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## **The Churches, The Media and Cultural Power in Latin America**

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### **Introduction**

Once upon a time, the churches of Latin America wielded enormous cultural power. Traditional churches had the power to set the acceptable limits for public religious practice. One could be Roman Catholic or one could belong to the tiny, but generally tolerated, Protestant minority. As of the 1920's, if one were poor and living on the margins of society, one might also choose to be Pentecostal.

For centuries the churches had sufficient cultural power to force those of other faith traditions to seek refuge in the institutional space provided by the dominant churches. Witness, over the centuries, how Guatemalan Mayans or Afro-Brazilians reached, in their particular contexts, strained accommodations with Roman Catholicism. The dominant churches had sufficient cultural power to suppress a wide range of alternative spiritualities ranging from Spiritism to millenarian sects.

With the globalization of consumer culture and the consolidation of global commercial media systems in the nineties, the cultural power of the traditional churches began to wane. Sociologists in Latin America began to speak of a global religious supermarket that competed with traditional religious institutions by eliminating the intermediary and directly offering individual religious consumers a broad variety of symbolic goods.

This coincided with the explosive growth of the Neopentecostal megachurches. By the late eighties, these groups had begun to stage and broadcast elaborate religious spectacles on radio and television. Such churches offered spiritual catharsis to thousands in an attractive theater setting with high production values. They provided high drama in the form of exorcisms,

powerful personal encounters with transcendence and the promise of material blessing.

### **The Pentecostalization of Latin American Christianity**

Today about 80% of Latin America's Protestants are either Pentecostals or Neopentecostals. Add to this numerical dominance the overwhelming pentecostalization of liturgy in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, their increasing political activism and the widespread presence of Neopentecostal programming on radio and television stations throughout the region and one begins to understand the growing cultural power of these groups.

In the current context of global consumer culture, the concept of material blessing merits special comment. Classic Pentecostals tend to be churches of the poor: people on the margins of society, often rural, who find in their faith groups a space where they can seek community and petition God for healing and forgiveness. It is a space where the silenced come to find their voices. God's blessing, to a community living on the margins of consumer culture, is found in healing, a sense of community and a general sense of well-being.

Neopentecostals, on the other hand, insist that blessing must be material. If your God isn't big enough to grant you a better job, a new car or a bigger house, they say, try mine! As children of the King, you have the right to expect the best! They insist that material blessing is documentary proof that one enjoys God's favor.

The symbolic goods offered by the Neopentecostals have proved attractive to several constituencies. Some traditionally Roman Catholic urban professionals have felt betrayed or abandoned by that church's dramatic embrace of the poor and the liturgical reforms introduced after Vatican II. These urban elites have found in Neopentecostalism a new belief system that justified their position of relative privilege within society. Neopentecostalism also offered the elites a renewed divine mandate for their ongoing exercise of political and economic power.

At the other end of the social spectrum are the precarious urban masses who have fled rural violence and poverty to seek survival in the cities. As they confront the *anomie* generated by life in the city, these people have found in the megachurches a sense of personal empowerment, discipline and self-esteem that has helped some to survive in a hostile economic and political environment.

People in the North frequently find the religious intensity that is prevalent in Latin America to be intimidating or incomprehensible. Those of a highly rational bent sometimes mistakenly dismiss such vibrant spiritual sensibilities as a sign of weakness. One cannot understand Latin America's history or culture without taking into account the universal immediacy of religious devotion in the region. Clattering about in Latin America's collective subconscious is a rich diversity of symbolic systems and religious traditions: African, Amerindian, European, Asian. Secularism has had only limited impact on Latin American culture.

Thus, you will find in the region thoughtful, educated individuals in moments of need who will call in their prayer requests to a radio preacher, then respond with earnest expectation to the preacher's call to place their hands on the radio and receive the answer to their petition. Yes, people are healed in this way; individual lives are transformed.

### **Marketing Faith as a Commodity**

A new generation of religious entrepreneurs has understood how to tap into the collective spiritual resources of the region, package them in drama, and cloak them in authority and mystery. Then they offer them to a populace mired in permanent crisis and hungry for meaning, hope and a sense of transcendence; a young populace that has been taught since the cradle that all of human experience, including ethical values, intimate relationships and encounters with the numinous, can be commodified, packaged, and sold as consumer goods.

The Neopentecostals market individualized consumer religion. Pursuing the supermarket analogy, consumers, whatever their social class, enter the marketplace and take from the shelf those symbolic goods they need to get them through the week: an ounce of self-esteem, a packet of hope, a portion of pardon, essence of encounter with the divine. All this is mixed according to one's personal recipe and used as needed.

As systems for marketing new spiritualities and mediated symbolic spaces become broadly available, the traditional churches are losing their historic monopoly on dispensing sacraments. Simultaneously, their power to stigmatize "unorthodox" religious belief and practice has been weakened.

Most traditional churches have had to scramble to position themselves to compete in this symbolic marketplace. As they see their members move to the megachurches, many traditional churches have tried to plug their leaking institutions by imitating or assimilating the Neopentecostals. The Roman Catholic church in Brazil, for example, has promoted the grand religious spectacles of the telegenic singer/priest Father Rossi, who fills football stadiums and sells CDs by the millions.

If people in Latin America are abandoning the traditional churches in droves it is partly because for centuries these churches, ensconced in their positions of power, have taken for granted the devotion of the masses. Their emphasis on preserving alien hierarchical structures and their insistence on imposing European and North American understandings of spirituality have left many people with only tenuous ties to traditional religious institutions.

I suspect that personal religious belief has always been a function of profoundly intimate choices that are not necessarily subject to the rules of Western logic or the constraints imposed by powerful religious institutions. In most cultures such symbolic constructs combine the personal and the communal. Now, with the globalization of individual consumer religion, the communal element is relegated to a secondary role and individuals are freer to simultaneously and publicly embrace elements drawn from a variety of symbolic systems. Today it is common to find people in urban Latin America who simultaneously consume the religious spectacles offered by the megachurches, use amulets or crystals derived from New Age spirituality, seek alternative healing from traditional healers, and consult with Spiritists for orientation in cases of personal crisis.

### **Using the Media to Market Religion**

With the sole exception of widespread broadcasts of Sunday morning masses, few traditional churches have any presence in the major commercial media in Latin America. Religious broadcasting in the region has been dominated by fundamentalist groups like Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) or the Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN). Such initiatives have always been closely tied to the United States and have attracted audiences made up almost exclusively of the faithful.

Religious broadcasters understood as early as the 1940s the importance of the electronic media

in the creation of common meaning, as well as the importance of sharing of religious symbols and celebrations. Such symbols are rooted in the daily struggle to cope with life's conflicts and contradictions, to nurture hope, to find meaning in suffering, to build common values, to feel at one with transcendence. These primal needs are not rooted in respect for particular religious institutions nor in exercising proper hermeneutics, but in the immediacy of human experience (Schultze: 1987, 1990).

Only in the 1990s did Latin American church groups, especially those in Brazil, become net exporters of symbolic goods. Brazil's *Universal Church of the Reign of God* became a major player in commercial network television by buying *TV Record*. Now their "Stop Suffering" slogan and heart-shaped logo is seen throughout the region (Silveira: 1997).

In September, 2003, the ALC press service reported that the week-long Christian Consumer International Fair held in São Paulo, Brasil would generate more than US\$10 million of business. The previous week, the Catholics had held their own Fair called *Expocatólica*. Brazilian Catholics projected total sales of religious goods for the year at more than US\$1,000 million. Products offered range from music, devotional materials and keychains to specialized cell phone services and religious tourism. One Brazilian study suggested that the religious market is growing at a rate of 30% per year.

### **Moving Toward Post-Pentecostalism?**

In a recent paper, Peruvian Pentecostal theologian Bernardo Campos suggests that the Neopentecostals would be better described as Postpentecostals. After all, notes Campos, modern Pentecostalism is now a century old, and it is high time for new religious actors to find innovative ways to express their encounter with the sacred. What remains unchanged with the Postpentecostals is that they legitimize their religious construct as being rooted in an experience with the Spirit (Campos, 2004).

An emerging trend for the Postpentecostals is to break with established denominational structures by anointing their key charismatic leaders as "apostles". In Guatemala we now have thirteen self-proclaimed apostles who see themselves as contemporary expressions of the messianic and apostolic traditions that empowered the early church. The new apostles base their authority on their reading of Ephesians 4:11: "The gifts he gave were that some would be

apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. . .” They argue, notes Campos, that for the last Century, Pentecostals have taken advantage of only four of the five gifts listed. Now that we are only moments away from the Second Coming, they argue, the Church must claim the gift of apostleship to mobilize the faithful to reach all nations with the Gospel.

These new groups raise orthodox eyebrows by their dramatic displays of exotic spiritual gifts, especially exorcism and spiritual warfare. The Postpentecostals favor organizing themselves as megachurches. The soon-to-be-completed MegaFrater in Guatemala City, for example, offers theatre seating for 14,000, an 8-story parking garage topped by a heliport, full television and radio production facilities, a swimming pool, a school and a restaurant. This impressive facility, insists Jorge H. López, the pastor, has been built with Guatemalan money.

Such megachurches stage elaborate religious spectacles. The tone is positive, sermons are laced with humor and exhortation, and everything always comes back to faith as an investment in one’s own material well-being. Exorcisms and other powerful manifestations of the Spirit are expected.

This new emphasis is especially important because of what Campos correctly calls the despentecostalization of Latin American Pentecostalism. My own conversations with Pentecostal leaders have revealed a deep level of self-doubt as many admit that they, as second or third generation Pentecostals, have seldom, if ever, spoken in tongues, prophesied or experienced divine healing. They now spend their time as church bureaucrats, just like us Presbyterians. Of course, say the Postpentecostals, the fire of the Spirit had been quenched as Pentecostal enthusiasm was domesticated into manageable institutions. Indeed, respected Pentecostal colleagues have described to me a kind of callousness, a spiritual exhaustion generated by spending a lifetime observing programmed ecstasy.

Campos suggests that the Postpentecostals may also be leading us to the demise of denominationalism. Certainly in Guatemala, the thirteen apostles jockey fiercely with one another to be portrayed in the local media as the legitimate spokespersons for Guatemalan Evangelicaldom. Earlier this year, for example, Rev. López organized an interdenominational

prayer service for newly-elected President Oscar Berger and his Cabinet. Styled after the annual *Te Deum Evangélico* celebrated by a sector of Chilean Pentecostalism in support of the Pinochet regime, this event was picked up by TBN and carried live throughout the Americas. Curiously, López convinced Guatemala's Evangelical Alliance to co-sponsor the event, and the Alliance's participation was limited to a brief opening prayer by their current President.

Remember, Latin America is a region where populism and authoritarianism are deeply engrained in the culture. Ours is a region with a long tradition of strong charismatic leaders. Remember, too, that neither modernity nor democracy have been capable of bringing to Latin America a modicum of security, the rule of law, social tolerance or broad-based economic development. According to a recent survey sponsored by the United Nations Development Program, 55% of Latin Americans would be willing to accept a non-democratic government if it proved capable of generating widespread economic development (Latinobarómetro: 2004).

### **What About the Back Door?**

Religion, like politics, is a messy enterprise. When people traffic in raw power, some are corrupted, others are hurt. An encounter with transcendence can unlock within one vast reservoirs of wisdom and tenderness. But that same encounter unlocks within others bottomless reservoirs of ambition and avarice.

What is clear is that when a religious leader is perceived as being a channel to divinity, a mediator of sacred space, people will seek that person out. People do not expect that person to be free of human foibles; they don't even expect that person to be enlightened or altruistic. It is enough that the person has become a steward of sacred space.

I was discussing this issue with a Catholic colleague a few months ago, a Jesuit-trained radio producer who has no illusions whatsoever about the personal contradictions embodied in religious leaders. "You know," he said, "our encounter with the sacred has often been that way in Latin American history. In how many Catholic parishes have people not understood that the priest is a crook or an agent of the military or sexually promiscuous or dizzy with drink? Yet Sunday after Sunday people keep coming to hear that priest celebrate the mass. He has the key to the sacred space."

Yet this doesn't mean that people don't get hurt in the process. Now, with the increased emphasis on materialistic religion marketed with all the bombast of the consumer society, thousands come streaming through the front doors of the megachurches. But thousands also are stumbling out the back doors.

One cannot deny that many have found in these dramatic religious spectacles a renewed sense of self-esteem. But many others end up fleeing this environment feeling spiritually violated. A variety of studies tend to suggest that many Latin Americans are engaged in a spiritual pilgrimage that has taken them out of traditional Catholicism through traditional Protestantism and out the back door of Postpentecostalism into an uncharted territory characterized by the privatization and fragmentation of religious belief.

Today's loss of cultural power by the traditional churches may not be a bad thing. Rapid changes in the religious status quo have given traditional churches a unique opportunity to rethink their pastoral strategies and institutional priorities.

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