

COMPETITION AND FLUIDITY IN LATIN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

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- EVANGELISM AND APOSTASY: THE EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF EVANGELICALS IN MODERN MEXICO.* By Kurt Bowen. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. Pp. 270. \$39.95 cloth.)
- EXPORTING THE AMERICAN GOSPEL: GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM.* By Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose. (New York: Routledge, 1996. Pp. 344. \$18.95 paper.)
- THE REFORMATION OF MACHISMO: EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM AND GENDER IN COLOMBIA.* By Elizabeth Brusco. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. Pp. 203. \$35.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- RENDERING UNTO CAESAR: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE STATE IN LATIN AMERICA.* By Anthony Gill. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. 269. \$15.95.)
- SOUTH AND MESO-AMERICAN NATIVE SPIRITUALITY: FROM THE CULT OF THE FEATHERED SERPENT TO THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION.* Volume 4 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest.* By Gary H. Gossen, in collaboration with Miguel León-Portilla. (New York: Crossroad, 1993. Pp. 563. \$49.95 cloth.)
- THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN MISSION HISTORY.* Edited by Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Pp. 212. \$35.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)
- THE WAR OF GODS: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA.* By Michael Löwy. (New York: Verso, 1996. Pp. 192. \$60.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.)

Scholarship on religious questions in Latin America has reached a new stage of discussion. For those familiar with the field, it is no surprise that Pentecostal Protestantism has made many converts nor that the Roman Catholic Church embarked on a new course of action with the poor in liberation theology. While liberation theology has attracted numerous researchers interested in its ideas and applications, Pentecostalism has drawn relatively few analysts (with some important exceptions).¹ Liberation the-

1. See David Stoll, *Is Latin America Going Protestant?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); and David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

ology—which was formulated by some of the best minds in the progressive wing of the Catholic Church—fits into many academics' view of what religion should be and what the Catholic Church should do. Pentecostalism, in contrast, contradicts most intellectuals' worldview. Speaking in tongues, faith healing, belief in the power of the Devil, social conservatism, and the born-again experience seem irrational or ridiculous to many university professors.

Newly published field studies of Protestant converts now afford a deeper understanding of the appeal of Pentecostalism to many Latin Americans. Two monographs reveal larger trends within evangelism, one written by an anthropologist, the other by a sociologist. Anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco's superb study of Colombian Pentecostals, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Protestantism and Gender in Colombia* focuses on the strong gender basis of Pentecostal conversion. The image of conservative Protestantism is that women's role is a submissive one in the family and an oppressed one within the larger society dominated by males. Yet Brusco's study shows that Pentecostalism appeals strongly to women. Conservative Protestantism revalues the family, making it the center of social relations, and thereby raises the status of wives and mothers. For males, this revaluation entails a major shift away from a male culture ("machismo") where men's ties are made largely outside the nuclear family, including forming adulterous relationships with women and socializing with men around drinking, gambling, or general carousing. These men often maintain abusive relationships with their wives and children that compound problems. Brusco finds that women usually convert to Protestantism first and then bring their children and husbands into the faith. Men convert mainly when they experience duress in their life, such as illness or unemployment. With family values a high priority in Pentecostalism, men change their behavior—they stop drinking and smoking, stop cheating on their wives and abusing them, and stop hanging around with macho males. These reborn men achieve a valued place in the family system because their wages are not dissipated outside the family and women and children's home life improves significantly. Brusco argues persuasively that this process constitutes "the reformation of machismo." For many European and Anglo North American feminists, however, the idea that evangelical Protestantism improves conditions for Latin American women is astounding or repugnant or both. Brusco points out nonetheless the adaptiveness of evangelical Protestantism for her Colombian subjects and its potential for shifting gender relations over the long term.

Sociologist Kurt Bowen's *Evangelism and Apostasy: The Evolution and Impact of Evangelicals in Modern Mexico* traces changes in religious beliefs and affiliations over time. Converts do not necessarily remain within the *evangélico* community for more than a few years. Conversion is a "born-again experience," a profound break but not necessarily a lifelong one. As

Protestants found during the Reformation, the problem of the next generation is how to replicate that experience. Bowen's research indicates that even born-again first-generation *evangélicos* drifted back toward Catholicism after the intensity of the conversion experience wore off and participation in the evangelical community became routinized.

While Brusco's approach emphasizes the practical aspects of evangelism, particularly for women, Bowen refocuses the discussion by reminding the reader that individuals' religious beliefs have a "nonmaterial objective." That is, no matter how much religious affiliation is shaped by politics, economics, gender, or other large forces, the aim of evangelical Protestantism is salvation. According to Bowen, Mexican evangelicals understand salvation as "a solution to the problems of the world, most notably that of evil, by supernatural means" (p. 17). Growth of evangelism in Latin America as a region has been widespread. In Mexico the fervor of first-generation converts has generally been retained in small congregations of believers (*sects* in Weber's terminology), and these small congregations have not been transformed into a more institutionalized denominational church. If congregations do not move from a highly committed conversion sect to a denominational church, they risk constraints on growth from institutional instability. Mexican evangelicals have a high dropout rate, but Bowen does not track the apostates' subsequent affiliation to Catholicism or retention of residual attachments to evangelism.

Bowen devotes considerable coverage in *Evangelism and Apostasy* to pastors of evangelical congregations. With the standard Protestant stance of "the priesthood of all believers," ministers are closer to the status of their congregants than are Catholic priests, who undergo lengthy training in the seminary and take a vow of celibacy. Within a much looser institutional framework, fewer constraints regulate the appointment of evangelical pastors, and the potential for factional disputes is higher. Pastors depend directly on their congregations for their livelihood, speeding the Latin Americanization of even the pastorate churches affiliated with churches based in the United States. But pastors' dependence has also put them in direct competition with other pastors for congregants—the practice known as "sheep stealing."

In *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan Rose focus on Christian fundamentalism as a potent (and in their view, toxic) cultural export to developing areas such as Guatemala, the Philippines, sub-Saharan Africa, and Korea. Their premise is that fundamentalist Protestantism is just one element in a bundle of U.S. cultural values that the poor buy into along with capitalism, consumerism, and Western modernity as a package deal. The authors comment, "[E]ven as Christian fundamentalism is purveyed by an aggressive international sales force . . . , the social product that they distribute so successfully around the world is clearly stamped 'Made in the

U.S.A.” (p. 11). The authors further contend, “Fundamentalist Christian Americanism pushes this globalization and simplification of culture more intensely on the religious plane because its believers have more than something to sell. They have a particular Biblical truth to share and billions of unsaved souls to rescue” (p. 14). Given that direct imperialism controlling foreign territory is no longer fashionable, religion provides the means and the justification for cultural and economic imperialism. A provocative line of argument, but I don’t buy it. The pattern in Latin America is for foreign missionaries to be replaced rapidly by local Latin American clergy and for evangelical churches to become Latin Americanized. Moreover, research shows that congregations are drawn in not by doctrines of prosperity or the joys of consumerism but because members feel powerless and seek pragmatic and spiritual ways to reshape their lives and adapt to changing cultural circumstances.

Not surprisingly, the authors of *Exporting the American Gospel* decry the patriarchal elements of fundamentalism that reinforce male authority, particularly as head of the family and in wider society. Yet as Brusco’s work suggests, the revalorization of family life can have a highly positive effect on the status of poor women. Fundamentalism indeed frowns on women pursuing careers, but poor Latin American women are hardly seeking fulfillment in the professions, a middle-class concern that they can only dream of. Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose’s concluding words envision “twin covenants” of “Americanism and their churches” that sell North American values and “the kind of civic and psychic orderliness that does not question the rule of the powerful” (p. 271). In reality, fundamentalists do not generally challenge the political status quo because they distrust “the world.” Nor would I characterize Latin American Pentecostals’ world as having a psychic orderliness. Rather, it has a strong ecstatic element that endows individual religious experience with such power. Perhaps if Latin America becomes more prosperous and Pentecostals share in that wealth, Pentecostalism will experience a softening of its more extreme practices, as has happened in the United States and Canada. For the Latin American poor today, evangelical Christianity offers many adaptive features that make it the fastest growing religion of the dispossessed.

Competition with evangelical Protestantism and its effects on the political stances of the Catholic Church become a main theme of political scientist Anthony Gill’s major work on church and state in Chile and Argentina. Gill borrows from economic analysis in *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*, using microeconomics’ model of the rational actor calculating the costs and benefits of particular strategies and testing the political stances of the Catholic hierarchies in Chile and Argentina under right-wing authoritarianism in the 1970s and 1980s. These two countries have many factors in common, and their historical paths in church-state relations were parallel until the 1930s, when Chile developed

the first sizable evangelical Protestant population in Spanish America that challenged Catholic hegemony. Argentina also counted a significant number of Protestants, but they were foreigners who posed no threat to Catholic domination of the religious sphere.

This difference in the situations of the institutional Catholic Church in Argentina and Chile is key to their sharply divergent roles under military dictatorship, according to Gill. After the 1973 military coup in Chile, the Catholic Church became the outspoken critic of human rights violations and the quashing of democracy. But the Chilean Catholic Church had a strong progressive wing that had undertaken reforms in the 1940s and 1950s in an effort to retain or regain the loyalties of the poor drawn to evangelical Protestantism. This effort resembled those pursued by the church hierarchy in Brazil, also concerned about the growing weakness of the Catholic Church. Leaders of the Chilean (and Brazilian) Catholic Church stood in the forefront among progressive reformers in the wake of Vatican II (1962–1965).

In Argentina, in contrast, the Catholic hierarchy actively supported the military rulers who overthrew the government and thus legitimized the dirty war against Argentine “subversives.” At that time, the Argentine Catholic Church had only a weak progressive wing, which was quickly suppressed. Its smallness prior to the coup may well indicate that the Argentine Catholic Church had no incentive to reform prior to Vatican II, and the hierarchy resisted change in its wake. Protestantism did not challenge the hegemony of Catholicism, and the church remained a close ally of the state. The ones who were outspoken in denouncing the regime and its human rights abuses were not Catholic leaders but Argentine lay women, the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

For Gill, religious competition between the Catholic Church and rival groups is the key to understanding church-state relations under authoritarian political rule. Where competition is nonexistent, the church maintains its alliance with the state in order to continue receiving major privileges. Where active competition emerges, the Catholic Church hierarchy pursues an oppositional strategy. Both Chile and Brazil present complex religious landscapes that include large and active Protestant evangelical populations not found in Argentina. By actively opposing the military regime, the Chilean Catholic Church could assume the role of defending the poor against the repressive regime and enhancing the church’s appeal to large numbers of nominal Catholics. Gill argues in *Rendering unto Caesar*, however, that the Catholic Church as an institution prefers not to be in direct conflict with the state. Thus when Chileans started pressing for democracy after years of military rule, the Catholic Church became less strident in its opposition to the state, seeking to return to a nonconflictive relationship. As Chile returned to democracy, the Chilean Catholic Church came out smelling like a rose for having opposed an authoritarian government, de-

fended human rights, and promoted democracy. The Argentine Catholic Church emerged from the years of military rule stinking of collaboration with a brutal and morally bankrupt regime.

In *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, Michael Löwy examines case studies focusing on liberation theology in Brazil and Central America and its struggles against both liberal and conservative Protestantism. His concluding chapter is provocatively titled "Is Liberation Theology Dead?" Because of the Vatican's more recent hostility to liberation theologians and its systematic replacement of liberationist bishops with more conservative ones, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has backed away from "the preferential option for the poor." This theological stance came out of the 1979 conference in Puebla, Mexico, attended by newly elected Pope John Paul II. The phrase "preferential option" was to indicate the church's commitment to the poor, but it also softened the strong commitment to the poor and to liberation theology made by Pope Paul VI at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. Cynics say that the Catholic hierarchy's stance regarding the poor is now less preferential and more optional.

The Vatican of Pope John Paul II is actively pursuing normalization of the Latin American Catholic Church, that is, hierarchical and ideological control by Rome and a systematic undermining or silencing of progressive elements. As the hierarchy has become more conservative politically and theologically, reaffirmed the church's stances on clerical celibacy and an exclusively male priesthood, and backed away from the more egalitarian aspects of liberation theology, the crisis in the Catholic Church has deepened. Large numbers of clerics have left the priesthood in Latin America and elsewhere, a trend that has prompted dwindling numbers of U.S. and European priests to fill the shrinking ranks of priests in the region. Although the rhetoric of the 1992 meeting of Conferencia Episcopal de Latinoamérica (CELAM) in Santo Domingo maintained the core phrase "preferential option for the poor," papal backing is absent for programs of liberation theology that were launched to realize that goal. Consistent with the Vatican's current ideological position, but shocking nevertheless, is the fact that after the Haitian military overthrew the democratically elected government of liberationist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991, the Vatican alone among all world governments recognized the new government. In addition, as Löwy points out, the Vatican had already expelled Aristide from the Salesian Order for "incitement to hatred and violence, as well as exalting class struggle" (p. 126).

Many Latin American clerics and an unknown number of parishioners remain loyal to the liberationist vision, but the church hierarchy promotes conservative Catholicism while making a place for the charismatic renewal movement (Catholicism's version of Pentecostalism). The Catholic Church under Pope John Paul II has reemphasized the spiritual sphere, thus avoiding progressive politics and overt challenges to temporal gov-

ernments. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the 1990 defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (who had closely identified themselves with liberation theology), and the emergence of the post-cold war world has created a general crisis for the Latin American Left. For conservative Catholics, these developments seem to confirm the correctness of their stances. Löwy points out that despite the current conservatism of the church hierarchy, the years when liberation theology was a significant theological current educated many Catholics in a new way of thinking and acting in the world. The critique of power and the religious and social conscience that liberation theology taught will not disappear overnight, nor will its new vision of what is possible. In Mexico, for example, the network of grassroots communities formed in liberationist Bishop Samuel Ruiz's diocese of Chiapas laid the groundwork for the political action occurring in the Zapatista uprising.

The long history of Latin American Christianity has shown that beliefs were malleable at the local level, particularly where outright rejection of Christianity was impossible (in the so-called spiritual conquest) but local practices could vary to some degree. In *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation*, edited by Gary Gossen in collaboration with Miguel León-Portilla, diverse adaptations in the colonial period are portrayed in essays on Nahuatized Christianity, Tzeltal and Yucatec Maya blended Christianity, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The message that Spanish friars preached was often not what Indians heard or practiced. Blended religions, often labeled "syncretism," were created in the long contact period between Catholicism and native peoples. David Scotchmer shows that Mayas continue to adapt their traditional cultural beliefs even if they convert to Protestantism. No matter what their religious affiliation, Mayas retain their basic concerns for "peace with deity/ies, an environment that sustains life, and with others in the human family" (p. 507).

Contributions to *The New Latin American Mission History*, edited by Erick Langer and Robert Jackson, reassess the frontier institution designed to indoctrinate Indians in Christian beliefs but also to teach them European agriculture and artisanry. Missions thus aimed to incorporate Indians body and soul, nature and culture, into the European system. According to historian David Sweet, the differences among missions did not arise from religious orders (Franciscan versus Jesuit) or from national origins (Spanish or Portuguese) but from region, climate, and the degree of missionary control (rigid or lax). Mission life brought major changes in frontier natives' lives: disease and depopulation due to contact with Europeans, malnutrition, discipline and regimentation, deculturation, infantilization, and alienation from nature. But Sweet also discusses why some Indians entered missions willingly: they perceived opportunities in the new system, the most important being survival. Environmental conditions like drought in California or

predations of slavers in Brazil made the mission appear to be a haven in a dangerous world. But its safety was largely illusory. The essays in this collection form a critique of the mission system, yet a nuanced one that places mission Indians at the center of analysis as historical actors in their own right. As Sweet points out, the genocide school of criticism “perpetuates Bolton’s perspective on the history of the frontier missions by reaffirming the primary agency of the missionaries in mission Indian history” (p. 43).

As a historian, I have found these new studies of the modern Catholic Church and Latin American Protestantism to be welcome additions to the literature. They indicate that sufficient time has passed for reappraisals of movements initiated only a few decades ago. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Catholic Church was embarking on a new path, and the 1968 Latin American Bishops Conference meeting in Medellín with Pope Paul VI presiding seemed to be a turning point. But that gathering may have been instead the zenith of the progressive movement within the Catholic Church. If large numbers of nominal Catholics become involved with their church, it may well be through the charismatic renewal movement and not through ecclesial base communities. The fate of members of grassroots communities as the Catholic hierarchy has adopted increasingly conservative positions certainly warrants research. Longitudinal studies of popular-class Catholics and Protestants and their shifting religious affiliations can provide tremendous insight into the largest sector of the Latin American population. Their stories are only now being told and are far more difficult to uncover than the history of church and state as institutions. For long-dead peoples whose history is largely lost, rereading the remaining historical record may reveal much more than we currently can see. Mission Indians and others from the distant past may still be able to speak to us across the centuries, if we care to listen.