

CATHOLICISM, POLITICS, AND SOCIETY IN MODERN LATIN AMERICA

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Introduction

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In 1835, the French liberal economist Michel Chevalier returned home after several years spent travelling across the United States. In his reflections on US society and economy, as well as the history of the Americas in general, Chevalier wrote: “Our European civilization has a twofold source, the Romans and the Teutonic nations . . . These two branches, Latin and German, re-appear in the New World; South America, like southern Europe, is Roman Catholic and Latin; North America belongs to the Protestant Anglo-Saxon population.”¹

The distinction drawn by Chevalier between “Anglo” America and “Latin” America would later become part of a vibrant debate among scholars about how exactly the region south of the Rio Grande became known as “Latin America.”² While opinions diverge, there is general agreement that Catholicism, and the region’s common Catholic heritage, were an essential part of what enabled contemporaries, including Chevalier himself, to give birth to the idea of “Latin America.” Nevertheless, during that same period the Catholic Church across Latin America was thrown in social, economic, and political turmoil, and was thus paradoxically forced to fight for its place in the continent that it was helping to conceptualize.

After being sheltered in the warm bosom of the Spanish Crown for 300 years, the Catholic Church found itself alone in Latin America. To the fear and dismay of royalist Rome, Republican forces were victorious and led the continent to Independence. Permanently detached from the monarchy, the Catholic Church was

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left to fight for its place in the lives of millions of people who would eventually be living in over 20 independent republics. Nevertheless, even Independence could not erase the enduring legacy of the long colonial past. The wealth and the ideological and spiritual authority that the Catholic Church held in the eyes of millions of new “citizens” turned this institution into an important inheritance that the new republics received, perhaps the most important one. As Anthony Gill has argued, “it became imperative for the liberation forces to control the Church either by continuing to manipulate the internal workings of the Catholic hierarchy via the *patronato* or destroying its external sources of power, mainly its wealth and ideological linkages to the population.”³ For their part, Rome and the Catholic episcopacy in Latin America were reluctant to hand over the keys, and conflicts over various issues related to the church, state, and society quickly erupted.

The means through which these conflicts were resolved varied greatly, as did the role that the Catholic in the society of the new nation states. In Mexico, where anti-clerical liberals held the reins of power for most of the nineteenth century, the church was the target of zealous attacks. First, Antonio López de Santa Anna’s administration closed church schools, secularized missions, and forbade priest from participating in politics. Then, the administration headed by President Benito Juárez stripped the church of much of its lands and possessions, implemented restricted tariffs for religious sacraments, and officially declared the separation of church and state in 1859.⁴ While the church was able to restore some of its previous functions during the *Porfiriato*, its days as an inherent and formal part of government were over. Its social influence and role, however, were far from extinct. The status of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national symbol is a salient example of how Catholicism has continued to play a significant role in modern nation building, even after the separation of church and state. In other cases, the church cultivated “social and emotional bonds that emerged from group spiritual exercises, coordinated pilgrimages and the cult of miraculous images” to stimulate and mobilize the faithful on behalf of this institution.⁵

In Peru, as in Mexico, the church was also busy carving out new spaces and pursuing new venues. Nevertheless, the Peruvian church found more powerful allies than its Mexican counterpart. The fact was that the clashes between liberals and conservatives were never as acute in Peru as they had been in Mexico. After Independence, Peruvian liberals were much more interested in controlling the church than in uprooting it from Peruvian society to create a secular state.⁶ Furthermore, the Catholic Church had a strong base in the Southern city of Arequipa and the Southern departments of Peru, which looked out for its interests even when anti-clerical voices grew louder, after the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). To wit, well into the twentieth century, it was able to preserve

the exclusive status of Catholicism as the only religion that could be publicly exercised, a privilege that ended in 1915, when freedom of religion was enacted in the country's constitution.

Issues concerning Church and state such as freedom of religion or secular marriage, which were a cause of discontent and conflict throughout the nineteenth century in Latin America, were, for the most part, settled by the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, decades after the church had been separated from the Crown, there was still no consensus regarding its place in the public and private life of most Latin American nations. As social, political, and legal agreements were contested, their fragile nature was constantly exposed.

One significant challenge in that regard was the growing presence of new social protagonists on the national stage and the emergence of mass politics across the continent in the 1930s and 1940s. These movements stirred anxiety among the Catholic episcopacies who shared a fear of Communism or a renewed outbreak of anti-clericalism, or were concerned that the new forces would wrest from the church its control over the masses. Nevertheless, reactions often diverged and depended on local contexts. In this context, Cubas Ramacciotti's article analyzes the various ways in which prominent Peruvian Catholics, within and outside the church hierarchy, reacted to the new political landscape in the 1930s. Unlike the Catholic Church in Argentina that, at least for a time, was able to find a comfortable place among the supporters of Juan D. Perón, the Peruvian church was unable, unwilling, or both, to align itself with any of the new popular parties that were now part of the country's political panorama. Instead, Catholic laymen, with the backing of the clergy, established their own party, the *Unión Popular*. Thus, segments of the Peruvian Catholic world accepted the new political game and attempted to play by its rules.

The *Unión Popular*, however, was unsuccessful in its electoral endeavors, and the Catholic Church was left without a representative in the new government and Constituent Assembly. The church, therefore, attempted to influence the debate over the Peruvian Constitution through pastoral letters and the writings of politicians such as Víctor Andrés Belaunde, who strongly identified with the Catholic Church. Thus, Cubas Ramacciotti, more than emphasizing the actual impact of these measures on the articulation of the 1933 constitution, highlights the various avenues and means through which the church tried to influence the political sphere, in light of its loss of direct political power, a recurring theme since Independence.

While members of the church's hierarchy were seeking ways to influence decisions being made in the chambers of Congress, congressmen and politicians, even the most anticlerical, often discovered that they relied on the church for various social functions that the state could not fulfill. As Gertrude Yeager has

pointed out in the case of mid-nineteenth century Chile, the state and the church collaborated in assigning lay women to administer and operate hospitals, schools, and other charitable institutions.⁷ Religious missions were another important institution in this regard, as they were usually located in frontier areas, where the state had little presence. The establishment and operations of the mission system during the colonial period has been thoroughly studied; however, as Erick Langer points out, the institution was just as important in the post-Independence period.⁸

Focusing on the life history of René Ramírez, a prominent Paraguayan indigenous leader during the second half of the twentieth century, Valentina Bonifacio sheds light on the complex dynamics between missionaries and their indigenous converts. The Salesian mission of Puerto Casado was established in 1925 in the Paraguayan Chaco. As in other countries, the mission played an important role in nation building and was part of a wider effort to bring “progress and regeneration” to the Indian race. During the 1960s and 1970s, largely in response to the Second Vatican Council and the 1971 Declaration of Barbados, missionaries, as well as other Catholic institutions, rethought their roles among indigenous peoples as well as the way they had defined them. Rather than “civilizing” the Indian as part of a wider national “modernization project,” missionaries began to promote indigenous rights and emphasize indigenous agency.

It was precisely during this period that Ramírez moved into the mission and was singled out by the missionaries as a future indigenous leader. He became the first indigenous member of the Carlos Casado S.A. trade union and eventually led the indigenous struggle for land which had the support of the Salesian missionaries. Nevertheless, Ramírez was also looked upon critically by the missionaries who, at times, believed that he was overstepping his boundaries. Thus, Bonifacio illuminates how missionaries contributed to enhancing indigenous agency while attempting to control it and keep it under their auspices. Indians were to be indigenous leaders, however the work of leading the nation as whole was reserved for whiter hands.

The emphasis on indigenous issues was a part of a broader transformation within the Catholic Church in general, and the Latin American church in particular, that resulted from the growing presence of Liberation Theology. The church’s preoccupation with issues of poverty, violence, and social inequality took precedence over other aspects, placing it at odds with the right-wing dictatorships that came to power and breaking the strong bonds between the governing elite and the church. In some countries, such as Brazil, the break with the Catholic Church sent the government on a quest for new religious partners, which they found in disparate Pentecostal denominations.⁹ The fractures in the Catholic monopoly over the Latin American religious landscape deepened during the 1980s with the return to democracy. Catholicism was no longer the only religious option

and millions of people were turning to the countless Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations that mushroomed across the continent.

Since its separation from the Crown, throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, the church fought to preserve its prerogatives and access to power. Now, it also had to fight for adherents in a competitive religious economy. One of its responses to this new economy can be seen in the Catholic Charismatic Movement (CCM), a lay movement that originated in the 1960s. The CCM shares many commonalities with Protestant Pentecostalism and has been similarly successful among indigenous peoples and women. Focusing on Guatemala, Andrea Althoff argues that the CCM derives its appeal from the fact that it allowed adherents to remain Catholic while enabling them to challenge the Catholic hierarchy. Catholics who no longer found answers to their spiritual needs within the Catholic Church, or were critical of its leadership, could leave the church altogether and find a religious alternative in one of the many denominations on offer in the new religious economy. Nevertheless, this could only be a valid option for those who no longer granted significance to the fact of being Catholic, in and of itself. For those who wished to preserve their own Catholic identity, the CCM was a compelling alternative.

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit, viewed as capable of providing the believer direct access to the divine, undermined established hierarchies, as Mayan women no longer depended solely on priests and sacraments to conduct their relationship with God. Thus, the church found a way of empowering women while keeping them within its institutional boundaries. To an extent, this method resembles the church's conduct with René Ramírez, empowering him while making sure that he did not threaten its own hierarchies.

I began this introduction contending that Catholicism was one of the commonalities that made the idea of Latin America possible and plausible, but signaling that this happened, oddly enough, at a historical moment when many intellectuals would have wished for their newly born nations to be less "Catholic." Almost two hundred years later, the wishes of these intellectuals seems to be coming true in some places, albeit hardly in the way that they had originally envisioned. Considering the major shifts in church and state since Independence, and even more so, the recent mass conversion to Pentecostalism across the region, I will conclude with a question: Can Catholicism still be considered one of the pillars of a common continental identity? Or, perhaps, do these religious transformations make Latin America less "Latin"?

Notes

- 1 <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/chevalier-society-manners-and-politics-in-the-united-states>
Last visited 4 November 2018.
- 2 See: Michel Gobat, “The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy, and Race,” *American Historical Review*, 118. 5 (2013): pp. 1345-1375; John L. Phelan, “Pan-Latinism, French Intervention in Mexico (1861-1867) and the Genesis of the Idea of Latin America,” in Juan A. Ortega (ed.), *Conciencia y autenticidad históricas: Escritos en homenaje a Edmundo O’Gorman* (Mexico, D.F.:UNAM, 1968), pp. 279-289; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- 3 Anthony Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 25.
- 4 Onida E. Gonzáles and Justo L. Gonzáles, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 138-143.
- 5 Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 5.
- 6 Fernando Armas Asin, *Liberales, protestantes y masones: modernidad y tolerancia religiosa: Perú siglo XIX* (Lima Fondo Editorial PUCP, 1998).
- 7 Gertrude M. Yeager, “Female Apostolates and Modernization in Mid-Nineteenth Century Chile,” *The Americas*, 55.3 (1999): pp. 425-458.
- 8 Erick D. Langer, *Expecting Pears from an Elm Tree: Franciscan Missions on the Chiriguano Frontier in the Heart of South America, 1830-1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 9 R. Andrew Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).