
REVIEW ESSAYS

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

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THE CHURCH IN BRAZIL: THE POLITICS OF RELIGION. By THOMAS BRUNEAU. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. Pp. 237. \$27.00 cloth.)
RELIGION AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA. By DANIEL H. LEVINE. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. 342. \$22.50 cloth, \$6.95 paper.)
THE CHURCH AND POLITICS IN CHILE: CHALLENGES TO MODERN CATHOLICISM. By BRIAN H. SMITH. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982. Pp. 383. \$30.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.)

The social and political questions that have emerged with the transformation of the Catholic Church in Latin America since the 1960s are numerous and complex. *New York Times'* correspondent Alan Riding, in reviewing Penny Lernoux's *The Cry of the People* (1980) and three other recent titles, called the changing role of the Church the most important single variable affecting the resurgence of revolutionary struggles there, and the metamorphosis of the Church "the most important political development in Latin America since the Cuban revolution" (1981, p. 3). Although perhaps exaggerated, such claims point to the tremendous significance of the Church in a period of widespread crisis and social change.

The Latin American bishops in their Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) conferences took strong stands on social justice and declared a "preferential option for the poor." As readers of this journal know,

Church-State conflicts over national policies and human rights violations have grown recently in numerous countries. Radical sectors of the Church are developing a systematic "liberation theology" and have fostered its growth in communities of peasants, workers, and the urban poor. Christian participation in movements for social change and even revolution is significant, and growing numbers of lay workers, nuns, and priests have become victims of repression and organized State terror.

The terrain in which the dynamics of Latin American political power and those of contemporary Catholic belief and practice intersect has nonetheless been little explored by social scientists in this country. A work like Ivan Vallier's *Catholicism, Social Control and Modernization in Latin America* (1970) has been transcended by events and by developments in social theory. Writers like Michael Dodson, Thomas Sanders, and Alexander Wilde, together with the authors reviewed here, are central figures in a new generation of scholars who are now seriously reexamining that terrain.

The three studies under consideration are detailed, comprehensive efforts to examine religion and politics in the specific national contexts of Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil. Well written and soundly researched, all are contributions to understanding such dynamics and welcome forays into a field that is certain to be the focus of even greater attention in the years ahead.

Daniel Levine's work begins by noting that religion and politics develop and change together in all societies and cultures, often harmoniously and often in conflict. Cautioning against both liberal and orthodox Marxist notions that religious institutions are mere "survivors" in the modern world, Levine stresses the depth and pace of change in Latin American Catholicism and insists that "the intensity, scope and meaning of this change demand careful and systematic attention" (p. 4).

His work concentrates on two countries that are rather lackluster when it comes to religion and political change, Venezuela and Colombia. They are neither in the throes of revolution nor under the heel of a dictator. Their Catholic Churches are quite traditional. But because they are among the region's few formal democracies and because the author approaches them from a complex, comparative perspective, the subject is interesting.

The first section of Levine's work seeks to lay the necessary theoretical and historical groundwork for a discussion of religion and politics in Latin America and to that end provides a quick sketch of the evolution of dominant political and religious institutions in Colombia and Venezuela. This section highlights the divergent outcome of Liberal-Conservative conflicts in the nineteenth century and the overall weakness of the Venezuelan Church vis-à-vis that of more traditional Colom-

bia. The second and third sections of the book present the results of his primary field research. That research (during 1971–73) included structured interviews with every member of the hierarchy in both countries regarding their visions of the Church and its proper relation to “the world,” and numerous interviews with leaders of national Catholic bureaucracies and organizations like *Cursillos*, the Legion of Mary, and Catholic Action. It also involved considerable documentary research and the development of telling case studies consisting of three pairs of roughly “matched” Colombian and Venezuelan dioceses.

What the author found was a broad diversity of religious and sociopolitical perspectives, styles, and patterns of action among Church elites. Among the sociopolitical were traditional and activist patterns, as well as a pattern promoting lay, but not clerical, action. Among the religious patterns were a hierarchical, bureaucratic orientation (“ecclesiastical”) and a more open, community-based (ecclesial) style. In the final section of the book, Levine adds reflections on “the creation, use and transformation of symbols and structures” (p. 293), and he provides an interesting characterization of four “syntheses” of religion and politics (Christendom, Neo-Christendom, Liberation Theology, and Evangelical-Pastoral) operative in Latin America today.

The author argues theoretically and methodologically for a phenomenological approach to the Church, stressing “thick description” (as does Geertz) and seeking to get at the meaning of symbols, structures, and social practice from the inside out (as do Weber and Berger and Luckmann). He analyzes the relations between social structure, institutions, and ideology as a dynamic and dialectical process, but gives place of honor to the conscious self-perceptions and role definitions of those in positions of institutional leadership. Theoretical statements about the Church and politics tend to be woven into the discussion rather than presented as abstract principles or generalized conclusions.

Levine’s study correctly notes the growing importance of national identities within a Church that was once more self-conscious only as local and as universally united through Rome. At the same time, the work fails to treat in any detail the continental and international aspects of the Church, like personnel and material-resource flows and dependencies, or the ideological struggle around CELAM (Conference of Latin American Bishops), headquartered in Colombia. Levine’s brief description of a “neo-Christendom” tendency in the Latin American Church would have been greatly enhanced by concrete reference to the actions and projects of CELAM’s conservative Archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo, his followers, and his supporters in the Vatican.

The book gives detailed attention to the Venezuelan and Colombian hierarchy, but far less to other levels and sectors of the Church, such as religious communities or grassroots believers. It is surprising,

for example, to find no reference to the Jesuit Centro Gumilla and its educational efforts in Venezuela. Similarly, almost nothing is said about the beliefs and practices of the common people of these two countries, although Levine has recently become a prime mover of research on popular religion in Latin America.

The treatment of "radical" sectors within the Church is intelligent and balanced. But it is misleading to cite Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who died a guerilla in 1966, as an exemplar of such sectors, or to bind liberation theology, socialist ideology, Marxist analysis, and political action too tightly together. "Pastoral action," a concept highlighted at various points in Levine's book, takes many forms and might be the most appropriate field in which to distinguish the emerging varieties of religious-political "syntheses." It is certainly not the exclusive preserve of the bishops or of a political "center" within the Church, as Levine seems to suggest (p. 306ff.).

A final weakness is that Levine pays too little attention to the socioeconomic and political dynamics of contemporary Latin America. Consistent with the "culturalist" leanings of the work, he describes the area as being in a state of cultural or symbolic crisis (p. 293). Nowhere are the material aspects of Latin America's current social and hegemonic crisis seriously addressed. Even as context or backdrop, little is said about dependent capitalism, slowed growth, debt, unemployment, or the widening chasm between rich and poor. Class structures and conflicts, popular movements for change, and systematic State terror do not play the role in the discussion that they should.

Levine has nonetheless produced a rich and insightful study. In making sound distinctions between visions and actions, differentiating the very real variety of roles, objectives, and styles in the Church, and suggesting new typologies and causal patterns of change, the author touches the central nervous system of the institution. At the same time, he demonstrates a keen understanding of and sympathy with the people of the Church.

Brian Smith's book focuses on Chile, a country whose history of Church-political developments in the twentieth century is far more interesting and certainly more instructive. He has produced a volume packed with valuable insights on a broad range of Church-political issues. His principal concern is to determine the parameters within which the Catholic Church as a whole—given its concrete nature and religious mission—is capable of implementing post-Vatican II stands in favor of greater social equity and freedom. In that sense, while Chile is the reality being studied, it is presented as a case from which important historical lessons can be drawn, and hypotheses or generalizations can be proposed on a more extensive scale.

Among the conclusions that Smith draws on the basis of Chilean

experiences during the seventies are the following: first, that the use of Marxist analysis by Christians can be an important source of internal critique and assessment of the political impact of the Church, while partisan political commitments by clerics challenge internal discipline and the moral influence of the hierarchy (pp. 273–76); second, that relations between the Church and a democratically elected Marxist government can be good, although in a situation of “severe societal polarization and a breakdown of normal democratic mechanisms to resolve conflict, cordial relations . . . are harder to maintain” (p. 226); and third, that “prophetic denunciations of an authoritarian state by Catholic bishops normally do not occur until the core interests of the Church are threatened, and even then have little impact on changing overall policies of repression” (p. 345).

Smith examines earlier historical periods, including the formal separation of Church and State and the distancing of the Catholic Church from Chile’s Conservative Party (1920–35), and Church promotion of social reform during the rise and partial decline of Christian Democracy (1935–70). He highlights the Church’s role vis-à-vis socialism and Marxism during the Popular Unity years (1970–73) and the Church today under military rule. He relies empirically on the study of a broad range of historical works and documents; analysis of public opinion surveys conducted in Chile between 1958 and 1973; his interviews in 1975 with all thirty then-active Catholic bishops, and with a sample of some seventy priests, thirty sisters, and fifty lay leaders; and his experiences in Chile in 1972 and 1975.

The broad theoretical approach employed here is more conventional than Levine’s. Expressing a special debt to David Apter, as well as to Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz (who helped guide this work as a dissertation at Yale), Smith conceptualizes the Church as a complex traditional organization. For each period discussed, he examines four key variables affecting the institution’s capacity to respond to social forces and secular challenges and to implement change: (1) the degree of flexibility in its normative values, (2) the arrangement of elite roles and structures, especially authority patterns, (3) socialization and motivational processes affecting its broad, multilayered, and socially diversified membership, and (4) the material and personal resources that the Church can generate, at both local and transnational levels.

This careful, orderly work treats the reader to a far more detailed discussion of national history and political developments than that in Levine’s study of the Church in Venezuela and Colombia. Smith’s work is even richer than Levine’s in suggestively comparing and contrasting national religious and political realities within Latin America and beyond. Much needed attention is given to the transnational dimension of the Catholic Church and its implications. Despite the more positivistic

framework of this effort, the author clearly has a deep understanding of the inner dynamics of the Church and a strong commitment to it. There are moments when Smith, a former Jesuit, strikes very personal notes.

Ample use of survey data is made in this work, but there is no real discussion of the sampling methods employed or the reliability of the survey data used. Among other things, the data suggests that the Popular Unity's electoral support among the urban working and sub-working classes was not as cohesive as some had concluded earlier (pp. 131–33) and that acquiescence to the 1973 coup among Church leaders even in poor areas was greater than previously thought (p. 212).

The treatment of Chile's Christians for Socialism movement is insightfully comprehensive and illuminates the reasons why the Church hierarchy reacted more strongly to it than to the Popular Unity government itself. Smith's overall effort here is nuanced and objective, although he erroneously states that the Christians for Socialism movement made it a "requirement that priests form political movements" (p. 237). He also draws too tight a comparison between revolutionary exhortations in the documents of radical Christians and Church doctrine as presented by the bishops. However related and however disturbing to the hierarchy the former may have been, they were distinct modes of discourse. Christians for Socialism did not seek to create a "parallel magisterium" for the Catholic Church.

Numerous generalizations drawn in the work, particularly those relating the Church to socialism and Marxism, are constructed with reference to Western Europe, social democracy, and Eurocommunism. Although important, they shed far less light on situations where armed conflict has prevailed, such as contemporary Central America, Zimbabwe, or the Philippines. Indeed, it is striking that Nicaragua is mentioned only once in the text and twice in footnotes.

Smith's discussion of the Chilean Church and military rule from 1973 to 1980 is a rich one that makes reference to numerous situations elsewhere in the Third World. He makes little effort, however, to compare and contrast the Brazilian experience, where official Church-State conflict has been sharper in recent years and Church developments at the grassroots (Basic Christian Communities) have been a greater source of concern to government officials.

Thomas Bruneau's book focuses directly on the some sixty thousand Basic Christian Communities in Brazil in order to examine the influence of the institutional Church on the beliefs and practices of the Catholic population as a whole. He argues that the Brazilian Church has adopted an historically new approach to influencing society, one that seeks in various ways to reach the "lower classes." In the 1950–64 period, such a transformation had been encouraged by government reforms and by Vatican positions favoring social change. In the past de-

cade, this approach was consolidated by even greater awareness that the Church has scant influence among the common people and little support from the State, by a growing recognition of the highly inequitable social implications of the Brazilian "economic model," and by direct repression against Church personnel. The new influence strategy is perceived as having had very limited effectiveness at the grass-roots level. But Bruneau asserts that the flourishing Basic Christian Communities are the most effective means to improve the situation and that their emphasis on faith reflection, popular participation, and change poses a real challenge to Brazil's reigning authoritarian political model.

This volume follows Bruneau's earlier book on the Brazilian Church (1974) and grew out of his curiosity about what difference the Church's changing might make, given its historical lack of influence "among a population much given to 'popular religiosity', forms of Spiritism, fundamental Protestant sects and movements such as messianic cults" (p. 161). Sections of the book provide sketches of the history of the Church, the Brazilian regime since 1964, and Church-State conflict in the public arena (repression against Church personnel; bishops statements; organizational efforts around human rights, land policy, and indigenous peoples), but the emphasis is squarely on grassroots Catholicism and its development.

Bruneau took most of his theoretical and methodological cues from Vallier, which means that he analyzes the Church as a complex organization with institutional interests to protect and promote in an evolving "modern" society. He concentrated his attention on the "intermediate" organizational level of diocesan structures and performed systematic quota sampling (two thousand interviews) in eight "matched" dioceses, in an effort to compare and contrast them. This process yielded interesting data about beliefs and practices, with factor analysis suggesting four patterns of Catholic religiosity: "popular Catholicism," "spiritism," "orthodox Catholicism," and "social Catholicism." But Bruneau's theoretical approach, which treats the Church as an adaptive system whose essential goal is influence in society, remains reductionist and one-dimensional. The reader gets little sense of the vitality and commitment of this most progressive of Latin American Churches.

Although Bruneau accomplishes what he set out to do and makes an important contribution, those elements of the work that do not deal directly with Church influence on Catholic religiosity in Brazil are nonetheless superficial. The book contains little about what is happening elsewhere in the Catholic world, little about intra-Church skirmishes, and no elaboration of what "liberation for the lower classes" might mean concretely in Brazil.

These three important works reflect significant advances in the

understanding of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Latin American politics and growing sophistication in studying the Church. At the same time, they offer no well unified theory or method of study. It seems surprising how little impact the approaches and concepts of Antonio Gramsci or various neo-Marxian authors have had on these North American scholars. Venezuelan sociologist Otto Maduro's *Religion and Social Conflicts* (1982) constitutes one good example of that general theoretical approach. His and other recent works by Latin Americans are providing additional enrichment to our growing understanding of the interaction between religion and politics, an explosive mixture in Latin America today.

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