

Media, politics and fundamentalism in Latin America

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In 2006 the Latin America region of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC-AL) held a series of meetings on 'Communication, Politics and Religious Fundamentalisms'. The conferences were held in collaboration with the Catholic University 'San Pablo' of La Paz, Bolivia, the Methodist University of São Paulo, Brazil, the Central American Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Guatemala City, Guatemala and the Methodist Seminary in Santiago, Chile.

In all of the conferences, speakers made the obligatory references to the U.S roots of religious fundamentalism. In a broader context, we understood fundamentalisms to be social movements that embrace unconditional truths expressed by authoritarian leaders who validate their position through charismatic religious, economic or political discourse.

Fundamentalisms are strategies for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, especially for communities that consider themselves disenfranchised or persecuted and that seek to build their identity and a sense of self-affirmation in moments of profound and rapid social change.

We began with the premise, succinctly stated by Chilean sociologist Arturo Chacón, that fundamentalism is a product of modernity. More specifically, fundamentalism is a product of the deep cultural changes and social dislocation produced by modernization and industrialization.

In our discussion we came to realize that most people demonstrate fundamentalist behaviors at one time or another, reacting with fear, disgust or intolerance to other persons or groups. We found this important because, in Latin America, where the rule of law is precarious, where violence is endemic, and where many people feel alienated from traditional social and political structures, fundamentalisms become another survival strategy, but a strategy that undercuts a sense of citizenship, of active participation in the exercise of power for the common good. Fundamentalisms can encourage intolerance and the negation of the other.

We understood that there is a qualitative difference between isolated individuals demonstrating intolerance and fundamentalism as a social system. To build a fundamentalist movement requires power. A radio or television program, political office, or a pulpit can provide a charismatic individual with a powerful platform from which intolerance can be multiplied.

Brazilian sociologist Saulo Baptista describes fundamentalism as a system of representations whose leaders elaborate a discourse that responds to the fractured sensibilities of the faithful in a post-modern world. Baptista has observed that fundamentalist discourse can fulfill people's need for order and meaning in a world that offers neither.

Baptista also asks whether the academy's protestations against the intolerance of fundamentalism does not reveal the implicit intolerance of liberal democracy that reserves for itself a monopoly on the right to blaspheme against all that does not fit within liberal ideology.

Violeta Rocha, a Nicaraguan Pentecostal theologian who is Rector of the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica, notes that fundamentalism is flourishing in a consumer culture, a culture of desire in which individuals want to feel satisfaction. This moment in history makes people especially susceptible to the blandishments of prosperity theology, the notion that God wants God's children to be healthy and wealthy, and if one isn't, it is either because one lacks faith, or is living in sin. In this cultural milieu, divine blessing has become more linked to material prosperity, than to such intangibles as a sense of personal well-being, consolation or forgiveness.

Both Rocha and Baptista described how, in a materialist, consumer culture, individuals can become disconnected from their identities and their traditions. Traditional religion as a path to the numinous, can lose its centrality in a community's life when forced to compete with the concrete immediacy of consumerist gratification. In the words of the Spanish pastoral theologian Juan José Tamayo, 'God has carved out a space in the midst of billions of inhabitants who have been progressively dishabited by a culture that pretends to abolish the mystery of things' (Tamayo, 2004:51-53).

We are witnessing the materialization of mystery.

We also posited that fundamentalism strengthens male attempts to control women's bodies, be it through the prohibition of abortion, the negation of female sexual pleasure, or macho social norms that propose to keep women pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen. While we found abundant anecdotal evidence to support the link between fundamentalism and patriarchy, we also recalled that many Pentecostal groups, despite their sexist discourse, end up providing unprecedented social spaces where women have found their voices and begun to exercise control over their lives. Where else can women in Latin America stand up in public and pour out their souls in vibrant and eloquent testimony? Where else can women find a community of support to help them challenge their partner's debilitating alcoholism or domestic violence?

Indeed, Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar found in their study of neopentecostal groups in the slums of Rio de Janeiro that women leaders in some local congregations, despite their formal affiliation with megachurches whose leaders own media empires and control voting blocks in Congress, were creatively engaged in battling gang violence, creating jobs, and building self-esteem (Shaull, Cesar: 2001). However, these examples of agency exercised by women tend to

be individual or local in nature, and do not threaten patriarchal institutions.

Fundamentalism and spirit-filled religion

In recent decades we have witnessed the irruption of charismatic religion in Latin America as TV preachers and neopentecostal megachurches have become major players on the regional stage. Simultaneously, we have seen deeply-rooted traditional movements such as Afro-Brazilian religions, Mayan spirituality and Kardecist Spiritism come out from the shadows to compete for the public allegiance of the faithful.

Chacón argues that Protestantism, with its emphasis on reasoned theological discourse rooted in the thoughtful analysis of a written text, has served as a vehicle for modernization. If traditional Protestants have sold their soul to reason, suggests Chacón, then Spirit-filled religious leaders, to sustain their authority, must reclaim their founding myths, and must either usurp existing religious institutions or create new ones.

Chacón also argues that such myths are always cloaked in violence. Deeply rooted in the Latin American psyche is an understanding that God cannot be domesticated, and that our profound longing for a personal encounter with transcendence is fraught both with mystery and with danger.

In our conferences Violeta Rocha argued forcefully that all Pentecostals are not fundamentalists and that not all fundamentalists are Pentecostals. Many adherents to Spirit-filled religion, because of their faith commitments, are deeply engaged in social justice issues and have been for the last century. If Pentecostals don't identify themselves publicly with progressive political causes it may be because of the secular and explicitly anti-religious discourse of the political left.

Brazil: A case study

Baptista looks specifically at Brazil, a country of 186 million people of whom 15% are Protestants of one form or another. About 7 million are traditional Protestants or evangelicals, while at least 20 million are Pentecostals or Neo-pentecostals. Brazil is experiencing an explosion of Spirit-based religion. Baptista cites research documenting that Brazil has the second largest population of practicing Protestants in the world, second only to the United States.

Baptista also emphasizes that fundamentalism is neither reactionary nor nostalgic. Fundamentalists, even if they employ the rhetoric of nostalgia, are proposing a return to the future, a utopia that has never existed. In Latin America, religious and political fundamentalisms have been able to build upon modernity's unfulfilled promises by offering their own visions of a brave new world.

Baptista notes that fundamentalism enthusiastically embraces cutting edge technology. They employ strategic planning, modern organizational theories, new information technologies and the full range of the electronic media – all in service to their utopian vision.

Fleshing out that utopian vision can be a challenge. Historically, Latin American fundamentalism has been rooted in the sensationalist eschatology of dispensationalism as imported from the United States. Back in the 1980s the fundamentalist media agenda was set by U.S. televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard.

As prosperity theology began to take hold in the 1990s, Latin America's religious entrepreneurs began to validate their ministries by proclaiming themselves prophets or apostles, who claim privileged access to divine revelation. When so many apostles are promising material success here and now, end time prophecies become somewhat passé.

Unlike other Latin American countries, some Brazilian Neopentecostal religious leaders have proved their ability to deliver the vote in elections. Edir Macedo, the head of Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and owner of the TV Record television network, cut a deal with Lula that allowed Macedo to designate Lula's vice-presidential candidate in the previous elections. Baptista described to me how big landowners, known in Brazil as Colonels, have positioned themselves as regional leaders in Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. From this position they came to exercise influence in regional and national politics.

When fundamentalist leaders become so mundane as to define their vision as prosperity now, and to craft shifting political alliances of convenience, such short-sighted tactics would seem to undermine their long-term credibility and effectiveness. The most recent election results from Brazil would seem to support this hypothesis: More than half the 513 congressional representatives were re-elected on Oct 1, but only 15 of the 60 members of the evangelical caucus were re-elected. Adelor Vieira, the head of the caucus, was re-elected despite being implicated in a financial scandal. It is not yet clear how many representatives will choose to join the evangelical caucus in the new congress.

Building engaged citizens?

Can people of faith who seek to build citizenship and work for peace and social justice relate to people who seek God in neopentecostal megachurches?

My own work at Cedepca, a small ecumenical training center in Guatemala City, tends to suggest the importance of creating safe spaces where people who are imbued with the discourse of prosperity theology can consider more inclusive alternatives. Language is key. If one seeks to unpack how and where God is present in today's world, and what are our responsibilities as people of faith when confronted with human need, neopentecostals will not respond positively to partisan leftist discourse. Most of us on staff at Cedepca are able to engage such seekers because we come from conservative evangelical backgrounds; we speak the language of faith and participate actively in local churches.

A non-sectarian approach rooted in our common humanity is also key. I have observed that many Latin Americans have embarked on a personal spiritual pilgrimage that has taken them from traditional Catholicism through traditional Protestantism into Neopentecostalism and then out the back door, thoroughly disillusioned with organized religion.

Current statistics suggest that more than 14% of Guatemalans, a profoundly religious people, no longer identify with any religious institution. One is left with the impression that many Latin Americans feel themselves to be adrift in an ethical void and that religion, instead of providing a touchstone, a moral community, has become, for some, just another consumer product for individual consumption.

As people of faith, can we propose a common ethical agenda? In our discussions I turned to that classic Christian apologist C.S. Lewis who, in *The Abolition of Man*, suggests that the core teachings of diverse religious traditions can be summarized under the rubric of the Tao. Key elements would include:

- The law of general beneficence: all people should work generally for the good of all humankind and for all of creation. Then, the law of special beneficence: all people should work especially for the well-being of their family and their community. Each person should respect their mother, their father and their ancestors. Each person should respect their children and their posterity. The practice of justice applies to all human behavior, from the practice of sexuality to the rule of law: No to deceit, no to imposition by force, no to falsehood, no to theft, yes to structures of justice that are effective, just and transparent. Each person should practice good faith and veracity. Each person should practice mercy. Each person should practice generosity.

As professional communicators we also recalled that WACC has given us useful benchmarks we can apply to our discourse and practice. We call these benchmarks the Christian Principles of Communication. They were first drafted 20 years ago by Michael Traber, who passed away in 2006:

- Communication affirms transcendence: when we communicate with other people we affirm that God is present in our world and God desires abundant life for all of Creation. Communication builds participation. Communication builds community. Communication promotes freedom. Communication promotes human culture, celebrating diversity and defending the right to be different. Communication is prophetic; it should proclaim justice and speak truth to power.

This summary is drawn from the following papers: Las raíces del fundamentalismo by Arturo Chacón; Fundamentalismos, comunicación y cultura by Violeta Rocha; Fundamentalismos, comunicación y globalización: Desafíos pastorales by Dennis Smith; and Fundamentalismo e identidades no campo evangélico brasileiro by Saulo Baptista.

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