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Protestantism in Guatemala: A Personal Liberation Theology

“Liberation Theologies” was probably the most challenging and exciting course I took in my time here at Goshen College. It was exciting because it promised to make theology relevant to those who needed it the most and because it spoke necessary words to those of us who live in wealth. My experience in this class was heightened by the fact that I had spent a previous semester in Guatemala, where I saw first-hand the environment out of which Latin American liberation theology arose. One of my greatest disappointments, however, was the realization that liberation theology was no longer as visible or, it seemed to me, as vibrant in Guatemala as it used to be. Why this shift? Why now, when it seemed that the Catholic Church was making huge strides towards relevance and justice? I explored this topic in my final paper for the course.

In the 1960s and ‘70s, the development of liberation theology in Latin America seemed likely to solidify Catholicism in the region. The emphases of identification with the poor and liberation from economic oppression moved the Catholic Church from its passive, spiritual role to an active political presence. The Church protested human rights violations, spoke out against corruption in the government, and sought to improve the lives of its parishioners in concrete ways. The Catholic Church was finally serving the people instead of functioning as a justification of Western and oligarchic oppression, as it had done since the Conquest.

Ironically, the number of Catholics in Latin America is now declining sharply. In Guatemala, the most Protestant of all Latin American countries, about 40% of people are Protestant.¹ Twenty years ago, there were only a handful of Protestants in the country. The reasons for this shift are multiple and complex. Part of the issue is the Vatican's failure to adequately support the progressive movement, but in other ways, Protestant growth represents some significant shortcomings in liberation theology itself, such as its de-emphasis of personal ethics and its lack of emotionality. Protestants have significantly contributed to the cause of liberation, excluding some neo-Pentecostal movements. Progressive North American scholars must recognize that Protestantism in Latin America does not necessarily represent a threat to liberation theology, but balances the sociopolitical emphasis of the Catholic Church with an emphasis on personal liberation; both are relevant and necessary in the Latin American context.

Before discussing the reasons for this religious shift, it is important for North Americans to recognize two characteristics of Latin American Protestantism. The first is that this movement, though mainly evangelical and Pentecostal in form, should not necessarily be equated with the North American "religious right." Evangelicals in Latin America have supported various types of governments. David Smilde notes that evangelicals have facilitated a left-wing revolution in Nicaragua, endorsed corrupt right-wing autocrats in Guatemala, and participated *en masse* in the Brazilian electoral system.² In the context of Latin America, it is inaccurate to associate evangelical Protestantism with political conservatism, as we often do in the United States.

¹ "Guatemala: A Rising Faith," Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, episode no. 836, first broadcast 6 May 2005 by PBS. Online article at <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week836/cover.html>>

Secondly, the charismatic trends associated with Pentecostalism actually cut across denominational lines in Latin America. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) represents this multid denominational phenomenon. The CCR is a lay movement that emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit and seeks to revitalize the church. The main dividing line between the CCR and Protestant Pentecostals is simply the Catholics' continued centralization of the Virgin Mary.³ Today CCR easily eclipses in vibrancy and popularity the Catholic Base Christian Communities (CEBs) associated with liberation theology.

With these caveats in mind, we can examine the reasons for the rapid growth of Protestantism in Latin America. First, the Catholic Church's own limitations have contributed to this shift. One central issue is the lack of available Catholic priests, especially in the rural areas of Latin America. The inability of the Catholic Church to provide priests for these people led to a weakening of Catholic ties in rural areas and greater openness to Protestant missionaries. Vatican policy has only exacerbated this trend. The Catholic hierarchy has banned the ordination of indigenous deacons, who often have families, because of their concern to maintain the celibacy of the priesthood.⁴ Indigenous Catholics with gifts for preaching often end up converting to Protestant groups and become evangelical preachers.

² David Smilde, Book Review: *Evangelicals and Politics in Latin America: Moving Beyond Monolithic Portraits*, *History of Religions* 42, no. 3 (2003): 245-6.

³ R. Andrew Chesnut, "Opting for the Spirit in Latin America: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal as a Response to Pentecostal Competition," in *Contemporary Catholicism, Religious Pluralism, and Democracy in Latin America: Challenges, Responses, and Impact Conference Held in Notre Dame, Indiana 31 March-1 April 2005*, (Notre Dame, IN: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 2004), 10.

⁴ "Staying Alive," *Economist* 364, no. 8304 (2002): 35.

Since the 1980s, the Vatican has also retreated to some extent from its earlier support of liberation theology, in some cases even becoming antagonistic. In 1963, Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, in support of liberation theology. The next pope, Paul VI, also gave his support to the movement with his *Populorum Progressio* in 1967. However, during the papacy of John Paul II, this support largely turned to criticism. In his visit to Mexico in 1990, for instance, John Paul II denounced the ties between liberation theology and Marxism. The withdrawal of support from the Vatican blunted the political activism of Catholic liberation theology as well as its identification with the poor.

However, the growth of Protestantism is more attributable to positive aspects of this movement rather than any failures within Catholicism. The greatest draw to Protestantism is its emphasis on personal morality. Besides the social oppression that liberation theology seeks to alleviate, many Latin Americans suffer from personal oppression such as alcoholism and financial irresponsibility. Protestant churches help to “liberate” members from these vices, resulting in better lives for their families

Related to their concern with personal ethics, Protestant churches often address domestic issues much more fully than do Catholics. Carol Ann Drogus says that Catholic CEBs rarely address familial issues, preferring to focus instead on large political and social issues.⁵ Pentecostals, on the other hand, stress domestic issues. They offer advice to women on how to be better mothers and denounce male deviancy, such as alcoholism and adultery. Although Pentecostals do reinforce traditional gender roles, Drogus says,

⁵ Carol Ann Drogus, “Private Power or Public Power: Pentecostalism, Base Communities, and Gender,” in *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, ed. Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 65.

this emphasis can actually have the effect of greater egalitarianism in the household. Rather than redefining women's gender roles, Pentecostals seek to reform the males in their congregation to create their familial ideal.⁶ Many Latin American women find this appealing.

The strong sense of community in Protestant churches compounds the effectiveness of their "personal liberation theology" by helping to hold their members accountable. Tightly knit Protestant communities can exert substantial pressure against any perceived "ungodliness" in their individual members. There is much less personal accountability in the Catholic religion; men, for instance, often have little respect for clerical opinions concerning domestic issues, and the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church works against the possibility of horizontal accountability that is apparent in Protestant churches.⁷ Protestants can both effect personal change and maintain this change over time.

Another possible reason for the success of Protestantism in Latin America is its compatibility with small-scale entrepreneurship, which is now an important way of life for many lower class Latin Americans. Henri Gooren explores this issue in the context of Guatemala, noting that Protestants have stressed personal ethics that make business success more likely: optimism, sobriety, hard work, punctuality, honesty, etc.⁸ In addition, Protestant churches provide important networks among their members that can

⁶ Drogus, "Private Power," 58.

⁷ Carol Ann Drogus, "Religious Change and Women's Status in Latin America: A Comparison of Catholic Base Communities and Pentecostal Churches," (Notre Dame, IN: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 1994): 3.

⁸ Henri Gooren, "Catholic and Non-Catholic Theologies of Liberation: Poverty, Self-Improvement, and Ethics Among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2002): 33.

help small businesses survive, especially in the first few years.⁹ Furthermore, traditional Catholic festivities, such as those practiced by the *cofradías* in rural Guatemala, sometimes require a commitment of multiple days at a time. This was appropriate for an agricultural society, with its slower rhythms of sowing and harvesting, but small business owners find it impossible to leave their businesses for an extended period. Therefore, Catholicism is seen in some areas as an outdated hindrance to entrepreneurship.

Besides the practical draw, Latin Americans often find that Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism, is more compatible with native spirituality. For instance, the Mayan belief in spirits and shamans is easily translated into the spirit-filled worship of Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal emphasis on miraculous healing is comparable to ancient Mayan healing ceremonies.¹⁰ The emotionalism of Pentecostal religion was also very attractive to indigenous people whose spirituality did not mesh well with the increasingly rational Catholic emphasis on social justice.

Finally, Protestantism proved better able to inspire hope in its parishioners than Catholic liberation theology. In Guatemala, Gooren says, after the institution of a formal civilian democracy in 1985-86, there was a general pessimism regarding the possibilities of social change through politics.¹¹ Though Catholics had stressed their solidarity with the poor, this did not necessarily result in substantial changes in the economic situations of most people. Poverty was still widespread, the country was still oppressed by North

⁹ Henri Gooren, "Catholic and Non-Catholic Theologies of Liberation," 33.

¹⁰ Edward L. Cleary, "Evangelicals and Competition in Guatemala," in *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, ed. Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 178.

¹¹ Henri Gooren, "Catholic and Non-Catholic Theologies of Liberation: Poverty, Self-Improvement, and Ethics Among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2002): 39.

American and oligarchic policies, and there was little hope of rooting out corruption in the government. Pentecostalism offered a practical way for people to improve their own situations and, with its emphasis on eschatology and future happiness, infused its converts with new optimism. Pentecostals focused on the personal realm, which the poor had some measure of control over, as opposed to the political realm, which the poor despaired of changing.

Protestantism in general has had a positive influence on Latin Americans, bringing actual improvements to their lives through an emphasis on personal morality. However, some neo-Pentecostal movements should arouse some suspicion. This is especially true of the “megachurches,” that have arisen primarily in urban areas such as Guatemala City. These churches, generally led by one charismatic preacher, often harbor harmful theology, which may eventually have negative effects on Latin American society.

First, megachurches often preach a variety of the “health and wealth” gospel, claiming that conversion to Christianity will result in material benefits from God. This view represents the opposite extreme from Catholic liberation theology. Instead of focusing on structural forms of oppression that cause poverty, neo-Pentecostalism often attributes economic realities to spiritual causes. Besides taking focus away from structural oppression, neo-Pentecostalism can remove pressure on wealthy Latin Americans to reduce the extreme imbalance of wealth in the region. Jorge Lopez, pastor of Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala in Guatemala City, exemplifies this movement. His congregation recently built the largest church building in Central America, with

seating for 13,000, a 300-square meter stage, a seven-story parking garage, and a heliport.

In an article with *Charisma* magazine, Lopez says:

“I saw that the evangelical Church in Guatemala was totally geared towards poor people...I observed that very few middle-class people would even come to church... We were told in those days that ministers should not own property and that if you had money you were materialistic. But something inside me did not buy that. So I decided to swim against the current.”¹²

Lopez targets the middle and upper class sector of the population by connecting God with wealth and refusing to acknowledge the structural oppression in Guatemala.

Secondly, megachurches often do not contribute to the general community-building effect of Protestantism. Megachurches attract people away from Catholic and other Protestant church structures, but have a lower retention rate than do other Protestant churches. Dennis Smith, a Presbyterian missionary in Guatemala, says, “Megachurches have wide front doors, but also wide back doors.”¹³ Though they succeed in attracting huge numbers of converts, megachurches do not generate strong enough community bonds to retain their members. Many people who leave these megachurches do not find other church homes. Now isolated from their Catholic or Protestant relatives, they lose the support structure of a church community.

In conclusion, Protestantism in general is a positive influence on Latin America, providing a necessary balance to Catholic liberation theology. With the exception of some neo-Pentecostal movements, Protestantism has the potential to transform Latin

¹² J. Lee Grady, “Small Nation, Big Faith,” *Charisma* 29, no. 6 (2004): 44.

¹³ Dennis Smith, Class Lecture, 12 October 2005.

American society in ways not possible using only the paradigm of liberation theology. We must recognize that true liberation can only be achieved by addressing both personal ethics and structural oppression, and that an underemphasis on either will impede this goal. Latin American evangelical Protestantism should be recognized as a “personal liberation theology,” just as relevant as Catholic sociopolitical liberation theology.

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