Disputed Lands: the Rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America

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Why did the Progressive Catholic Church not turn into a Mass Movement with the End of the Dictatorships?
Assess the Impact of Pentecostalism on this Decline.

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church "could no longer claim Latin America as its own. The traditional religious monopoly was giving way"[1] – The religious story of Latin America under Hispanic rule has long been one of Catholic religious hegemony and dominance. When the fleet of Conquistadores set sail for the New World, the Catholic Church accompanied them and endorsed their quest for riches and the salvation of souls. Soon, the indigenous religions had been suppressed, but also assimilated and incorporated, as the Catholic Church established a powerful political and religious predominance, particularly after the expulsion of the Jesuits missionaries. Yet following independence, many national Catholic Churches saw their land and political power reduced dramatically by liberal politicians, while its hegemony was increasingly challenged by non-Catholic migration and the rise of alternative mobilising ideologies, such as Marxism. Increasingly, the dominant Catholic elites, who had so far courted the upper classes channelling resources to the more lucrative members of their parish, came to realise that great numbers of their flock were turning away from the Church's fold. With the rise of military authoritarian dictatorships in the region, national Catholic Churches, who had up to that pointed chosen the path of least resistance of accommodation with the dominant elites, concluded that they had to take a stand: Thus, many national Churches opted for the poor, denouncing human rights abuses and turning to the hitherto forgotten poorer segments of society, establishing Communidades Eclesiales de Base (CEBs), some of which took on left-wing overtones, particularly those in the remote villages and jungles of Central America, where death squads and guerrillas endangered the very survival of the congregation. Thus, the progressive Church's call to liberation was often framed in the language of class struggle and violence. At the same time, however, other national ecclesiastical elites, for example in Argentina, remained firmly on the side of the oppressive regime, while the CEBs reached only a marginal sector of the population. When the era of authoritarian oppression drew to an end and a democratic consensus dawned in the region, civil society began to regroup outside the protective wings of the Church. Due in a great part to a conservative backlash within its hierarchy, the Catholic Church often drew back from its political role. At the same time, an ever increasing net of evangelical Churches, mostly endogenous Pentecostals, rapidly spread its web of churches and prayer halls across the country, attracting precisely those marginalised groups which the progressive Church had failed to reach, with popular religious services and self-improvement courses. Is Latin America thus permanently falling under the "Shadow of Luther"[2], while the Catholic cathedrals and churches remain empty as the Vatican, under conservative leadership of the more reactionary ecclesiastical carder, continues to alienate its flock, driving them into the welcoming arms of evangelicals?

This essay explores the role of the progressive Catholic Church with the end of authoritarian rule in Latin America. It assesses the role that the rise of Pentecostalism played in this decline.

In the following I briefly examine the rise of Liberation Theory and the Progressive Church in Latin America. I assess

its impact, which I judge to be fairly limited, yet varying across countries. Next I turn to the rise of Pentecostalism, which, as the most common form of evangelicalism in the region, I focus on. I contrast the decline of the Catholic Church with the simultaneous rise of Pentecostalism. I conclude that the decline of the progressive Church cannot solely be blamed on its Pentecostal adversary, but also on the nature of Liberation Theory itself.

2. Opting for the Poor – Liberation Theology and its Impact

2.1 From Neglect to Preferential option – History of Liberation Theory

"Nothing lies outside […] political commitment. Everything has a political color"[3] – After almost four centuries of neglect, catering for the upper echelons of society, who were more likely to contribute to the collection plates, the Catholic Church turned its attention to the poorer segments of society in the post-War decades. Whereas previously the Church leaders, "firmly allied with elites opposed to change in the established order of things generally"[4], had set themselves against popular activism and protest, religion increasingly appeared synonymous with solidarity and resistance to injustice and repression, under the heading of Liberation Theology. Thus, the global public was confronted with stories of priests and nuns bravely confronting paramilitary death squads in the jungle and loudly condemning poverty and repression in the streets of Rio de Janeiro or Guatemala City. What had triggered this impressive volte-face? And how much influence did the progressive Church really have in the region?

These dramatic changes emerged at a time of intense social and economic transformation and profound upheavals in the political landscape: Efforts to foster economic growth through protected industrialization had failed, with a few rare exceptions, and the 1970s witnessed a prolonged slide into debt, economic depression and poverty. This was exacerbated by the policies adopted by the military governments during the 1970s, which had the effect of distributing income upward, away from the lower classes.[5] The same period was marked by accelerated urbanization, expanding literacy, and a series of agrarian reforms which impoverished and further proletarianized peasants throughout Latin America. On the political side, the changes were equally dramatic: The 1960s witnessed a turn to military authoritarianism in the major South American countries[6], followed in the next decade by the crisis of reactionary rule in Central America. Initially successful radically left-wing revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador quickly degenerated into protracted and violent civil war at the end of the decade.[7] In such a context, "the ideas of liberation theology resonated strongly"[8], in that it found a ready and available audience which in many ways simply had not existed before. In part, this clientele was a product of the social and economic changes described above. Agrarian proletarianization and urbanization cut many populations loose from the social bonds which had previously structured and regulated their daily life. Furthermore, the intense political repression closed alternative channels, such as political parties or trade unions, thus driving popular groups almost by default to the churches.[9]

Following the Second Vatican Council[10], a general effort began to reorient Latin American Catholicism. In 1968 the General Meeting of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, triggered an inter-church debate on poverty and reform,[11] which was to take the Latin American Church far beyond the remit set out by Vatican II: Progressive Catholics formed what was called the Popular Church which gained hegemony within the Catholic Church, at least for a while. The Popular Church's theoretical blueprint was Liberation Theory, which borrowed from Marxism and emphasized social transformation as salvation,[12] identifying unjust social structures as sinful and calling for radical change, coming close to justifying popular insurrection as a response to 'institutional violence'.[13] The emphasis was on social and economic rights and the commitment to mobilizing the poor to struggle for their own liberation.[14] Poverty was explained in structural terms, in Marxist categories of class, conflict and exploitation, mixed with dependency theory, which had to be overcome to improve the lives of the impoverished masses living in such abject poverty that they were excluded from living a fully Christian life. The poor thus appeared less as subjects of the church's actions or programmes than active subjects, with a privileged insight into reality.[15] Priests and nuns reached out to poor communities, often opting to live in poor barrios or remote villages, sharing the poverty and repression their parishioners had to endure.

The Church went on to establish a new organisational model to implement these new ideas: Bishops and priests began setting up 'ecclesial base communities' (CEBs), grassroots groups of working-class or peasant Catholics who would study the bible and use it as a basis for action.[16] The major growth of CEBs dates back to the mid-1970s.

CEBs are normally small groups, ordinarily homogeneous in social composition and comprised of poor people. In addition to the religious aspects of the groups, members frequently organize and participate in community projects or activities geared toward self-improvement.[17] CEBs are usually born linked to the churches, specifically from initiatives by bishops, religious orders, priest, nuns or lay agents commissioned by the church. Ties, which are maintained through regular visits by clergy and instructional material provided by the church, mean that they are not autonomous of isolated from the institutional church, but rather constantly "influenced by it, and often subject to its monitoring and control"[18]. In some instance, notably in Nicaragua and El Salvador, CEBs have served as cover for guerrilla forces.[19]

In 1979 at the next General Meeting of the CELAM in Puebla, the debates were more contested, with tension among the different factions of bishops: A general conservative backlash had occurred among the hierarchy against Liberation Theology, encouraged by Pope John Paul II.[20] The Pope and his conservative bishops restricted the progressive clergy's political activities and cut back many of the innovations introduced during the heady days of dictatorship.[21]

2.2 A Beleaguered Minority – Impact of Liberation Theory

This paper has shown that the progressive Church set out to achieve dramatic social change and ultimately the liberation of the poor. Yet, despite, or maybe because of, these ambitious political and social aspirations, its impact has been rather limited: While Medellín was a defining moment for the Latin American Church, its regional impact should not be overemphasised. The conference was dominated by a handful of progressive bishops who set the conference agenda. Yet when it came to applying the preferential option in their home countries, several episcopacies, including that of the host country, Colombia, were less than responsive to the needs of the popular classes.[22] The middle and upper classes, those formerly preferred segments of society, were often alienated by the preferential option for the poor.[23]

Indeed, Liberation Theology was "always only one faction – and a beleaguered minority at that – within the larger Church"[24], which fostered its own conservative reaction within the Catholic Church. Within the regional trend of upsurge and conservative reaction, national churches responded quite differently to liberationist ideas: While, for example, Nicaragua's Popular Church emerged despite and in conflict with the hierarchy, Colombia's conservative ecclesiastical elites promoted conservative CEBs closely tied to the hierarchy.[25] In the countries where CEBs later did become prominent, that is Central America, Chile and Brazil, political closure decisively magnified their impact.[26] Thus, the progressive Church supported the insurrection to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua.

It is also important to remember that the CEBs took very distinct forms: In the rural areas CEBs tended to devote themselves to primarily religious activities, functioning like subdivisions of parishes, whereas in other cases, particularly in the cities, they tended to operate more like leftist social movements.[27] Furthermore, there are many examples of clerics who tried but failed to create CEBs. Failure was more likely when pastoral agents attempted to encourage highly politicized CEBs from the outset.[28] Indeed, despite their notoriety for radical political activity, this should not be overemphasised: Most people participate in CEBs primarily for their religious content and may ignore the political messages propagated by their progressive leaders. Even in Nicaragua and El Salvador, most CEBs were not engaged directly in revolutionary activity. Thus, their impact remains limited. Furthermore, the CEBs seem to have done little to extend the Church's influence among the very poor, as they focus on Bible studies to which the illiterate poor have no access.[29]

Furthermore, as Liberation Theology is aggressive in its attack on the status quo, it often invited repression of the vary people it sought to protect, and thus dissuaded individuals from liberationist commitments.[30] Encouraging the poor to insist on their rights, it has been argued, meant "throwing away the protective cloak surrounding religious activities"[31], thus forsaking the traditional function of religion as a sanctuary from repression. Thus, CEBs developed a 'subversive' reputation mainly because they taught the poor how to empower themselves, "an activity not encouraged normally by military dictatorships"[32].

Thus, although CEBs and Liberation Theology had a significant qualitative impact on Catholic thought and action, the movements remained quantatively small. Their influence has primarily been to challenge non-liberationist priests and bishops to think more carefully about the plight of their poorest parishioners. Many bishops "were receptive to this challenge, others not"[33].

This paper has shown that the impact of CEBs and Liberation Theory has been fairly limited in. Does this, however, mean the decline of the Catholic Church's Hegemony in Latin America?

3. The Decline of the Catholic Church's Hegemony?

One of the most intriguing puzzles of contemporary Latin America is the "failure of progressive Catholicism to become a mass movement and thereby to change society at large"[34]. As Latin America democratized, the Catholic Church receded from overt political activism. Several interlinked explanations feed into explaining this puzzle, some alluded at above, namely a combination of internal ecclesiastical developments, as well as socio-political developments in Latin America and finally the Pentecostal growth which I turn to in more detail later on: As Latin America redemocratized, and civil society once again began to flourish in many countries, the Church, who is, after all, not a political party, encouraged other groups and movements to take the lead in assuming the work it had previously carried out during the times of dictatorship.[35]

At the same time, the conservative reaction within the Church moved the clergy out of politics, rolled back many progressive innovations, and stressed the orthodoxy of the pre-Vatican II era. The reaction gained an important supporter in Pope John Paul II, a staunch anti-Marxist.[36] This trend is further accentuated by the new Pope Benedict XVI, who has described liberation theory as constituting "a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church"[37]. Furthermore, the collapse of communism discouraged Catholic progressivism, as capitalism and neoliberalism seemed to constitute the only remaining viable option. This paradigm shift to neoliberalism and individualism in Latin America, and the rest of the world, fed into a sense of path dependency and lack of alternatives. Indeed, one explanation for the decline of the Popular Church draws from this paradigm shift: Accordingly, the neoliberal reforms in Latin America led to unemployment, fragmentation of the working class and individualism, thus leaving grassroots activists less time and interest for activism. This fragmentation of everyday life thus leads to people being less committed to social transformation, and more focused on their individual concerns, which leads people to cast around for other viable alternatives.[38] This is exacerbated by the disillusionment set in with the Popular Church's failed attempt to bring about deep social transformation.[39]

Another reason for the decline in the Catholic Church's influence can be attributed to a scarcity of Catholic priests in the region: Although Latin America contains the highest concentration of at least nominal Catholics, it suffers from a chronic dearth of clergy, particularly in the poorest barrios and rural areas.[40]

However, it is wrong to assume that the progressive elements of the Church have been wiped out altogether: After all, pluralism exists within the Catholic Church itself, too, and thus many of the less radical ideas of Liberation Theology live on, as the Church continues to focus on justice, equality and human rights and does not shy away from vocalizing them. Furthermore, many civil society activists started out in CEBs, where they learnt important tools of mobilisation and political skills.[41]

As seen above, the Popular Church simply did not attract most of the poor, and the "CEBs did not fulfil the heady goals of progressive leaders, some of whom held elitist attitudes toward the poor"[42]. CEBs tended to include only a small minority of the population and came under tighter control by the clergy and were often torn by internal strife produced by the democratic transition, as they became more focused on religious concerns. [43] Thus, the Catholic Church seems to have failed its objective of attracting the vast majority of the poor it had for centuries shunned back into its flock.

At the same time others have encroached upon the Catholic Church's hegemony, achieving what the progressive church had striven for: Pentecostalist churches have succeeded in luring millions of the disaffected poor into their fold,[44] thus braking upon the Catholic hegemony which had existed ever since the *Conquista*. I now turn to this new

phenomenon of exponential evangelical[45] growth in Latin America, which has been described as "one of the greatest challenges ever faced by the Catholic Church in the Western Hemisphere"[46].

4. Luther's Rising Shadow – the Pentecostal Challenger

Today "religion is no longer an immutable social given but a private and nonpermanent choice"[47] – the tide of Pentecostalism that is sweeping across Latin America has offered a new kind of worship and religion to the disaffected masses, who are streaming into its prayer halls and churches, where they seek salvation by being taken over by the Holy Spirit during the services, which culminate in speaking in tongues and faith healings.[48] Pentecostalism branched out from a variety of Protestant denominations and faith missions and its leadership is almost always exclusively native. Like other Protestant denominations, Pentecostalists emphasize their direct link to God. However, they stress emotional and spiritual connections over more intellectual tendencies of older mainline denominations. Charisma, as opposed to scholarly knowledge of the Bible, figures as an important leadership quality. Due to the prominence of leadership, the movement tends to be highly schismatic and fragmented.[49]

The rise of Pentecostalism is not, however, a new phenomenon in Latin America. Protestant Pentecostal missionaries first came to Latin America at the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, a second wave of Pentecostals increased membership through faith healings and revivals in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador and Nicaragua. A third wave of new denominations in the 1980s added to Pentecostal growth in Argentina, Honduras, Paraguay and Uruguay. While in 1950, more than 90 percent of Brazilians still adhered to Catholicism; today, the Catholic Church itself admits that as few as 75 percent of Brazil's population still belong to this faith. The Protestants' share of the population has grown from 2 percent in the 1930s, to and estimated 15 percent in 1995.[50] Between 1990 and 1992, 710 new Protestant Churches, of them 91 per cent of a Pentecostal denomination, opened in Rio de Janeiro, reaching out into and embracing the poorest barrios and farvelas, while the Catholic Church established one new parish.[51]

Even prior to the 1980s, evangelical Protestantism was a major concern in several parts of Latin America and the intensity of its growth provoked a change in Episcopal thinking with regards to its evangelizing mission. In many cases, protestant influences actually helped shape the Catholic Church's new preferential option for the poor.[52] Indeed, Protestants were the first to develop a preferential option for the poor, providing material good and economic gains, which were generally distributed unconditionally.[53] Thus, Protestants underwent Gospel and literacy campaigns in rural areas before the institution of CEBs.[54] Where Protestantism was eating away at the Catholic Church's membership, the cooperation with dictatorship would have validated the view that bishops truly did not have the interest of the poor in mind and hasten the exodus to the evangelical camp. It is not surprising, therefore, that Brazil and Chile, the two countries with the highest level of religious competition, witnessed the emergence of the region's most progressive episcopacies comparatively early on, even before Vatican II.[55]

Indeed, both evangelical Protestantism and Liberation Theology envision religious change as the prologue to social transformation. Both believe that the religious ferment in Latin America will produce a new Christian social order. However, while Liberation Theology encourages a political struggle, inspired by religious faith but fought in the trenches of class conflict, for evangelicals the first, and often only step, is for the individual to get saved. These reborn men and women will then reform Latin America, as they adhere to biblical principles of morality and devotion:[56] "Let me do my thing and, if a social revolution results, that's up to God […] not me"[57]. Thus, the evangelical message of improving one's life through a simple personal decision, namely surrendering to Christ, "sounded easier than overturning the social order"[58]. Indeed, often the poor do not want to revolt, but rather climb the social ladder[59] and achieve material improvements to their lives.

In the study of Pentecostalist churches many have remarked on the predominance of women and the extent to which women claim that conversion has been followed by their empowerment in the home. The churches, who are adept at treating their member not just as followers but also as active members, who can climb up the church hierarchy, are often the only channel through which women, frequently the principal provider at home, can participate in the public sphere. Furthermore, many Pentecostal churches have more relaxed attitudes towards such issues as birth controls or abortion.[60] What is more, in Brazil, where Pentecostalism is strongest, many Pentecostal churches have

adopted imprecations and symbols drawn directly from Afro-Brazilian cults.[61] While those drawn to CEBs tend to be better off, as the CEBs based much of their activity around biblically based readings. Pentecostalists, on the other hand, centred their worship around oral testimony and singing,[62] thus attracting the very poor, often illiterate, segments of society whose lives the Popular Church had set out to transform.

Interestingly, some Pentecostal churches, particularly in Brazil, have however converted their religious success into social and political power by incorporating their followers into organized churches, electing members of humble origin into public office and tapping into political networks and state patronage.[63]

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to explain the decline of the Popular Church in Latin America. It concludes that the decline is in part due to the nature of the popular church itself and the reactionary backlash against liberation theology within the Catholic Church, but also to wider socio-political developments and the rise of Pentecostalism.

After four centuries of religious and cultural hegemony starting with the conquest of the Americas, it seems that the Catholic Church's dominance has been broken: From an elite-focused project until the mid-20th century, the Church increasingly turned to the poor, espousing Liberation Theology, which was meant to liberate the destitute and change the dominant political and social structures which were repressing them. However, even during the dark decades of military dictatorship and repression, the Popular Church's influence should not be overemphasised, as it only reached a small minority of the poor, and only in certain countries. And even those who participated in CEBs, many ignored the political message, if there was indeed one. The image of parishioners in remote villages taking up arms against the oppressor may be valid in a few cases, but most of the progressive Catholics turned to the Church for spiritual comfort at a time of extreme hardship and repression. Indeed, the kinds of defiance liberation theology tended to encourage have been "suicidal in many times and places"[64]. All too often, left-wing militants and radical activists with secure bourgeois backgrounds and upbringings, seem to forget that what most poor people crave is material and physical security, rather than revolutionary upheaval which may only result in further repression and pain.

Furthermore, with the onset of democracy in Latin America, the traditional channels of representation were once again open to activists, and the many progressive priests and bishops, under order from the ecclesiastical elites in Rome, tuned down their political activism and turned to matters of the soul. Indeed, today it is questionable whether the dichotomy of oppressor-oppressed still makes sense.[65] Furthermore, as globalisation and neoliberalism have prised open the formerly shut-off economies of Latin America, the population is increasingly undergoing the same changes as in Europe, as people become more individualistic and social bonds break up.

Yet the decline of the Church is not only due to changed socio-political circumstances, but also to religious competition: Increasingly, the Catholic Church has been faced with a religious challenger, as 'Luther's shadow' spread across the region, attracting those segments of society which the Progressive Church had set out to recapture into their flock. Indeed, it seems that the message which Pentecostalists propagate is more attuned to popular needs: Individual mobilization and self-betterment, combined with material welfare as well as open, enthusiastic forms of worship, in which the illiterate poor can participate, attract the extremely marginalised segments of society which the Popular Church never managed to reach: Thus, in their respective utopias, "the Catholic Church transforms or at least reforms this milieu while the Pentecostals offer ways to adapt to or escape from it"[66].

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[1] Scholl 1990: 3 – in reference to the early 1980s.

[2] Gill 1998: 79

[3] Ratzinger

[4] Levine 1988: 241

[5] Gill 1998: 39

[6] Brazil, Chile, Argentina

[7] Levine 1988: 248-249

[8] Levine 1988: 249

[9] Levine 1988: 249

[10] In four years of meeting with bishops form across the globe, the Council chartered a new direction: It changed its vertical chain of command for a looser structure based on consultation with local churches. Furthermore, it redirected its attention to life in the contemporary world, especially emphasising issues like human rights, justice, freedom and peace. Green 2005: 204-205

[11] Levine 1988: 248

[12] Serbin 2000: 147

[13]"When a dictatorship violates human rights and attacks the common good of the nation […] the Church speaks of the legitimate right of insurrectional violence" Green 2005: 205

[14] Drogus 1995: 465

[15] Levine 1988: 242-243

[16] Green 2005: 205-206

[17] These can include irrigation channels, pressing the government for social services or teacing paritcipants craft or job skills. Gill 1998: 37

[18] Levine 1988: 252

[19] Gill 1998: 38

[20] Berryman 1995: 113

[21] Serbin 2000: 144

[22] Gill 1998: 37

[23] Drogus 1995: 469

[24] Drogus 1995: 467

[25] Drogus 1995: 467-468

[26] Levine 1988: 255

[27] José Comblin in Berryman 1995: 112

[28] Levine 1988: 252

[29] Brazil, with one of the most liberationist churches in the region, claims to have reached five percent of the population through CEBs.Drogus 1995: 469

[30] Stoll, in Haas 1997: 441

[31] Stoll 1990: 313

[32] Gill 1998: 38

[33] Gill 1998: 38

[34] Serbin 2001: 127

[35] Serbin 2000: 148

[36] Under his leadership the Vatican punished liberation theologians, reprimanded progressive bishops and censored publications. Furthermore, conservative bishops were appointed Serbin 2000: 148

[37] Ratinger 2004, http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm

[38] Manuel Velázquez, as described in Serbin 2001: 128, 130

[39] Serbin 2000: 148

[40] Gill 1998: 87-88

[41] Serbin 2000: 150-151

[42] Serbin 2000: 148

[43] ibid.

[44] Serbin 2000: 145

[45] I concentrate mainly on Pentecostal churches, as the majority of evangelical growth can be attributed to Pentecostal expansion. While politically active, conservative organisations commonly affiliated with the 'religious right' in the US have received much media attention in their activities in the region (as fervently anti-communist organisations they entered the region following the 1979 Sandinista revolution, with the intention of reversing the radicalisation, including liberation theology) they have been relatively inconsequential in the religious area. They account only for a tiny fraction of religious growth in the region. Other religious denominations on the fringe of Protestantism, such as Jehova's Witnesses or 7th Day Adventists, have some growth potential, but their foreign nature prevents them from rivalling the more rapidly expanding Pentecostals. Gill 1998: 84

[46] Gill 1998: 79

[47] Serbin 2000: 145

[48] Green 2005: 210

[49] Gill 1998: 80

[50] Serbin 2000: 153

[51] Berryman 1995: 109

[52] Gill 1998: 80

[53] Although the Catholic Church did have schools and other material gains for its followers, these tended to be geared towards the wealthier member of the congregation. Furthermore, the connection between literacy and the Bible was played down, due to fears of another Protestant Reformation. Gill 1998: 89

[54] Gill 1998: 88

[55] Gill 1998: 111

[56] Stoll 1990: 309

[57] Interview with a Pentecostalist in Stoll 1990: 331

[58] Stoll 1990: 314

[59] Serbin 2000: 145

[60] Lehmann 1998: 621-622

[61] Lehmann 1998: 613

[62] Burdick in Berryman 1995: 109

[63] Serbin 2000: 145

[64] Stoll 1990: 313

[65] Berryman 1995: 121

[66] Serbin 2000: 146

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