexican history. Under the Royal Agreement of 1501, Pope Alexander VI and the Spanish monarchy established Catholicism as the only religion allowed in the Americas. All other forms of belief were prohibited, including Lutheran "heresy," Judaism and traditional Native American practices. The Catholic Church enjoyed great economic and social power during Mexico's colonial period and the Virgin of Guadalupe emerged as an important source of popular religious fervor and national identity.

After the consolidation of Mexico's independence in 1821, however, ties between the Vatican and the national government were strained. In the mid nineteenth century, Liberal anticlerical leaders fought against Conservatives who supported the Catholic Church. The Liberal victory culminated with the presidency of Benito Juárez, an iconic figure in Mexican history. Juárez separated church and state in 1875, establishing the first lay or secular state in Latin America and opening the door to Protestant institutions. Later in the century, the government of Porfirio Díaz showed greater tolerance toward the Catholic Church, but when the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, the church was again branded as a reactionary enemy seeking to impose a conservative order.

The Mexican constitution of 1917 codified a series of restrictions on the

Catholic Church and the practice of religion in general. Religious institutions were accorded no legal or juridical recognition, churches could not officially own property or run schools, public religious ceremonies were outlawed, and priests and the members of religious orders could not vote or be involved in political activities.

Although these laws were difficult to apply, they sparked a popular revolt, the Cristero war, in the 1930s. The outcome was a *modus vivendi* between church and state that involved simulated application of the laws by the government and passive acceptance by religious authorities. Amazingly, this arrangement remained in place until 1991, when President Carlos Salinas de Gortari sent the National Congress a proposal to modify sections of the constitution dealing with the official attitude toward religion. The result was the Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship, enacted in 1992.

## Bringing the Church Back In

The new law placed all churches under the category of religious associations (ARs). Currently, all ARs must register with the Ministry of the Interior to receive official recognition. To register, they must present a list of all their clergy and assets, but they are exempt from taxation. Clergy still cannot hold political positions or any post awarded by popular election. ARs cannot own mass media outlets, but they can rent them. Mexico now has more than

6,000 registered ARs, almost 1,000 of which are linked to the Catholic Church. (Different religious orders and dioceses have their own records and registers).

Implementation of the law has not been simple. The resolution of religious conflicts has required mediation by the state, and its role has not always been objective. An example is the treatment of members of dissident religious groups in rural communities, the most notorious case being the expulsion of 30,000 Protestants by the Catholic indigenous community of San Juan Chamula in Chiapas. The persecution persisted for more than 20 years due to the negligence of state authorities, who refused to get involved. After the new law took effect in 1992 the military finally intervened in the community. In 2000, the election of an Evangelical governor, Pablo Salazar Mendicuchia, brought a definitive end to the conflict and mediators were designated to help resolve religious differences at the community level.

Another problem was how to deal with Jehovah's Witnesses, who are more than one million strong in Mexico. The millenarian beliefs of this creed prevent its members from pledging allegiance to the national flag, and as a result some students were expelled from public schools. The National Human Rights Commission has condemned the expulsions as acts of intolerance in violation of the law and the number of such incidents is on the decline.

### The National Panorama

According to the 2000 census, Mexico has a total population of 97,483,412 (individuals aged five and older). Eighty-eight percent of the population declares itself to be Catholic, with Protestants and Evangelicals accounting for 5.2%. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists, classified under the vague term "non-Evangelical Biblical," represent a further 2.1%. An additional 3.55% say they have no religion, and the remaining 1.15% fall into the categories of "other religions" or "not specified."

The numbers vary from region to region, however. The most atypical state is Chiapas, located on Mexico's southern border, where only 63% of the population is Catholic, the lowest percentage in the country. An additional 13.5% of the state's residents are Protestant or Evangelical, 8.5% are Biblical non-Evangelicals, and a surprising 13.5% are non-believers. Other southern states such as Tabasco, Quintana Roo, Campeche and Veracruz all have lower percentages (about 80%) of Catholics than the national rate and double the percentage of Protestants and Evangelicals (10.3%). One explanation for this trend is the higher rate of conversion to non-Catholic denominations in indigenous communities, which are more prevalent in Mexico's south. In contrast, the central-western states of Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Zacatecas, with more urban, Hispanic populations, are almost totally Catholic. Mexico City, the capital, more closely mirrors the national average.

### Religion and Politics

The uneasy relationship between church and state continues in the twenty-first century. The conservative government of President Vicente



*This 19th-century polychromed wooden statue of Christ—Cristo Calvario—is still used in religious processions in the city of Guanajuato, Mexico.*

Fox (2000-2006) challenged the lay or secular tradition of Mexican politics by showing a clear affinity with the Catholic Church. It made widespread use of Catholic symbols and was obviously reluctant to mediate in the resolution of religious conflicts. This tendency has continued under the administration of current President Felipe Calderón, also of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), but a reversal may be in the works after victories by more liberal politicians in the 2009 midterm elections.

Another controversy in which religion plays an important role is in the debate on abortion. Mexico City's municipal government legalized abortion in April 2007 with the support of the leftist PRD party, sparking heated discussion among churches, political parties and non-government groups. In January 2009, at the International Conference on Family sponsored by the Vatican, President Calderón spoke in favor of upholding traditional values. Afterwards, 11 states passed local legislation that explicitly prohibits abor-

tion under all conditions.

Conservative sectors have approved these measures as a way of curbing the extremely liberal position of the capital city.

Politics cannot hide the reality that Mexico faces a future of increasing religious diversity. To meet this challenge, the country must work to increase respect for human rights and especially freedom of belief. Mexican churches do not have a tradition of accepting other creeds, and religious diversity may bring with it competition between different denominations. Negotiation will be necessary to resolve the conflicts that will inevitably arise, calling for disinterested intervention on the part of the state. Mexico's government has a responsibility to assume this role as part of the process of bringing the country into the future as a plural and open society. ■

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# Religion in Motion in Río de la Plata

By Néstor Da Costa; Translated by Alisa Newman

Argentina and Uruguay are countries with many elements in common, but religion has developed differently in each society. Both societies are products of colonial Catholicism as well as a massive influx of immigrants—mostly Italian and Spanish—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their religious development was similar until that time, but by the first decade of the last century they had diverged: While Argentina continued on the course of state-backed Catholicism, Uruguay began a process of institutional separation. Today the Catholic religion is enshrined in Argentina’s constitution,

but Uruguay formally separated church and state in 1919.

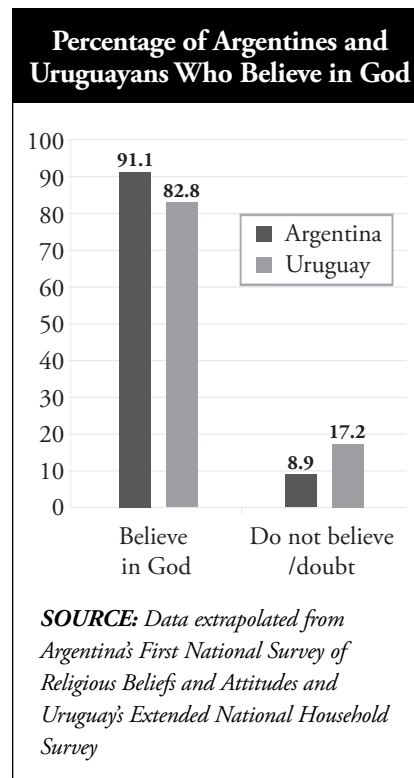
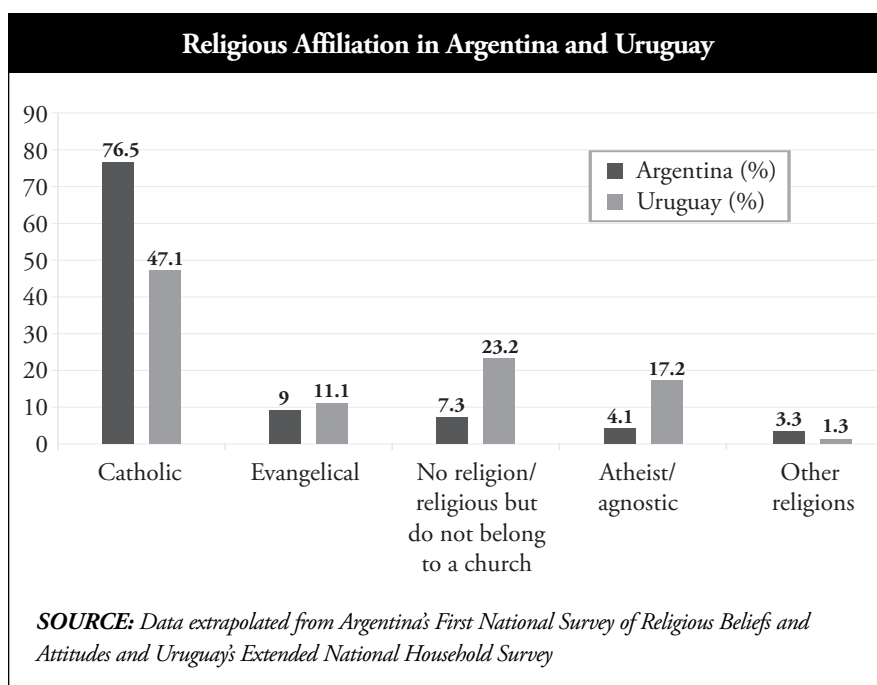
In Argentina the Catholic Church has had and continues to play a prominent role in society, political life and the collective imagination, and the percentage of Catholics is around 76.5%.

In Uruguay, the early separation of church and state—inspired by the French model and as a result of clashes between the nascent state and the Catholic Church—relegated Catholicism and religion in general to the private sphere. The percentage of Catholics in Uruguay is somewhere between 47% y el 51%, according to which poll is consulted.

In all, a total of 91% of Argentines say they believe in God, compared to 83% of Uruguayans. An additional 14.5% of Uruguayans do not believe in God, while 2.7% doubt that God exists.

The numerical differences are clear: Argentina has higher percentages of both believers and Catholics, while a greater percentage of Uruguayans are atheists. For their part, evangelicals make up a slightly lower percentage in Argentina than in Uruguay (9% vs. 11%).

Both countries reflect the growth of a recent phenomenon: people





*Devotees of the Afro-American Umbandista religion prepare an offering during the celebration of Iemanjá, the African goddess of the sea, in Montevideo, Uruguay. Photo: Miguel Rojo/AFP/Getty Images.*

who say they believe in God but are not affiliated with any institutional religion. This group accounts for 7.3% of Argentines and as many as 23% of Uruguayans.

While Christians are the majority in both countries (85.5% in Argentina and 58% in Uruguay), they represent a wide range of denominations. These can be broken down into four main categories: Catholics, Pentecostals, traditional Protestants (Pentecostals account for at least twice as many believers as historical Protestants), and other Evangelical groups.

Researchers began to take note of the expansion of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in the 1980s and 90s. The growth of these

groups was so rapid that many began to wonder if the future of Latin America would be Protestant instead of Catholic.

Catholics, however, are not a monolithic group; in fact, it would probably be more accurate to speak of “Catholicisms” instead of one single brand of Catholicism. The shades of difference among Catholics deserve to be studied in more detail. For most of its history, the hegemonic model of Catholicism in Argentina has been integralist Catholicism. While in Uruguay, this type of Catholicism has been in the minority due to the separation of church and state.

Beyond the specific trends differentiating each country’s religious

history, some of which are reflected in the percentages cited in this article, it is also worth mentioning some similarities. Not least of these is the obvious plurality of religion in both countries. Recent qualitative research has revealed the breadth and extent of local religion, whose manifestations can be traced back to different origins and time periods. Some practices were transplanted from other countries and cultures, especially eastern ones. The African influence is clear, as are localized outbursts of religiosity centering on the veneration of sanctified local figures. This diversity may not be reflected in the statistics but it is an important characteristic of the local religious landscape.

In both Argentina and Uruguay, of course, the growing plurality of religion has occurred in the context of social, political, economic and cultural transformations at the national and international levels. At certain points in the twentieth century some analysts predicted the eventual disappearance of religion, reflecting both the decline in sacramental Catholicism and the growing trend toward secularization. Nevertheless, religious dynamics have gone on developing and transforming themselves. Some scholars describe the current climate as a return to religion, while others of us prefer to interpret it as an adjustment to the realities of our times and the multiple modernities that coexist in the Río de la Plata region. ■

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# Globalization and Religious Change in the Caribbean

By Laënnec Hurbon; Translated by Valerie Leteinturier

In its very foundations, the Caribbean region contains various cultural and religious traditions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestant confessions. In it, there are also African religions derived from the context of slave colonization. Until the 1970s, leading religions such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Baptist and Methodist Protestantism worked along with the States, thus ensuring a sort of continuation of the colonial system, and imposing a Western-type cultural order. Nevertheless, from the 1970s to the present, an array of religious movements has been observed:

Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, the Japanese Mahikari, Moon followers, Scientologists, Mormons, Catholic dissidents such as the Apostles of Infinite Love in the French portions of the Caribbean, Rastafarians from Jamaica, Palma Sola from the Dominican Republic (a syncretic movement mixing elements of Afro-American cults and Catholic practices). Simultaneously, there has been a revitalization of Afro-Caribbean beliefs and practices such as the Haitian Voodoo, the Cuban Santería and the Shango Cult of Trinidad. In the age of globalization, what is the significance of this change in the pattern of religions in the Caribbean region? We shall attempt to examine this change by relating it to the problem of secularization and cultural diversity.

Two among the new religious movements that we have just men-



*Pilgrims gather for ritual bathing at the Saut d'Eau waterfall near the village of Ville Bonheur in central Haiti. The pilgrimage to the waterfall takes place each year in July to commemorate the appearance of the Virgin Mary at the site. The tradition mixes Catholicism and elements of the vodou religion. Photo: David Stewart-Smith/Getty Images.*

tioned stand out, becoming more and more popular since the 1990s. They seem to characterize themselves by cutting across the Caribbean: the Pentecostal and Rastafarian movements. They represent two cultural orientations that appear to be diametrically opposed. However, let us examine the changing background of the region in the context of globalization. In fact, every Caribbean country is going through social and cultural upheaval, due to fast “deruralization” (drift from the land), wild urbanization and, above all, massive immigration to Western countries (England, United States, Canada, France, Holland). We also notice an inter-Caribbean immigration, like the influx of Haitians to the

Dominican Republic, the Bahamas and the French West Indies (Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe); or of Dominicans to Guadeloupe. These movements of population entail a disorganization of family and community systems, and also call into question traditional identity marks. In this context, the regulations proceeding from leading religions that had been established alongside national States are weakened and any individual find him/herself quite helpless in a world which, to him or her, seems to be going towards a cultural leveling out and where he or she doesn't find his/her points of reference anymore. Moreover this leveling out which remains the brand of globalization is ironically far from

calming the social and political tensions that are even on the rise in big Caribbean cities like Port-au-Prince or Kingston.

The Pentecostal and Rastafarian movements are particularly symbolic of the transformations of the religious Caribbean scene. On one hand, as far as the Pentecostal movement is concerned, we witness a drive to create a new family and community living space which allows the convert to get away from the dominant world, now conceived as an evil order, and to find a temporary shelter from the violence of daily life and the risks associated with the realms of work and politics. The spectacular success of the Pentecostal movement goes hand in hand with the one of the Catholic charismatic movement that, in fact, recognizes that it shares the same origin as the Pentecostal movement. Practices such as speaking in tongues, reaching a state of trance as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in the believer's body, and resorting to miraculous healings, indicate a clear deviation from the patterns of modern western culture, for they imply that the converts genuinely start re-valuing the afro-American religious traditions. Indeed, said traditions are seen as evil and interpreted as among the greatest sources of the evil and misery of modern life. Curiously, though, they are used as a support for the conversion process, which implies that those beliefs are somehow kept alive and well. Moreover, we are witnessing a re-vitalization of afro-American cults a bit everywhere in the Caribbean, just when they bear the criticism of the Pentecostal and the Charismatic Catholic movements which deny them the ability to address the different problems of modern life (employment, housing, marital status, violence, etc.). The invisible forces to which an individual resorts within the context of

Afro-American cult cannot be used as a protection system and then, they are over-symbolized as hunting down forces moving around town.

At a different end of the religious spectrum, we find the offensive of Afro-American cults with a will to affirm an otherwise failing cultural identity. The Rastafarian movement is appealing to the young in popular urban neighborhoods, as well as in the areas of the Caribbean Diaspora. Contrary to the position of the Pentecostal movement, the Rastafarian movement, re-using the imaginary of the African continent, explicitly accepts the memory of the slave trade and slavery itself. That memory actually lurks within the afro-American beliefs and practices. The Rastafarian movement succeeds in co-existing with Voodoo as well as Islam in some popular neighborhoods of the Haitian capital. The derogatory vision of Afro-American cults is losing intensity and as Protestant Confessions, Adventists and Jehovah's witnesses gain more ground, Afro-American cults insist even more on introducing themselves in the public space, taking over some chapels and Catholic churches, like in Haiti, and especially to be assertively taken as a source of inspiration in the Arts, including music, dance and painting. In this same context, the Taino-type Amerindian traditions are re-vitalized through afro-American cults like Santeria in Cuba or what we call the Winti language in Surinam, Belize, and English Guyana.

In any case, it seems that the new forms of religious expressions developing in the Caribbean demonstrate a change in the relationships of an individual with his family and his traditional community, in the sense that he or she detaches himself or herself from them and appears to be left to fend for himself or herself; it is precisely in the circumstances of fail-

ing identity marks that he or she starts seeking a new social connection, imaginary and symbolic reference points that new religious movements are eager to offer. At the same time, he or she steps onto a path which leads him or her to put an end to the memory of slavery (like the Pentecostal movement), but this memory stays alive and keeps on pursuing him or her in the Holy Spirit trances, beliefs in dreams, and practices of miraculous healings, thus reinforcing this memory and cultural identity (like the Rastafarian movement and the revitalization of afro-American cults).

In any case, it is as if the secularization process is weakened by the success of new religious movements that are creating an actual re-enchantment of social space, in spite of a real progression of formal education in the region, for example in the French-Caribbean regions, Cuba, Puerto-Rico, the Dominican Republic and the British-colonized islands. At the same time, one cannot talk about cultural and religious monolithism like in the past: the plurality of religious movements refers to a cultural diversity which can be interpreted as an essential characteristic of the Caribbean. It is the states' responsibility to take on and defend the principle of secularism in order to protect this diversity and put a brake on the propensity to solve inter-religious conflicts through violence. ■

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# Latinos and Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election

By Gastón Espinosa

Latino communities are transforming the complexion of American society. According to the US Census Bureau, the national population increased from 22.4 million in 1990 to 46 million in 2008 (not including the four million residents of Puerto Rico and an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants, the vast majority of them Latinos). By official count, one out of every six Americans is Latino, accounting for 15% of the population. By 2050, the nation's population will soar to 128 million, with Latinos representing 29%.

Not surprisingly, this growth has been felt politically as well. This article, based in a larger study, challenges the notions that Latino Catholics and Protestants vote Republican, that faith and morals were dead issues in 2008, and that President Obama, like Clinton before him, has a lock on the Latino vote. The majority (56%) of Latinos identify themselves as Democrats, 17% as Republican, and 27% as independent or other. Obama won over religious Latino voters by providing a more bipartisan and compelling vision for economic recovery, participating in faith forums, speaking openly about his Christian faith, inviting Latino theologians and clergy onto his campaign team, splitting the moral vote by supporting a woman's right to abortion but not gay marriage, and reaching out energetically to Latino Catholics and Protestants. These efforts helped

him gain a majority among devout Latinos, contributing to his victory.

## The Growing Value of Latinos in Presidential Politics

One of the main reasons why Latinos figured so prominently in the 2008 election is their rapid growth and concentration in strategic states. Latinos have added one million new voters since 2004 and make up a growing share of the electorate in states such as New Mexico (37%), Texas (25%), California (23%), Arizona (17%), Florida (14%), Colorado (12%), Nevada

(12%) and New York (11%). We can expect this trend to continue given the fact that 10 million US-born Latinos are under the age of 18. If only two out of five come of age by 2010, the country will have four million new Latino voters.

The youthfulness of the Latino population, however, contributes to the discrepancy between its absolute numbers and voting capability. A full 34% of Latinos are under the voting age of 18 and 26% of those who are of age are not US citizens. Sixty percent of Latinos, therefore, are ineligible to vote, compared to



Then Democratic presidential hopeful U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton speaks to members of a Puerto Rican Pentecostal congregation in San Juan, Puerto Rico, during the 2008 presidential campaign. Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images.

23% of Americans of European descent, 34% of African Americans and 49% of Asian Americans.

These factors have undermined Latinos' political clout; despite the fact that they represented 15.3% of the US population in 2008, they accounted for only 9% of the electorate. In contrast, African Americans made up 13%, Asian Americans 2% and Americans of European descent 74%.

### **Changing Religious Profile**

According to the Latino Religions and Politics (LRAP) National Survey, 94% of Latinos self-identify as Christian: 66% of them as Catholic (30 million) and 34% as Christian non-Catholic (15.6 million), Pentecostal and other Christian (11.5 million), and Protestant (9.2 million). The growth of Evangelical Protestantism among Latinos is politically significant because adherents to this faith vote at higher rates than Catholics, are concentrated in swing states, and have shifted their vote by 20 points between election cycles. As many as 600,000 Latinos convert to Protestantism annually and a Hispanic Churches in American Public Life study found that for every Latino who returns to Catholicism, four leave it. Latino Protestants and Evangelicals make up as large or a larger share of the electorate than Jews, Muslims, Episcopalians or Presbyterians.

Sixty-seven percent of all Latino Protestant and 24% of Latino Catholic voters in the LRAP survey self-identified as born-again Christian. The numbers were similar among Latino registered voters: 65% of Protestants and 26% Catholics self-identified as born-again and Pentecostal or Charismatic. When analyzed by country of origin, Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans had

the highest rates (59%+) of born-again identity and Mexicans the lowest (34%).

### **The Religious Vote**

According to the LRAP survey, 77% of Latino Christian registered voters report that religion provides guidance in their day-to-day life, including politics. The importance of religion in the 2008 election was evident in the finding that the majority (66%) of Latino registered voters believed that a political candidate's personal faith and morals were relevant to their voting decisions. This was true for both Latino Catholics (58%) and Protestants (79%).

Did religion help McCain among Latinos, as it did Bush in 2000 and 2004? The answer is no. In 2000 and 2004, Latino Catholics voted Democrat and Protestants split their votes—voting Democrat in 2000 and Republican in 2004. In October 2008, the LRAP national survey found that Obama was leading McCain among Latino registered voters by 59% to 27%, with 14% undecided. Significantly, Obama led McCain among Latino Catholic (63% vs. 24%), Protestant (50% vs. 34%), and born-again (46% vs. 38%) voters. Obama was able to present himself as a genuine centrist candidate on many religious issues. His views, ideas and policies are a blend of right- and left-of-center impulses. Obama, like Clinton, recognizes what many Democrats do not: Although the American electorate is “operationally progressive,” it is nonetheless “philosophically moderate conservative.”

The simple reason why this strategy works is that although many Latino registered voters hold conservative moral and social views, no single moral or religious issue decides their vote. Latinos take a holistic view of a candidate. They place the candidate and his or her

views in a larger socio-religious context that takes into account a constellation of other issues, among them social justice, a living wage, jobs, immigration, health care, education, family, and a positive attitude toward Latin American immigrants and values. The top four issues for Latino voters in 2008 were jobs, the cost of living, education and health care. These were followed by crime, the war in Iraq, affordable housing, immigration reform, abortion and gay marriage.

The decisive level of Latino support for Obama contributed to his victories in key swing states for two reasons. First, the Latino electorate in those states was larger—in some cases significantly larger—than Obama's margin of victory. Second, Latinos voted for Obama by a decisive margin in all four swing states at much higher rates than they did for Kerry in 2004. Obama won a majority of the Latino vote in Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico and even Florida, a state Bush carried in 2004 by a wide majority. Latino support for Obama in these states surpassed his margin of victory: 12.4% vs. 9% in Colorado, 7.9% vs. 2% in Florida, 12.4% vs. 12% in Nevada and 28.3% vs. 15% in New Mexico. The Latino electorate was critical to Obama's victory in these states and will remain so in future presidential politics given its rapid growth in numbers.

### **Religion and Moral Views**

One of the keys to Obama's success in 2008 was his ability to win over a plurality of Latino moderates and even the most religious Latino voters—those who opposed abortion and gay marriage, read the Bible, prayed and attended church once a week or more. By opposing gay marriage but supporting abortion, Obama split the Latino moral vote, allowing religious Latinos to rational-



ize that Obama agreed with them on at least one of two key moral issues. Was this mere political expediency, given that gays and lesbians make up less than 4% of the US electorate, compared to the almost half of the population that opposes abortion in one form or another? Perhaps, but it was a strategy that helped pave the way to victory.

While McCain too reached out to religious voters, his outreach was limited in scope, vision and creativity and lacked genuine passion on faith issues. Obama and his team ran a brilliant campaign by outflanking McCain on traditional Republican issues, including faith-based initiatives. Obama also courted and put on his campaign team Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Latino leaders, defined many of the campaign issues, took the initiative on promoting faith issues in the election, and responded rapidly and effectively to McCain's critiques, thus neutralizing Republican rallying points. In addition, many Latino Catholic and Evangelical leaders supported immigration reform, a topic anathema to some Republicans. Finally, McCain did not put any major financial resources behind his outreach to Latino Catholics and Evangelicals, in contrast to Obama, who announced plans to invest \$20 million into outreach to the Latino community. His efforts paid off, as he won not only among Latino religious moderates but also a plurality of Latino conservative voters who opposed gay marriage.

Obama made it clear to these voters that he was a person of genuine faith and a religious moderate. A key element of this persona was his strong and outspoken support of church-state partnerships aimed at alleviating inner city poverty and drug abuse. In his autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*

(2006), which came out in Spanish a year and a half before the election, Obama discussed the organic link between faith and social change. He reaffirmed the link between religion, morality and social transformation and urged the US government to partner with faith-based programs to "feed the hungry, reform the prisoner, rehabilitate the drug addict, and keep the veteran employed."

Going one step further than JFK but still echoing Democratic presidents before him, Obama chided secularists for asking religious believers to leave their religion and morality at the door of American public life. He argued that many of the greatest American reformers were shaped by faith, including Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. "To say that men and women should not inject their 'personal morality' into public-policy debates is a practical absurdity," Obama concluded. "Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition."

Perhaps the most compelling reason why Latino Catholics and Evangelical Protestants were comfortable with voting for Obama was his spiritual journey. Although critics charged that he emphasized this point to counter rumors that he was a Muslim, distance himself from the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and show that he wasn't simply a traditional liberal Protestant, Obama began talking about his spiritual development long before the campaign began (perhaps anticipating later criticism). He won the support of many Latinos by proclaiming, "I let Jesus Christ into my life" and "learned that my sins could be redeemed and if I placed my trust in Jesus, that he could set me on a path to eternal salvation." This kind of Evangelical narrative resonated with many Latino Christians.

### Future Democratic Support

It is impossible to predict whether the Latino Catholic and Protestant faith communities will remain loyal to Obama and the Democratic Party in 2012, although history cautions that what goes up can come down. George W. Bush's ability to cut into the Latino Protestant and Catholic vote in 2004 despite Clinton's overwhelming victories in 1992 and 1996 reveals that a Republican Catholic or Protestant born-again candidate who is positive, youthful in spirit, compassionate, down-to-earth and committed to social justice could flip the Protestant vote again, making enough inroads among Catholics to win key swing states and perhaps the presidency. Similarly, the question of whether Obama's outreach efforts were genuine or a ploy to win the Latino Catholic and Evangelical vote will be answered by his political appointments and policy decisions.

Obama owed his victory in 2008 to the economy, Latino Catholics and Protestants in key swing states, his bipartisan and optimistic vision for social change and economic recovery, and a 4-14% increase in support among religious, racial-ethnic minority and women voters. His vision attracted Latino voters because it provided hope for a better tomorrow. Whether or not this will enable him to surpass Clinton's historic Latino support in 2012 remains to be seen, but history, initiative and inspiration are—at least at this moment—on his side. ■

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# Religion and Politics in Latin America since the 1970s

By Daniel H. Levine

Understanding the relation between religion and politics in Latin America since the 1970s requires equal attention to both spheres. The transformations of politics, and the social and cultural changes that underlie them: military authoritarian rule, civil wars, restoration of democracy, economic crises, the spread of literacy and access to mass media, internal migration and urbanization together provide the context within which the great transformations of religion gain meaning and direction. These include the theology of liberation, the end of a 500-year Catholic monopoly and the surge of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, the need of all churches to adapt to pluralism and competition, and the place of churches in civil society and politics in the democratic period beginning in the mid 1980s.

This article examines four aspects of these transformations: the vision manifest in the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM V) at Aparecida, Brazil in May 2007; religious pluralism and competition among churches; the new role of churches in civil society; and the relationship between the many kinds of violence in this period and changes in the churches as well as in patterns of religious affiliation, belief and practice.

## Aparecida

In the period preceding Aparecida, the world that Catholic leaders saw



*The faithful wave flags of South American countries as Pope Benedict XVI presides over Mass, opening the 5th general meeting of CELAM in front of Brazil's most famous shrine in the city of Aparecida. Photo: Franco Origlia/Getty Images.*

around them was utterly different from the one in which most had been born and raised. The unquestioned monopoly of the Catholic Church had eroded, replaced by a plurality of churches and pervasive competition among them for members, space, public sanction and goods. Statistics show that the number of people declaring themselves “Catholic” has declined steadily while the rate of Protestant affiliation (especially Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches) has grown sharply, along with small but notable segments claiming to be *católico a mi manera* (“Catholic in my own way”) or no connection to any religion at all. The Catholic Church no longer monopolizes public discourse about morality: It must share the airwaves, TV

screens, public platforms and arenas of power with other churches. Within Catholicism itself there is a growing diversity of opinion with many voices competing to be heard. These trends have continued despite the efforts of many prelates to rein in division by cutting funds to dissident groups and striving for greater control over schools, universities and publications.

The decay of the Catholic monopoly and the growth of pluralism have occurred in the context of the democratization of civil society and politics in the last two decades. This process has moved religious groups, issues and leaders off the center stage of public debate and political discussions. Christian Democratic or explicitly Protestant parties or candidacies have

weakened substantially and there has been a deliberate pull back on how and how much the institutional churches sponsor social movements. Religious groups have returned to more traditional lobbying for a core group of conventional issues surrounding education, public morality and sexuality and away from the social justice issues that dominated the 1980s and 1990s.

In combination, these changes have profoundly altered how religion is present in the public sphere. In much of the region, images and symbols of religious-civic fusion once affirmed the identification of “the Church” (only one was recognized) with political and economic power and social hierarchy. The public face of religion is very different now: Street preachers need only a Bible, a loudspeaker and something to stand on to make their pitch, new churches proliferate, and many voices jostle for space and attention. Where there was monopoly there is now pluralism; where a limited number of spaces were once officially reserved for religious observance (with a limited number of authorized practitioners) there is now a rich profusion of churches, chapels and mass media programming, not to mention campaigns and crusades that carry the message to hitherto “profane” spaces such as streets and squares, beaches, sports stadiums, jails, bars and nightclubs.

When the region’s Catholic bishops met at Aparecida, their stated goal was to preserve, enrich and extend the Catholic faith of the region’s peoples, which they described as “a fundamental basis of the identity, originality and unity of Latin America and the Caribbean” and “among its greatest riches.” This rich tradition of faith provided the context for the overall theme of the meetings: the role of the church and faithful as missionary disciples, a theme that was echoed by the Pope in his opening speech and

underscored throughout the conference documents.

The discussions at Aparecida and the final documents approved there underscored the value of Latin America’s Catholic tradition and identity but saw these as highly threatened in the future. The future as seen at Aparecida is filled with peril: dangers from cultural inroads into Catholic ideas of a proper moral sphere (especially with regard to traditional gender roles) and the role of the church in ordering that sphere; the related dissolution of a world view once united around the Catholic faith and guided by its official leaders; the threat of competition by other churches (especially neo-Pentecostal); and the danger posed by indifference, apathy and the trend toward *catolicismo a mi manera*, disengaged from church supervision and discipline, all of this in a context of social dissolution accelerated by poverty, violence and drugs.

This list of dangers was balanced by nuanced recognition of progress in politics (democracy), education, human rights and recognition of excluded groups, especially indigenous communities and those of African descent. But the predominant note sounded at the conference, was fear of loss and fear of control. These fears are grounded in a particular understanding of change in contemporary Latin America. What is the force behind this change, who are its agents and what does it mean for the church as an institution and collection of faithful? A highly compressed answer is that globalizing forces (economic and cultural, visible for example in the mass media) are undermining cultural unity, reordering social roles and destroying important values and relations of authority. The fact that the Catholic Church is no longer an unchallenged moral arbiter is taken a sign of loss of control and in that sense of the unity that characterized the past.

Facing a situation seen in this way, an institution like the Catholic Church (accustomed for so long to dominant cultural influence) has several options. It can simply adapt and go with the flow, engage as a participant in the process with its own message and enthusiasm, or resist change, rebuilding its structures and reorganizing around a common purpose and leadership. Aparecida takes the third option. Whether or not it works, and what policies it may generate, will depend on how accurate its underlying analysis of reality turns out to be.

### Religious Pluralism and the Encounter with Democracy

Plurality and pluralism are reshaping the public face of religion in Latin America as they intersect with the equally new fact of pluralism in politics and civil society. A plurality of churches, social movements and voices claim the moral authority to speak in the name of religion. This is a two-way street, a dialectical relationship: Just as religious plurality and pluralism transform social and political life, putting more actors, voices, and options into play, so too the consolidation and expansion of democratic politics, participation and a plural civil society have a visible impact on the daily life of religion and the ways religious institutions situate themselves in society and politics.

The most obvious expression of religious plurality and pluralism in Latin America is the sheer number of churches, religious venues and spokespersons and the competition for members, loyalties and resources. In a real sense there is more religion available in Latin America now than in the past: more churches, more chapels, greater presence in the mass media, more opportunities for participation and a greater variety of religiously-based or inspired groups. In response to this trend, as we have already seen, the Catholic Church has

reorganized and redirected its institutional resources (with Vatican sanction) away from support of social groups and innovative religious voices to a re-sacralization of its projected message. As a part of this process, it has placed greater emphasis on issues defined as moral and corresponding pressure on groups and individuals to refrain from “undue politicization.” Another response to the explosion of religious options is what Timothy Steigenga terms the “pentecostalization” of religious belief and practice. Elements once limited to Protestant (and specifically Pentecostal) experience, including stress on the direct experience of charismatic power, faith healing, speaking in tongues, certain kinds of music and patterns of group organization and leadership have been diffused widely throughout the Christian community.

All this does not mean that Latin America is “becoming Protestant,” to cite the title of an important early book by David Stoll. Rather, the region is becoming *pluralist* for the first time in its history and in a way that provides general support for democracy. Although the orientations and alliances of particular churches are located all across the political spectrum and at all levels of the social structure, with rare exceptions, all of the region’s churches, now support democracy and an open civil society.

The pattern of political change over the last few decades has had important and often unexpected impacts on religion. As democratic politics have been restored and expanded across the continent, churches and religious leaders have lost (and sometimes deliberately abandoned) their openly political roles. To the extent to which political parties and a “normal political life” have regained strength and presence, the viability of civil society groups with some link to churches has declined. Church leaders have cut their moral and material support to

groups, and in any case, members have more options now in an open civil society. Explicitly religious political parties or voting blocs have also had limited success. Among Evangelicals, such parties have been unable to mobilize or guarantee a bloc vote of the faithful, nor have they attracted masses of voters of any kind. Christian Democrats remain strong only in Chile (with relatively little trace remaining of the impact of Catholic Social Doctrine), and efforts to create explicitly Protestant parties have had limited success. The very idea of a confessional state, which resonates strongly in some fundamentalist circles, finds little echo in Latin American Protestantism.

Social and cultural pluralism, along with emerging democratic rules of the game in politics, also challenge the activist collection of groups, ideas and practices that emerged within Catholicism in the crucible of the 1970s to 1990s. For those inspired by Liberation Theology, the global and regional collapse of the left has required wrenching reappraisals of democracy as a goal and of the meaning of politics and political activity. Accommodation, compromise and alliance building are more the norm in plural societies than revolution. In many countries, activists have been drawn out of religiously inspired groups into ordinary politics. At the same time, the Catholic Church as an institution has opted to move out of the center of political activity and reduce its support for groups and movements.

Plurality and pluralism bring challenges to the growing Protestant community as well. In the attention paid to the overall rate of growth of Protestantism, it is sometimes easy to ignore the process of change embedded in the numbers. New churches grow faster than old ones; Pentecostals grow faster than other groups (including mainline churches and fundamen-

talists); and churches in urban settings grow faster than others. The well-established historical tendency to fissiparous growth within Protestantism is fully exemplified in contemporary Latin America. Competition among Protestant churches and alternative national and continental confederations—for members, resources and a public voice—is now as notable as Protestant-Catholic competition.

This continuing and accelerating growth has brought a shift in the public presence of Protestantism and the elaboration of innovative means of managing its new status in a changed political arena. No longer isolated minorities and weak supplicants for public recognition, Protestant churches have vigorously pressed claims to equal status in the public sphere and a share of the benefits (including subsidies for schools) long allocated to the Catholic Church. In case after case, churches, interchurch alliances and individual figures have moved actively to engage in what was once seen as the tainted and corrupting world of politics. At the same time, Protestant churches have engaged broader issues and entered into a wide range of social and political alliances that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago.

Political opening, along with growing pluralism within the Protestant community, has brought several important elements to the scene. New leadership and utterly new leadership styles have emerged, along with media skills and careers in religious or other broadcasting as steppingstones to politics. There has also been a notable reevaluation of politics itself: Once seen as the realm of corruption and evil, it is now presented as a possible, legitimate and even necessary field of action for believers. Where once the children of light were enjoined to concentrate above all on personal salvation and building a community of the elect, they now

visualize politics, despite the dangers it holds, as a central part of their identity and responsibility. The explosive growth of these churches has, not surprisingly, drawn in new members with a wide variety of experiences, careers and orientations. The experience of Brazil is particularly well documented, with self-identified Evangelicals (many of them adult converts) present in parties and movements across the ideological spectrum.

Pluralism offers opportunities as well as challenges. Among the most notable is the chance to acquire new followers, to reach and energize them in new ways, and to exploit new media. Another is the opportunity to develop ways of acting in politics and relating to potential political allies and partners. This task is complicated by the fact of a more open, less regulated civil society and by the more open kind of politics that has accompanied transitions to democracy. At the very least, more open politics means the possibility of greater choice, more options to compete for the allegiance and membership of one's audience and less regulation of the effort. Protestants in many countries have devoted substantial effort to leveling the playing field, above all by sharing in public subsidies hitherto limited to Catholic institutions and by removing or fighting barriers to the ordinary life of their communities, such as laws regulating "noisy churches."

These new democratic realities have nurtured and at the same time benefited from a consistent effort on the part of many churches to create a democratic presence within society. But as democracies have consolidated, much of this effort has moved out of politics to civil society, where both Catholic and Protestant churches remain active in a range of efforts from social centers to schools, neighborhood associations, cooperatives and other movements.

### **The Churches and Civil Society, the Churches as Civil Society**

The relation between churches and civil society has changed notably in recent years. The Catholic Church, followed not long after by many Protestant churches, played a critical role in Latin America in the creation, promotion and protection of social movements of all kinds. As sponsors, churches provided access to resources, information and leadership training while facilitating cooperation between religiously inspired activists and other grassroots groups. They also provided material aid and legal defense when necessary. With the restoration of democracy and the weakening of many of these movements, churches continue to function in civil society through less confrontational groups as well as through networks of schools, local and regional radio, cooperatives and health centers.

Throughout the region, the transitions to democracy of the last 30 years have been accompanied by the marginalization and demobilization of many of the same popular movements that played an important role in these transitions. The struggle was difficult, costly and exhausting, and by the end many groups had weakened, divided or disappeared. Successive economic crises meant that for many the daily struggle for survival took precedence over collective and political efforts. The difficulties that so many groups experienced in consolidating themselves, and even in surviving, were exacerbated by the impact of neoliberal economic policies that created obstacles to collective organization. The restructuring of the state and of public institutions effectively eliminated many instances in which citizens could present demands and exercise political pressure. In this way, neoliberal reforms that were in theory directed at increasing citizen participation in practice helped reduce it.

The resituating of the institutional church within civil society as one group among many has been accompanied by the development of a civil society within the church itself, manifest in the proliferation of research centers, radio and television stations, and groups of all kinds. Catalina Romero writes that "through these distinct forms of association and new spaces for encounter and interaction, the church has renovated itself and has been able to infuse the challenges of daily life with religious meaning. Over the last decade, there has begun a process of closing these same spaces, due to the intervention of various bishops who are trying to re-take control of public spaces within the church, as well as of the forms in which the church expresses itself and is represented in civil society, politics, and the state."

The tendency that Romero notes for Peru is evident in many countries. Groups of all kinds abound, but they are fragmented and lack the ability to sustain themselves or exercise enduring influence in public life. The groups and movements promoted by the church in years past (the *comunidades eclesiales de base*, for example) turned out to be much more vulnerable to the withdrawal of support by the institutional church than many early observers imagined. Fearful of division and loss of control, bishops often try to subordinate groups, cutting financial and organizational support and taking measures to gain greater control over schools, seminaries, universities and publications. The cumulative weight of changes in Vatican policies over the past few decades—the naming of conservative bishops, removal from their posts of sympathetic clergy, withdrawal of official backing from groups deemed to be excessively "politicized," drastic reductions in the flow of human and material resources and the closing of institutions of great symbolic value,

among them Chile's Vicariate of Solidarity—have had a devastating impact on many groups.

Issues of gender and ethnicity play a prominent role in many of the religiously inspired or connected groups and movements in question. The very visible role often played by women reflected their relative availability, their closeness to issues such as the cost of living, as well as the belief that women might be less subject to retaliation. With the restoration of democracy, these movements and their activists lost the direct support of churches whose leaders sought to “normalize” relations with the state and elite and clearly expected female activists to return home. The results of this demobilization varied according to the circumstances of each case, with very different results for the activists themselves. In Chile, for example, a strong church investment in human and material resources was accompanied by greater control and direction from the hierarchy, resulting in groups that were more dependent with a lower capacity for managing on their own. In Brazil, in contrast, the operative model of the “popular church” encouraged greater independence on the part of groups, with fewer resources and much less top down supervision. As the institutional churches cut back their commitment and reduced their support, Chilean women were left weaker, more disoriented and much more resentful than their Brazilian counterparts, who ended up more autonomous, confident and open to alliances with other civil society groups, albeit with fewer resources.

The role of religiously sponsored movements in ethnic communities and their relation to questions of identity has also undergone far-reaching changes in recent years. Historically, the task of missionary work was to “civilize” indigenous peoples and replace their traditions and

practices with the new message of the Gospels. Beginning in the 1970s, this model was challenged by another that affirmed the value of indigenous cultures, respected the presence of God in their traditions, incorporated indigenous peoples into the clergy and trained clergy in indigenous languages. In some countries, churches have also assisted indigenous communities in the pursuit of their claims to lands and rights. This has been most notable in the Andean region, north-eastern Brazil and Guatemala. In Bolivia and Ecuador, churches have played a key role in building networks of indigenous organizations, including communal radio and the creation of new political parties.

As noted, many of the groups that arose in civil society in the 1970s and 1980s have failed, dispersed or at the very least weakened substantially. But even though the hopes of those involved have often been frustrated and cut short, these church-supported movements helped open the public sphere to individuals and groups whose voices had hitherto been silent or tuned out, creating a series of spaces that simply did not exist before: neighborhood associations, women's groups, cooperatives, communal kitchens, cultural associations, sports clubs, micro businesses, new unions and protesters of all kinds. Although only a handful of these can trace explicitly religious origins or sponsorship, many enjoyed close ties to churches and religious groups with whom they exchanged ideas, agendas, personnel and resources.

These groups did not create democracy by themselves. Many are not explicitly political nor can they be understood as social movements, if we understand this to refer to formally constituted groups whose explicit objective is to pursue claims and seek material or symbolic goods from the state for their members. If we broaden the definition, however, we can

argue that these groups advanced ideas, movements and networks that emerged as part of the effort to create linkages and points of entry between the state and political parties and the daily lives of citizens.

### **Violence and Religion in Recent History**

Latin American history over the last 50 years has been deeply marked by the relation between violence and religious change. Both violence and religion come in many forms, and it is useful to distinguish among the most notable kinds of violence and religious transformations in this period.

Violence can be distinguished by its level as well as its source and intention. On the most generalized level is civil war, such as the conflicts in Central America, Peru and Colombia. There has also been an important phenomenon of state repression on a scale not seen before. A new element in the violence of the last 50 years has been a systematic attack on churches, creating many martyrs among bishops, clergy, nuns, catechists and lay people. Such attacks have been most frequent in civil wars and in countries where repressive state held power for many years (Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay).

The phenomenology of violence is of course not limited to politics at the national level. There is also an ever present violence of daily life, experienced everyday in the form of crime, domestic abuse, unemployment and poor health, among others. In the discourse of Latin American Catholicism since the landmark bishops' conference of Medellín (1968), it has been common to incorporate these phenomena under the rubrics of institutionalized violence and structural sin, underscoring the impact of elements such as unemployment, economic inequality, poor health, low life expectancy and social injustice on individual and community life. But

although the notion of institutionalized violence has been influential in many Catholic circles in Latin America, it often fails to highlight and denounce the violence of daily life, including alcoholism, drugs, crime, local or family vendettas, and the domestic violence and physical abuse inflicted on women and children, which is often related to these elements. Personal and community experiences of such violence have led many people to Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, which offer a way out of a difficult and dangerous life via entry into a new and supportive community of faith.

Much of the impact of violence on churches and religious life stems from the victimization of churches and religious personnel. In the midst of repression and open civil war, churches have often defended the victims, in the process becoming targets themselves. Religious personnel and church institutions such as radio stations or educational organizations became prime targets of violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay and Peru. The direct experience of official terror led many in the churches to see themselves as victims, to identify with victims and to ally themselves with victims in defense of their rights. Churches and church-sponsored organizations became prime protagonists of human rights movements and key intermediaries in processes of peace, reconciliation and the recovery of historical memory. Where repressive states held sway, church hierarchies and the institutions they directed acted both as opposition and complicit ally: opposition in Brazil and Chile, complicit ally in Argentina.

The long-term psychosocial consequences of violence have created a legacy in Latin America of fear, nightmares, suicide, alienation, broken families and the erosion of communi-

ty as a result of forced migration and the prohibition of public rituals of mourning. One result has been a wave of conversions to new churches that offer a way out of a violent world through a change of life and entry into a community of faith that provides moral and material help in negotiating the threats and dangers of daily life. For its part, the Catholic Church has articulated issues of justice, rights, participation and liberation and made a sustained effort to give these a prime place in the agenda of institutions and groups. Beginning with the Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) conferences, which further articulated the theology of liberation and carried it to the public sphere in numerous pastoral letters and the programs and commitments of groups and social movements, elements in the Catholic Church broke traditional alliances with political and social power and put themselves on the side of those seeking change.

To put oneself on the side of change in this period in Latin America has varied meanings: forming and supporting reformist groups and Christian Democratic parties; backing social movements of slum dwellers or landless peasants; providing legal, moral and material support for new trade union movements; even allying with insurgent movements, as in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Such positions are costly and bring resistance from governments, and often from the high leadership of the churches themselves. Once the external pressure of violence declines (as has occurred with the end of civil war and the transition to democratic politics throughout the region), many church leaders have look to cut their losses, rebuild good relations with states and social elites, and return to a more conventional agenda centered on personal morality, issues of sexuality and family, and the search for public subsidies. The salient point, how-

ever, is that the initial impulse for change was rooted in reaction to the experience of massive violence and the search for a meaningful and appropriate response.

This confluence of interests helped open the churches to a new set of ideas about rights and turned their leaders and institutions into promoters of human rights. In Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Peru (and later, Guatemala) the institutional Catholic Church (with support from transnational networks) provided critical resources in support of human rights and to victims of repression, helping families find shelter and work, with legal assistance, and in the difficult task of finding the disappeared. The defense of classic human rights (to be free from arbitrary arrest, abuse and torture and to reject the impunity of political leaders, military and police) was accompanied by efforts to promote and make effective the right to collective organization (by the landless, by slum dwellers, by indigenous communities) and in general to assert the right of the poor and powerless to participate in political and social life.

The incorporation of a commitment to rights as an integral part of discourse and agenda was not limited to Catholicism. Within the Protestant community, there are numerous examples of churches, national and regional organizations, and lay groups that joined ecumenical coalitions in defense of human rights while acting in defense of their own churches and membership. The impulse for change came in response to the direct experience of violence. In Peru, Protestant and Pentecostal churches grew exponentially in the 1980s and 1990s, a period that coincides with the rising arc of violence related to the Shining Path insurrection. Many churches and communities found themselves trapped between the guerrillas (who targeted any group that tried to mobilize the

population) and the repressive actions of the army, police and Special Forces. As the toll of victims grew within the Protestant churches, the National Council of Evangelicals of Peru (CONEP) began to create organizations and to take public positions in defense of human rights. With the defeat of Shining Path and the decline of large-scale violence, pressure arose within the Protestant community to return to a more traditional emphasis on preaching the word of God, “growing the church” and keeping out of politics.

The commitment to rights was not shared by all the churches. A transformation of this magnitude does not happen without costs or resistance. In the context of what was presented as a war against subversion and leftist atheism, some churches reinforced their ties with state and military, articulated a position of Christian nationalism, and became deeply involved in repression and complicit in tortures and disappearances. Argentina is the best known and best documented case of this kind, but even in this case, reality is less homogeneous than might appear at first glance. During the 1970s, important liberationist currents were present in the Argentine Catholic Church. They promoted social mobilizations and allied themselves with elements of Peronism to form the base of the Montonero movement. They were ultimately marginalized within the institutional church, defeated politically, and in many cases arrested, tortured, and killed. With the transition to democracy, the broad discrediting of the military, and the election of Peronist governments willing to break traditional ties to the Catholic hierarchy (beginning with the government of Nestor Kirchner) the country has begun to experience a genuine religious pluralism, still resisted by the bulk of the Catholic hierarchy.

### Conclusions

The events of the last 40 years present deep, conflicted and interrelated transformations in the panorama of Latin American religion. To draw a balance, it is helpful to underscore how very different the word of religion and politics is now (2009) from then (1970). Catholicism’s 500-year monopoly is gone and will not return; religious pluralism is not merely present but continues to grow. Democracy has established itself almost everywhere in the region, with notable consequences including the end of civil wars and a substantial reduction in political (albeit not everyday) violence. Confessional political parties (those linked to a particular church) have not prospered, and in general churches have withdrawn from the center stage of politics. This does not mean they have abandoned all actions of a political nature; most churches and religious groups continue to lobby governments on issues such as birth control, family law, public morality and education and continue a constant search for official subsidies, support and recognition.

Religion, in all the variants of Christianity, appears to be flourishing, but it is not the Christianity of 40 years ago. There have been too many changes in society, culture and in the churches themselves for that to be the case. What Fortunato Mallimaci has said about Argentina holds true for the region in general:

*Today in Argentina people do not believe—be it in politics or in religion—more or less than in other periods but differently. Politics has not disappeared but rather is “exploding” and “emerging” outside, above, below and within the old structures of political parties. Nor do we find ourselves in the presence of religious groups that are “static,” “pressured,” seeking shelter in the “private” or which are no more than “a reflection of socio economic struc-*

*tures.” Instead we face groups that are dynamic, active in all social classes, which move and pressure for their own objectives, which can be short or long term, with a multiplicity of ties not only within the religious sphere but also throughout social life... Believing and belonging, believing without belonging, and belonging without believing are part of the various options that men and women find today as they look to give meaning to their religious life.*

Do the past four decades have any lessons for the future? Although it is always risky to extrapolate current trends into the future, some elements of the process of change appear well established. The combination of intense religious transformations with a return to democracy makes it likely that churches will continue to withdraw from partisan politics to cut their losses and recover strength. At the same time, they will fall back on more conventional themes and efforts to gain privileges and legitimacy along with the resources and tools they need to maintain and grow their institutions. Competition among churches will continue, intensify and spread to new areas. There will be a continued diffusion of intense and spirit-filled forms of religious practice (in the Pentecostal style), the region’s Protestant churches will continue to become more independent from their origins in the north, and these churches will intensify the projection of their message to the global south and back to the north. ■

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# Christian Reorder in Latin America

By Fortunato Mallimaci; Translated by Alisa Newman

As part of the reconfiguration of social structures and beliefs in recent decades, Latin America has transitioned from a virtual Catholic monopoly to a plural and diverse Christian majority characterized by the spread of Pentecostalism and a growing number of people claiming no religion at all.

Secularization does not mean the disappearance or privatization of religious beliefs but rather their continuous reordering. Capitalism's multiple modernities are not linear, nor are they evolutionary; they are indeterminate and multidirectional, and no

one can predict their outcomes. Going beyond what is normative and prescriptive to analyze concrete situations is a challenge that scientific studies cannot ignore.

The historical foundation of the nation-state (alternating democracies and dictatorships under multiple neo-colonialisms), policies to expand citizenship—or not, the type of social framework, the formation of social movements and the role played by Christian movements—Catholicism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with Evangelicalism in the twenty-first—are a central part of the socio-religious narratives that have dominated our national histories.

The crisis of the state, along with privatization and deregulation, has dislocated not only our material existence but also our symbols, memories and expectations. During the longest democratic period the region has ever known, life is full of contradictions, both among states and within them—on the one hand, the heterogeneity of poverty and the penal/repressive control of populations destabilized by unemployment; on the other, the extension of new rights of citizenship to vast sectors of the population accompanied by an aggressive rebuilding of state and civil society capacities.



French nun Yvonne Pierron speaks during an ecumenical celebration in honor of French nun Leonie Duquet, kidnapped and murdered by navy forces during Argentina's military dictatorship. Photo: Daniel Garcia/AFP/Getty Images.

Categories such as time, space and promise have been reformulated in such a way that—especially for young people—time has been transformed into something instantaneous, into a permanent presence that makes it hard to plan for the future. The world-space has been expanded by new information technologies, and globalization and the collective promises of a better tomorrow have lost credibility, and this leads to many individual exit plans.

Meaningful institutions—the state, family, labor unions, churches, political parties—no longer create long-term legitimacies and are being eroded in our so-called “liquid modernity.”<sup>1</sup>

### Religious Institutions and Beliefs

A quick look at institutions and beliefs on the continent shows us an active market in salvation and a broad religious field with strong demands and multiple sources of supply. Religiosity does not end with institutions and religious beliefs are not only channeled through clergy.

In Brazil, Catholics make up 73.8% of the population and Evangelicals 15.6%, ranking it as one of the Latin American countries with the highest percentage (and absolute numbers) of Evangelicals (17,733,477 Pentecostals and 8,477,068 mission-oriented Evangelicals). The category “no religion” is as high as 8%.

Ricardo Salas confirms the growing plurality of religion in Brazil. “The Catholic Church may still be the majority religion (73%),” he writes, “but there has been sustained growth by Evangelicals (16%) (who, on the one hand, tend to look to their neighborhoods for meaning and, on the other, tend to be more indifferent toward democracy than Catholics) and other religions (4%).”

Uruguay, perhaps the most secular country in Latin America, has the highest rates of religious indifference

in the region. Unaffiliated believers account for 23.2% of the population and atheists and agnostics 17.2%. Uruguay has the lowest percentage of Catholics (47.1%) of any country in the Southern Cone. 11% of Uruguayans identify themselves as Evangelical and a little more than 2% as belonging to other religions.

In a study that combines census figures and ethnographic research, Mexican researchers using data from the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) analyzed the complex world of religious identity in their country. Renée de la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez Zúñiga found the “territories of religious diversity” in Mexico today to include 88.9% Catholics, a little more than 5% Evangelicals, 2.5% “non-Evangelical Biblical religions” and 3.52% no religion. “The dissidence is composed of a diversity of religious minorities, internally very disparate, where we find both firmly consolidated religions and a pulverization of religious offerings.”

The results of Argentina’s First Academic Poll of Religious Beliefs, carried out in 2008, also reflect the strong inroads made by Christian religions other than Catholicism. Argentina is still Catholic majority, but other denominations have expanded and diversified: 76.5% of respondents identified themselves as Catholic, 9% as Evangelical and 11% as indifferent (in other words, atheists, agnostics and no religious affiliation). The rest were divided between Jehovah’s Witnesses (1.2%), Mormons (0.9%) and other religions (1.1%), among them Judaism, Islam, Umbanda or other African-inspired religions, Buddhism and Spiritism. One noteworthy finding is that more Argentines have no religion or religious education (11.2%) than are Pentecostal (10.4%).

If we focus on the religion with the most followers in Argentina,

Catholicism, we find that three-quarters of Catholics practice their beliefs without the Church as an intermediary (65% practice their religion on their own and 10% never do). Among Evangelicals, in contrast, the split is more even: 55.8% connect with God through their church while 42.4% say they do so on their own.

As we have seen, Christianity, the overwhelmingly majority religion on the continent, is undergoing a profound transformation. On the one hand, the Catholic Church (which has difficulty maintaining a dialogue with emerging sects, obsessed as it is with the topic of sex and tangled up in its own dogmas and bureaucratic authority) is losing its hegemony to countless and diverse religious groups that “negotiate” their public presence, foremost among them the powerful and vital Evangelical movement. On the other hand, we are witnessing an “emotionalization” of beliefs that cuts across Christian groups that prioritize organization, authority and emotional community over dogma. Faith healing, speaking in tongues, ecstatic dancing, entering into trances, creating a climate of human warmth and seeking a direct connection to the sacred with no or little institutional mediation, along with “hyper-modern” use of the mass communications media and links to more “pragmatic” sources of financing are a part of both the Charismatic Catholic Renewal movement and the many different Pentecostal Evangelical groups.

In response to this religious nomadism, however, communitarian Catholic and Evangelical groups have emerged that offer certainty, security and totality to small groups, with the goal of achieving long-term continuity. Among Catholics, groups like the Legionaries of Christ, Institute of the Incarnate Word, Knights of Christ the King, New Catechuminate, etc. and, among Evangelicals,

the Assemblies of God, God Is Love, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and others create their own authorities, legitimacies, memories and relationships. The Catholic groups are in a state of permanent tension with local ecclesiastical authorities and have varied links to Rome. The Evangelical groups can be likened to small salvation businesses that act as micro-enterprises, with local inputs and legitimacy limited to their leader and congregation. The network structure makes these groups permeable but complicates the formation of shared national or regional policies. Ultimately, individualization and communitarianism are part of the same social and cultural process.

Long-term studies should keep in mind that Christian institutions maintain historical relations with the state, culture and society through negotiations and by the power they accumulated in each nation state.

Christianity—especially Catholicism—is a social space, not just an institutional one, with strong roots in Latin American society that go beyond the number of churches or clergy. A common and differentiated universe of belief feeds “diffuse Catholic imaginaries” that compete with other imaginaries in the current context of globalized communications, but that endure as symbolic capital always ready and available for use by different religious actors and constituting “natural continuity” in a “long Catholic tradition.” It is these different Catholic imaginaries that have been at stake in Latin America since the end of the Cold War, the triumph of the market and US global hegemony: a Catholicism based on certainties, another on emotions and a third on asceticism. Once more the question is whether to conciliate or confront “liberalism,” US imperial policy, modern values, hedonism and individualism, and whether the effort should be based at the level of the dominant or popular

sectors, the institution and/or society. While many Christian groups and movements join in criticism of unbridled market economics and the external debt, other issues, among them complicity with power, imposed dogma, and opposition to state-mandated reproductive health and sex education create strong divisions both within Catholic groups and between the Church and important segments of society.

The weakening of the social state and the privatization of public policy has created new spaces for religious groups, especially those with a strong institutional presence. One example is the increased role of religious groups in public education and social assistance. As a result, neither the state nor political parties can claim hegemony over popular spaces; instead, an assortment of religious groups enjoy so much legitimacy in this sphere that the state and party leaders are compelled to consult them and invite their participation in social, educational, cultural and employment-related activities.

In addition, the loss of credibility of government and party promises and mediation in the redefinition of the public and private spheres (an effort in which the women’s movement has played a central role) has opened a whole new range of spaces for religious leaders and their agendas. This explains the increasingly frequent appearance of priests, pastors, rabbis, imams and other religious leaders in mediating or managing social conflicts. They have more credibility as social actors than as “representatives of the sacred” or for their moral or religious recommendations, and they have the ability to claim greater institutional power.

Religious institutions do not consider themselves to be on the margins of political power, nor do state officials think of themselves as apart from religion. We have seen the

emergence of a political-religious sphere characterized by a back and forth flow that merits more transparency and analysis. Legal equality among all religious groups (or the effort to gain the same privileges as those enjoyed by Catholicism), as well as the quest for equality, justice and inclusion for all men and women, may represent a potential source of conflict among religions.

In conclusion, we must remember that in Latin America historically the great majority of believers have not been active members or daily participants in any religious group. Latin America does not have the same tradition of mass parochial culture that characterized Europe for many centuries. These are not “apathetic” or “passive” men and women who are “objects of manipulation” by their churches. Their religious beliefs influence their daily lives and provide answers to important challenges at the level of identity, belonging, family structure, etc. In situations of generalized anxiety or uncertainty, religious ethics are one of the main sources of meaning. The panorama of experiences ranges from believing without belonging to religious individualism. By affirming the primacy of emotional experience, Pentecostal groups—whether Catholic or Evangelical—do not respect, or simply reject, the imposition of religious authority through institutional symbolic violence. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Concept introduced by Zygmunt Bauman, referring to the privatization of ambivalence and increasing feelings of uncertainty, a kind of chaotic continuation of modernity. (Editor’s note)

# Indigenous Pentecostalism in Latin America: Argentina's Chaco Region

*By Pablo Wright; Translated by Alisa Newman*

The Protestant expansion in Latin America, which has progressed at a varying pace across the region in the last century, marks a new chapter in societies whose socio-religious structures were shaped historically by Catholicism. Even in the colonial period, however, when Catholicism was imposed on indigenous groups as the hegemonic faith of the Spanish conquerors, it gave rise to countless cultural recreations blending ancestral languages, rituals and sacred images with those of the European Christian world. These re-elaborated religious and ritual forms were the context for the arrival of Protestantism, extending mostly from two geopolitical powers, the United States and England.

Of all the varieties of Protestantism, Pentecostalism has had the strongest impact on indigenous societies, thanks to two interrelated factors. First, certain characteristics of Pentecostalism, which emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” such as speaking in tongues and faith healing, as well as ritual forms of the manifestation of divine power—its cosmological and ritual aspect, its universe of practices and representations—find an echo in indigenous traditions. Second, in the majority of Catholic countries, Catholicism has been associated historically with the state, political power and the ruling elite, which for many indige-

nous groups are synonymous with cultural, economic and political oppression. The combination of these two factors, in varying degrees according to region and ethnic group, favored acceptance of the Pentecostal message as an interesting and liberating cultural, ritual and organizational synthesis with counter-hegemonic potential.

One example of this trend is the spread of Pentecostalism among indigenous groups in Argentina's Chaco region. Pioneering fieldwork by Elmer Miller, Edgardo Cordeu and Sandra Siffredi shows the same factors at work as those cited above. A similar story seems to have been repeated among other groups in Brazil, Paraguay, Peru and Mexico. All demonstrate complex, non-linear cultural recreations in which traditional mythic and historical elements combine with Pentecostal interpretations of Biblical mythology.

Among the Qom or Tobas people in the Argentine Chaco, we see the encounter between native shamanism and US Pentecostalism. The former is based on powerful beings on earth, underground and in the heavens who are the “lords” of plant or animal forms; an emphasis on dreams as points of contact with the numinous; and the social prestige of both male and female shamans. In the context of these practices and representations, the Tobas were impressed by the Pentecostal reli-

gious expressions they witnessed at missionary camps targeting mostly the area's mestizo population and went on to recreate Pentecostalism in their own way. Today, the dominant religious form is the so-called Gospel, the native synthesis of this encounter between religions practiced by Toba churches scattered throughout the Chaco region. Each church has a committee of pastors, deacons, secretaries, etc., who act as local power councils. Religious services have the same structure as conventional Pentecostalism but with elements of Shamanism, especially in the therapeutic techniques practiced during the phase of the service known as “healing.” Finally, in the shamanic-Pentecostal amalgam of religious representation we have an example of highly creative symbolic recreation. The Christian deity is inserted in the most powerful position of the Toba pantheon, along with Jesus and the Bible; the traditional “lords” have been relegated to secondary positions and generally, as was the case during the Spanish spiritual conquest, characterized by their demonic nature as representations of evil on earth.

The Toba Gospel is as much of a social system as a religious one, and the only way to understand it is as a product of modern Latin American history. This is clear in the responses of Toba church members in studies of the region; when asked by ethnog-

raphers why they converted to the Gospel a common answer is that Catholicism is a “white” religion—one practiced by non-indigenous social groups—and that they are now better off in terms of health and economically. In other words, Pentecostalism allows indigenous groups to become more visible and legitimate citizens despite the incomprehension of “whites,” in whose eyes Protestant Indians seem somehow “less Argentine.”

The Toba Gospel, since its beginnings in the mid 1950s, has undergone many transformations, crises, schisms and confrontations both within its ranks and with the political system, but it represents the most powerful and dynamic socio-cultural and religious condensation of its type to date. As in all social transformations, its members are the ever more visible protagonists of their own history. ■

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## LACC Haitian Summer Institute 2010

The Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University will hold its 13th Annual Haitian Summer Institute in 2010.

The thematic focus of the institute is: “Haiti, Language, Culture and Society.” The institute features intensive Haitian Creole language training at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels, as well as an interdisciplinary lecture series in Haitian Studies.

The institute takes advantage of Florida International University’s location in Miami, home to a vibrant Haitian community and participants benefit from daily contact with native speakers of Haitian Creole.

The institute is designed for students already enrolled in an academic program, for school teachers who want to increase their knowledge of Haiti and the Haitian community and for those in the general public who desire a deeper understanding of the social, historical and political development of Haitian society and language. The institute is open to degree and non-degree seeking students and credit hours may count towards teacher recertification.

**Tentative Dates:** June 23 - August 7, 2010

**Credits:** 6 credits

**Courses:** HAI 3213 Accelerated Beginning Haitian Creole  
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**Housing:** Housing is available on-campus for an additional cost.  
Students may also arrange off-campus housing.

**Tuition Cost:** \$1,200.00 (approximate)

The Haitian Summer Institute is co-sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida.

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# New World African Religion: Twenty-First Century Crossroads

By Terry Rey

African religions not only survived the transatlantic slave trade but have flourished so robustly that today in Brazil electoral candidates court the sanction of priestesses of Candomblé, an African-derived religion that counts millions of adherents. Its largest sibling religions, Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou, meanwhile, have likewise overcome a whole range of racist, political, and economic obstacles and today enjoy unprecedented visibility and acceptance, not to mention more followers than ever. In part because of these obstacles, membership in New World African religions in Latin America and the Caribbean is notoriously difficult to gauge, but most careful observers would agree that from Rio to Miami there are clear signs of growth and/or stability overall. In addition to the beauty and power that has always drawn followers to these religions, they will continue to be shaped in part by their relationship to church and state. Colonial slave states of course prohibited their practice, a suppressive juridical reality that did not change much with independence and would only recede, variously, during the last quarter of the twentieth century. In light of this newfound freedom from state persecution, one would expect these religions to continue to grow in the twenty-first century. Some, indeed, will, while others are beginning to decline.

Let's take the case of Haitian Vodou, for example. The most reliable demographic statistics indicate that between 1982 and 1997 the number of Protestants in Haiti had doubled to roughly one-third of the total national population, leading two leading Haitian sociologists to assert that "Haiti is on pace to becoming a country of a Protestant majority" (Houtart and Rémy 1997: 34-35)! Moreover, because throughout Haiti "the mixture of *sèvis lwa* [Vodou] with Protestantism is rare" (Woodson and Baro 1996: 54), it is likely that at least one in three people in Haiti today does not practice Vodou; if we add to them the number of *fran katolik* (lit: frank Catholics; i.e., Catholics who do not also practice Vodou), it would appear that presently Vodouists in Haiti, who are themselves mostly *also* Catholic, constitute a slight but declining majority of the population. And whereas President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's granting of legal status to Vodouist marriages in 2003 lends new legitimacy to the religion, this has done little, if anything, to stem the outward flux of apostates.

By contrast, Candomblé has continued to demonstrate remarkable growth and to develop an increasingly public national standing in Brazil. One scholar (Johnson 2002: 157) speaks of this as a "Widening Semiotic Community," which in recent decades has featured, among other impressive public displays: a period of national mourning for a priestess in 1986, "a loss not just for

Afro-Brazilian religious adepts but rather for *society*," which was followed several years later by a centennial celebration of her birth in the city of Salvador, "presided over by the mayor and the governor"; the appearance since the 1990s of "literally hundreds of thousands" of Brazilians along the beaches of Rio each New Year's Eve to venerate Yemaya, Candomblé's feminine *orixa* (spirit) of the sea; and, the use by Brazil's national airline, Varig, of the slogan "Fly with *Axé*," or with the divine life force that is central to the religion's theology and ontology alike.

This is not to suggest, however, that Candomblé and related traditions are being given free reign over Brazil's religious field. On the contrary, Brazil, like Haiti and, to a lesser extent Cuba, remains a predominantly Christian nation, and Christian churches are finding new ways to compete in an increasingly competitive religious marketplace (Chesnut 2003). Although lacking the state sanction and the related assistance of military and police forces that the Catholic Church enjoyed for years in its persecution of African-derived religions, Evangelical churches have taken to the task in recent decades with equal zeal. For one of the most glaring examples, Vodouists traditionally have flocked to Bois Caïman, a few hours north of Port-Prince, each August 14/15 to commemorate the 1791 Vodou ceremony there that—as national mythology has it—sparked the Haitian Revolution; this tradition



*Hundreds of followers and devotees of Cuba's patron saint La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre take part in a procession during celebrations in Havana. Photo: Adalberto Roque/AFP/Getty Images.*

has in recent years been impeded by overwhelming throngs of Evangelicals seeking to exorcise Bois Caïman—and, by extension, Haiti—and preaching that Vodou is satanic. The Evangelical assault in Latin America is also aimed at the Catholic Church, furthermore, which was quite shockingly illustrated in 1995 by Reverend Sérgio Von Helder's kicking and punching an icon of *Nossa Senhora da Imaculada Conceição Aparecida*, Brazil's patron saint, on a televised broadcast. Not to be outdone, outraged protesters, Catholics and Candomblistas alike, burned the televangelist in effigy.

Cuban Santería faces similar, if less dramatic, challenges from Christianity, though its recent history is distinguished from that of either Candomblé or Vodou by its ambiguous relationship to the Castro regime. On the one hand, the communist regime has effective-

ly promoted atheism and thereby curtailed public religious life on the island in general; on the other hand, it has long acknowledged Santería's place in Cuban national identity (Brandon 1997: 101), and Fidel Castro himself is widely believed to be a practicing Santero.

Furthermore, the Castro government has demonstrated surprising (for communists) entrepreneurial acumen in exploiting the religion's growing popularity at home and abroad by monopolizing the open sale of Afro-Cuban ritual paraphernalia and by selling visas to foreigners drawn to Cuba's burgeoning religious tourist trade, which is affectionately known as "*Santurismo*"!

Gone are the days—thankfully and hopefully forever—when adherents of African-derived religions in the Americas had to practice their faith in secrecy and/or in fear of legal and social reprisals. Though

still facing stiff competition in the ever-diversifying religious markets of Latin America, New World African religions have grown remarkably in recent decades and taken their rightful place, a central one at that, in the mosaics that make up cultural identity in many parts of the region, and not just for people's of African descent. For, the Latin American story is in significant part an African story, one that is told with unsurpassed beauty in the drumming and dancing of the Vodou temple, the Candomblé *terreiro*, and the Cuban *casa de santo*, and in the depth of meaning and power that these religions bring to people's lives. ■

*Terry Rey is a professor in the Department of Religion at Temple University. Dr. Rey specializes in the anthropology and history of African and African diasporic religions.*

# Transformations in Latin American Judaism

By *Damián Setton*; Translated by *Alisa Newman*

Latin American Judaism has experienced a series of transformations since the 1980s that have significantly altered its makeup and given rise to new social actors and conflicts.

As in other parts of the world, Judaism in Latin America in the early twentieth century was built on a foundation of secular matrixes that reflected Jewish aspirations to become part of the nation, with the religious dimension relegated to the background. It is this religious dimension, however, that came to monopolize the attention of both Jewish communities and social scientists by the early 1980s.

Again, as in other parts of the world, Latin American Judaism is currently experiencing a revitalization of Orthodox sentiments. Many Jews are practicing what in Hebrew is known as *teshuva*, a word that can be translated as “return,” and which in sociological terms implies a process of religious conversion. Typically, Jews socialized in non-Orthodox environments adopt lifestyles emphasizing strict observance of Jewish law. This trend reflects the transformation of the dynamic between religion and modernity that has affected other religions, including Christianity, Islam and “Oriental” religions. Some scholars, among them Susana Brauner and Renato Ortiz, have argued that the gap left by Zionism as a factor in Jewish identity has been filled by religious movements

at the same time that the process of globalization and the consequent weakening of national referents have opened a space for the construction of transnational identities. While Conservative Judaism tried to create

a movement that could express the national realities of different countries, as Leonardo Senkman notes, Orthodox congregations have little use for national considerations in the construction of their identities. In



*The Mikve Israel Synagogue on the Dutch island of Curaçao is the oldest Jewish house of worship still in use in the Americas.*



Argentina, for example, followers of the Chabad Lubavitch movement identify themselves as Lubavitchers, not as Argentine Jews. In definitions of identity, the transnational community takes pride of place over the national. This doesn't mean, however, that we should ignore local particularities when analyzing the teshuva movement in its different contexts.

The Chabad movement has altered the physiognomy of Latin American Judaism through its practice of sending emissaries to countries where Orthodox Judaism lacks a strong presence. Their goal is to create spaces for socialization that have a markedly Orthodox stamp. Other *baalei teshuva* (returnees) look for cities that offer the type of community infrastructure that was not available in their countries of origin; for example, many Uruguayan *baalei teshuva* emigrate to other countries because Uruguay does not have the infrastructure they need to practice their desired lifestyle.

Several factors are important to consider when discussing these trends, above all the political transformations involved in Jews' emergence into the public arena. In Argentina, the return to democracy in 1983 opened spaces for the expression of different religions. Argentine society stopped thinking of itself as a monolithic whole and began to recognize and legitimate its own plurality. And in Mexico, the end of the PRI's monopoly over politics brought to power the National Action Party (PAN), whose tradition of conservative Catholicism lent new legitimacy to religion in public life.

Another trend developing on the fringes of Orthodoxy is the emergence of a heterogeneous collective that defines itself as "pluralistic Judaism" and comprises such sectors such as the Meretz party, the ICUF (Federation of Yiddish Cultures), Conservative rabbis and various

intellectuals. The Pole for Pluralistic Judaism, which was created in Argentina in 2008, defines Judaism from a perspective that acknowledges the many different ways of being a Jew and the individualization of definitions of identity.

Finally, for many Jews, Judaism itself is an arena for free circulation and fluid borders. They construct their own Jewishness from a patchwork of different influences without affiliating themselves with any single one. They build their own Judaism out of multiple sources of meaning that incorporate diverse Jewish and non-Jewish influences and, within Judaism itself, different religious expressions.

As a result, we are witnessing a moment when two apparently conflicting trends are intensifying simultaneously: on the one hand, the creation of communities with well-defined borders, and on the other, individuals for whom these borders do not represent an insurmountable barrier. Orthodox Judaism benefits from both of these movements. ■

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# Islam in Latin America

By María del Mar Logroño Narbona

Islam is one of the world religions practiced in Latin America today. Since the late 1950s mosques are part of the urban and religious landscape of cities like Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Caracas, and Bogota among others. While statistics are contradictory and its history is controversial, Islam is nonetheless part of the social and cultural reality of most Latin American countries. Today Latin Americans of Muslim descent and converts alike practice Sunni or Shiite Islam, along with other more or less controversial forms such as Sufism.

## Contradicting Statistics

Despite an increasing presence of Islam, to this date there are no trustworthy statistics that convey the exact number of Muslims in any Latin American country. Lack of reliable official censuses and discrepancy in the available data are among the problems that scholars face when analyzing this phenomenon. For instance, as scholars of Islam in Brazil have explained, “[t]here is an enormous discrepancy between the data about Muslims gathered by the official census and the numbers presented by Muslim entities.”<sup>(1)</sup> If the official census indicated the existence of 27, 239 Muslims in Brazil in the year 2000, Muslim institutions claim the existence of up to one million Muslims in the same Brazilian territory. Scholars of Islam in Argentina face a similar challenge, with estimates ranging from 900,000 in the country to as low as 4,500 in Buenos Aires, the city with probably the largest number of Muslims. <sup>(2)</sup>

According to scholars of Islam in non-Muslim countries, the main issues behind statistical discrepancies lie both in the parameters as well as in the tools used to identify Muslim identity. Can we define only as Muslim the person who attends the Friday prayer at the mosque as prescribed in Islam? Do Muslims self-identify themselves as Muslims when asked in a survey? While the first question begs for comparison with similar problems faced by scholars of other religions, the second question needs to consider how Muslims have historically been subject of high profiling after the events of the Iranian Revolution

of 1979, and more recently of September 11, 2001.

## A Controversial History

The historical presence of Islam in Latin America is also a controversial subject. There is no agreement among historians as to when exactly date the origins of Islam in Latin America. Some Muslim scholars often date the presence of Islam to colonial times, whereas others have questioned this approach, since the presence of moriscos and Jews was banned by the colonial authorities.

Although academic research on this subject is starting to question



*A group of Muslims pray at the Al Imam Ali Eben Abi Taleb Mosque in the city of Curitiba in southern Brazil.*

the success of this prohibition, most scholars have traditionally agreed that the presence of Islam in Latin America can be traced back first to the presence of African Muslim slaves in Brazil since the late eighteenth century; the introduction of indentured labor in the Caribbean starting in the nineteenth century; and finally the waves of Arab Muslim migration to Latin America since the final decades of the nineteenth century.

### Islam in Latin America Today

Of these three trends explained by historians, only African Islam in Brazil seems to have left no trace in today's Brazilian Muslim community. On the contrary, indentured labor in the Caribbean and long-term migration from Muslim Middle Eastern countries are among the processes that have led to the development of Islam in Latin America. Along with them, conversion is the third way by means of which Islam is increasing its presence in the continent. To this day, conversion does not seem to represent a significant demographic trend within Latin American societies. It is nonetheless an interesting phenomenon that can be explained by two different factors: on the one hand, conversion is the result of efforts from within existing Muslim communities who, funded mostly by the Iranian and Saudi Arabian governments, expand their social activities and networks attracting followers; on the other hand, events like the Iranian revolution and September 11 have sparked interest in Islam among Latin Americans in search of religious fulfillment.

Islam in all its diversity is today present both in the urban landscape and the public sphere. Along with the construction of Shiite and Sunni mosques, smaller prayer halls

and associations mark the spaces of Islam in large and small cities of Latin America. Likewise, Islam shares some of the radio waves in cities like Buenos Aires. The ubiquity and interconnectedness of internet, however, has turned the cyberspace into the preferred medium among Latin American Muslims who, in their Spanish, Portuguese and English speaking websites provide support to this growing community. ■

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## “Islam in Latin America”

**LACC Wins Grant to Improve Public Knowledge on Islam and Muslim Communities in Latin America.** The project aims to:

- Support research on the increasing presence of Muslims in Latin America, a result of both conversion and migration
- Develop scholarship on Islam as a public resource
- Facilitate scholarly engage with policymakers and journalists and create new channels for the distribution of high-quality expert knowledge so that it might directly inform journalism, policy, and public discourse
- Revitalize the public mission of universities by addressing topics of critical importance to ongoing national debates and policy
- Communicate the diversity of Islamic civilizations and Muslim communities and bring attention to regions and issues that have been largely neglected in public discourse

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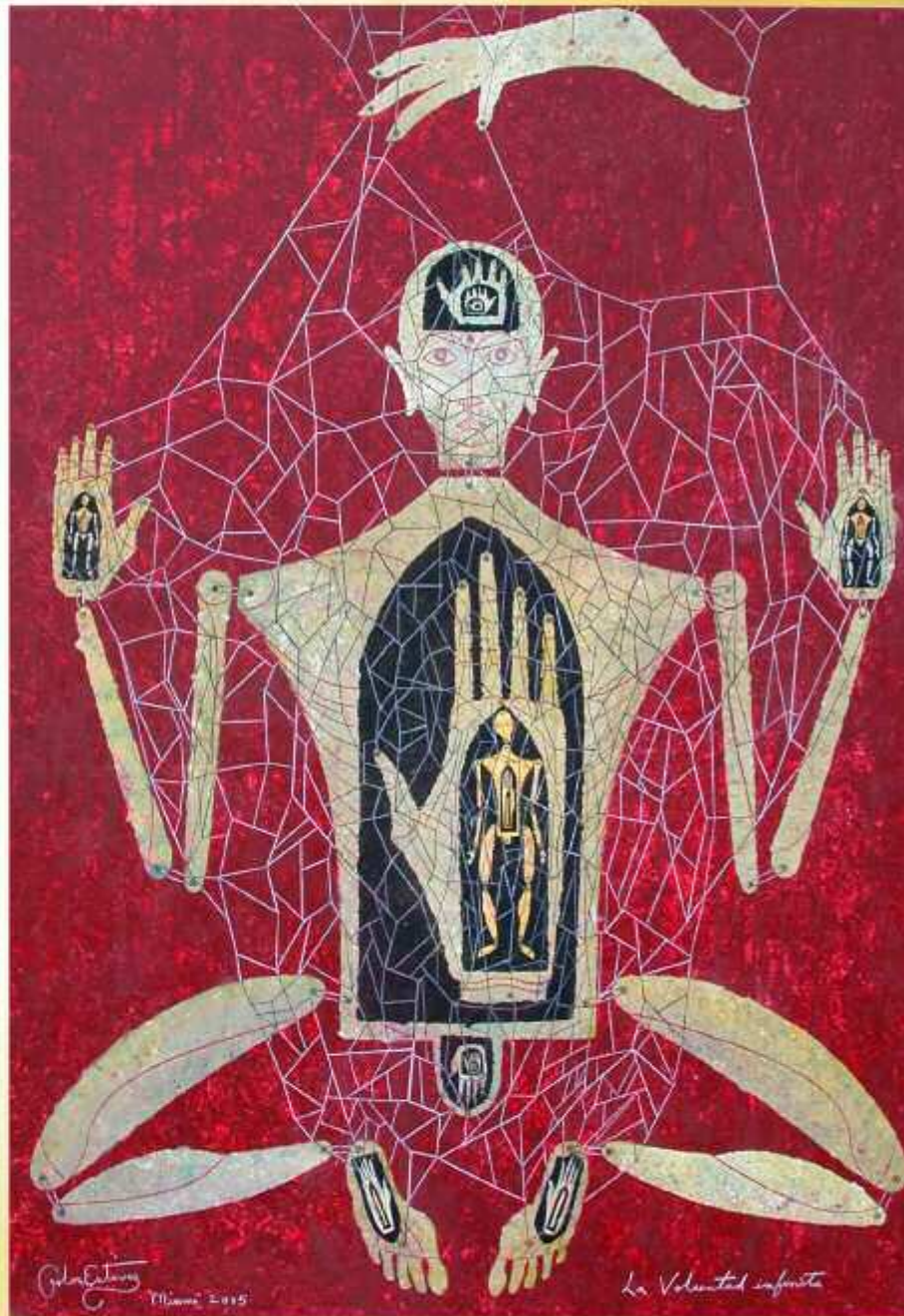
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