

Changing religious landscapes and political communication in Latin America

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Growing up in a middle-class Evangelical home in the United States, I learned to take religious belief and practice very seriously. This rather hermetic world was not very comfortable with religious diversity, and we were not encouraged to devote our youthful energy to changing unjust social and political structures.

Our focus was on evangelism and personal piety. Our reading of Scripture suggested that all positive social change was rooted in converting individuals to faith in Jesus Christ. At the Second Coming, Jesus himself would finally institute a millennial reign marked by true peace and justice. In the meantime, the Apostle Paul in Romans 13 called on us to respect political authority, yet experience suggested that it was wise to keep the grimy and duplicitous world of politics at a safe distance.

We viewed people from other religious traditions with suspicion and, sometimes, fear. I remember quite well when John Kennedy was elected President of the United States in November 1960. The Sunday after the election, I sensed an undercurrent of tension at church because Kennedy represented a dual challenge to our convictions: He was both a Roman Catholic and a politician. As I recall, the problem was not so much that Kennedy was a Democrat, but that he was a Catholic! Had the US become subject to Rome? How could God have allowed such a thing to happen?

In 1973, my personal journey took an unexpected turn. On the advice of my university chaplain I began attending a Presbyterian congregation in Evanston, IL. I had begun to work in radio while still in secondary school, and in university I studied both communication and education. Soon I would begin a career as a lay mission worker in communication for the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I first arrived in Guatemala as a volunteer in 1974. I spent the year travelling throughout the country: observing, listening, learning. I was embraced by a warm, wise and generous people who, at the same time, observed this young gringo from an enormous distance, marked by an ancient silence. I returned to Guatemala in 1977 as a mission worker and began to participate in and document the conversation between media, religion and politics in Latin America. Neither my lived experience nor my academic training had provided me with the analytical framework I needed to understand the economic and political exclusion, or the cultural alienation, experienced by most Guatemalans. Patient Guatemalan mentors and a few veteran missionaries introduced me to Latin American literature, history and culture.

It was through my contact with colleagues in the Latin America region of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) that I came to new notions of what communication is and how it works. In the 1970s, WACC colleagues were deeply involved in a golden age of communication theory and practice in Latin America. At a time when rising military dictatorships were being challenged by emerging insurgencies and grassroots social movements, Paulo Freire, Mario Kaplún and others began to blur the traditional lines between communication, pedagogy and mass political mobilization for social change.

It was a time when the few existing electronic media outlets – radio, TV, print – were controlled almost exclusively by the private sector or by nation states. The few exceptions – usually community or religious media – did little to incorporate the voices of the silenced, the faces of the invisibilized. Thus the growing emphasis of people like Freire and Kaplún on creating al-

ternative and *alterative* media – generally low-tech communication initiatives committed to *altering* the social, political and cultural status quo. In Latin America's post-Vatican II context – a time of growing ecumenical collaboration and common commitment to theologies of liberation – these alternative and alterative media identified with liberation struggles. Not surprisingly, military dictatorships repressed them brutally.

In time, I came to understand communication as being less linear, less specifically political, less rooted in technology; thicker, rounder, more sensual. In the words of Argentinean communication theorist María Cristina Mata, I came to understand communication as building meaning in common. At the same time, I came better to understand the power of the media to set the agenda for public discourse. In Guatemala, for example, I witnessed how the ancient, complex beauty of Mayan culture was often reduced by the private sector to a tourist poster, and, in this colourful representation, the people themselves, their very way of being, could be made invisible, their voices could be silenced.

I began to ask myself: What happens when not only your land but also your story is stolen from you? Your memory of who you are and why you are here usurped? I learned that once a people is silenced, made invisible, genocide becomes a viable policy option for those in power.

Learning communication in context

Gradually, as I re-learned my profession, I explored the history of Latin America's emerging political and religious context.

Early Protestant mission efforts in the 19th century coincided with the Latin American political and military movements that led to the creation of the region's nation states. As Latin America moved beyond the colonial era, Protestants demonstrated a decidedly modern approach to religious practice while Roman Catholicism positioned itself as the defender of conservative religious tradition and declining European empires. Throughout the colonial era, Catholicism, the religion of both Portuguese and Spanish royalty, had great cultural and economic power. During col-

onial times, the Catholic Church had been charged with cultivating religious identity, sustaining the political and economic status quo and defining the differences between colonizer and colonized.

As the colonial era stumbled to a close and nation states were formed, the emerging Latin American political and economic elites were deeply influenced by European Liberalism – they promoted less-regulated markets, representative democracy and the separation of Church and State. They were also influenced by the Positivism of Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, believing that education, science and technology offered the key to a democratic and prosperous future. In some countries – including Brazil, Mexico and Guatemala – the new Protestant missions became the *de facto* allies of these new political elites. Many US missionaries built schools and hospitals and came to be recognized by the new political elites for their practicality and entrepreneurial spirit. Such initiatives offered Liberal politicians living examples of their revolutionary ideologies.

The Protestant missionary impulse was also rooted in their understanding of themselves as the children of the Enlightenment and in their disdain for the Catholicism then practiced in Latin America. Not only did they see Catholicism as being locked in medieval obscurantism, they also felt it had strayed far from Christian orthodoxy by failing to hold the line against the syncretic influences of African and Indigenous spiritualities.

At the level of popular religious imagination, Catholicism and Protestantism approached worship and personal piety very differently. Catholic worship focused on the mystery of the Eucharist. Daily religious practice included devotion to the saints, praying the rosary, and embracing the ancient daily rhythms of a largely rural culture marked by the liturgy of the hours. Furthermore, the liturgical calendar divided the year into a regular cycle of religious festivals, including patron saint days for each community. All this provided a cultural architecture easily assimilated by rural Indigenous and Afro-Latin American communities deeply imprinted by the cycles of planting and harvest, life and death, loss and renewal.

On the other hand, Protestantism was at-

tractive to merchants, teachers and trades people – the natural allies of Liberalism in Latin America’s small towns and cities. Worship was centred not around the Eucharist, but the sermon – a reasoned discourse on a religious text. Many Protestant churches tended to be austere spaces, eschewing liturgical vestments, the liturgical calendar and even candles because they were considered too Catholic. Many Protestant communities celebrated the Eucharist only quarterly, or even annually. Daily religious practice included personal and family prayer, devotional Bible reading and bearing testimony to one’s faith before the community. Despite Protestantism’s privileged ideological position in Latin America’s new political universe, their numbers were few and Roman Catholicism continued to be the religion of the masses.

In 20th century Latin America, Liberalism’s early promise of progress gave way to the reality of conflict and profound social polarization. In time, the failures of Liberalism – and of government in general – gave birth to deep popular distrust in public institutions. In a harsh economic environment marked by mass migration to the cities, many new urban residents embarked on a search for consolation, meaning and transcendence.

The failures of Liberalism also represent, in a sense, the failure of secularism in our day. One of the banners carried at the recent marches in Paris proclaimed “Nothing Sacred”. Such was the bold proclamation of the French Revolution. However, secularism fails adequately to describe the pulse of mystery and the deep longing for transcendence that undergirds Latin American culture. Everything, it turns out, is sacred.

Rise of Latin American Protestantism

A major new study released by the Pew Research Center in November, 2014 suggests that while Latin America continues to be home to more than 425 million Roman Catholics – nearly 40% of the world’s total Catholic population – today only 69% of adults across the region identify as Catholic. The study observes that, “In nearly every country surveyed, the Catholic Church has experienced net losses as many Latin Americans have joined

Evangelical Protestant churches or rejected organized religion altogether. For example, roughly one-in-four Nicaraguans, one-in-five Brazilians and one-in-seven Venezuelans are former Catholics” (Pew,2014: 4).

Most Latin American Christians, including both Roman Catholics and Protestants, are Charismatics. That is, they claim to have had a personal, transformative encounter with the Spirit of God. Most Latin American Christians are deeply influenced by the notion that God expects you to be healthy and wealthy, and that a personal experience of God can be expected to grant you tangible, concrete benefits – what has come to be known as the prosperity gospel.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, Charismatic groups began to explore new ways of living out religious faith in Latin American culture. Faith healers adept at offering the hope of health and prosperity began to draw large crowds in marginal areas of major cities, areas marked by violence, limited social services and high unemployment. While Evangelical radio programs and religious films had been contributing to the consolidation of an identifiable Evangelical sub-culture since the 1930s, Latin American TV preachers in the 1980s began to change the public image of Evangelicals by developing a sophisticated and politically influential network of media outlets.

They produced quality programming rooted in popular music, charismatic preaching and dramatic testimonies. Evangelical music came into its own as a multi-million dollar enterprise. In Brazil, mega church pastor Edir Macedo broke out of the ghetto of religious broadcasting by consolidating his control over *TV Record*, that country’s second most important broadcast television network. Content ranges far beyond religion and includes competitive news programming, sports and entertainment. His media empire also came to include a national daily newspaper and radio stations. Macedo understood how to use his media empire to become a key power broker in Brazilian politics (Smith & Campos,2012).

By the end of the 20th century, new information technologies such as the Internet and Web-

based social media accelerated this process. Using this powerful toolkit, religious entrepreneurs – both Roman Catholic and Evangelical – were able to tailor their messages to broadly diverse target audiences ranging from the urban poor to middle class youth and young urban professionals. Some Evangelical TV preachers designed their messages to directly challenge deeply ingrained religious practices related to folk Catholicism and Afro-Latin American religions.

One reason for the recent rapid growth of Protestantism has been the accelerating urbanization of Latin American society in the 20th Century. In Brazil, for example, in 1950, 64% of Brazilians lived in rural communities; by 2010 that number had fallen to 16% nationally and, in the highly-industrialized states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, to less than 5% (IBGE, 2012). The rapid concentration of masses of people in emerging urban centres created a level of social dislocation that made changing religions a viable option for many new urban dwellers, an alternative that would have been much less attractive in their traditional rural settings. In many cases, small Pentecostal churches offered desperately needed social networks to people who, by moving to the city, felt cut loose from the family structures and traditional social mores characteristic of rural communities.

Another reason for the surge in Evangelicals has been the dramatic growth of Latin America's communication infrastructure. Looking again at the case of Brazil, until the second half of the 20th century, most of this nation's vast territory was only sparsely populated; even today most of the population lives within 300 km. of the Atlantic Ocean. By the 1970s, roads, telephone lines and electric cables began to crisscross the country. Television networks began to build a common national identity out of a patchwork of regional cultures.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in the midst of an increasingly diverse religious landscape, Latin American religious identity is becoming both more fluid and more nuanced. There was a time when Roman Catholics were Roman Catholics and Evangelicals were Evangelicals, and never the twain should meet. Evangelicals, espe-

cially, often expressed animosity toward Indigenous or Afro-Latin American religions. Today, it is not unusual for Roman Catholics to attend Neo-Pentecostal mega churches, nor is it unheard of for Evangelicals, in moments of personal crisis, to consult a Mayan shaman or a Spiritist for advice and counsel.

Religion and politics: Emerging scenarios

Under the current wave of globalization, Latin America has experienced the fracturing of traditional hegemonies in politics, culture, religion and the economy. In this context, both traditional and emerging media have become powerful tools for promoting not only consumer culture, but also political ideologies and religious belief systems. New social actors are emerging. Traditional elites have either lost part of their power or have had to scramble to forge alliances with these new actors.

In the religious sphere, traditional Christian denominations – including Roman Catholics – are losing members and influence in Latin American society. Neo Pentecostalism has grown so quickly and become so pervasive that Christian groups throughout the region have been influenced by both its style and substance. Historically, traditional church leaders had the power to silence or marginalize Charismatic Christian groups and other religious minorities. Today, mega church pastors and other new religious actors compete with traditional church leaders, both Evangelical and Roman Catholic, for cultural and political power.

Neo Pentecostal leaders often assume titles to affirm their religious authority. Since their churches tend to be new enterprises organized by charismatic individuals, they do not conform to the structures proffered by traditional ecclesiology. Their leaders tend to adopt titles awarded to them by divine revelation: Apostle, Bishop, Missionary – all terms of authority rooted in the Bible or Christian tradition.

Peruvian Pentecostal researcher Bernardo Campos notes that Latin American Charismatics began to import this new leadership model from the USA in the 1980s. "Apostles" are considered to be a contemporary expression of the messianic and

apostolic traditions that imbued the early Christian Church with authority and dynamism. Campos observes that many Charismatic churches interpret their recent growth as a confirmation that more traditional churches have missed the boat by not putting into practice the power inherent in the apostolic movement (Campos, 2004: 20-23). Members of the apostolic movement throughout the world have formed a growing network, act as one another's spiritual confidants and sponsors, speak regularly at one another's public campaigns, and consider themselves to be part of a "New Apostolic Reformation".

By combining their major media presence with daily religious services offered in huge auditoriums, the Charismatic mega churches break dramatically with the parish system of church organization still used by most Roman Catholics. Under the parish system, residents in a particular neighbourhood know that their religious needs will be attended to by the priest named to that parish. This system presupposes that a church organized in parishes – even if that church is no longer the established religion of the land – benefits from the inherent cultural authority granted by history and tradition.

Evangelicals organized around a different principle when they arrived in the 19th century, understanding their churches to be – in the spirit of the times – voluntary religious associations of individuals. Still, participation in such churches tends to be limited to those living relatively near the church building. Peruvian communication researcher and WACC member Rolando Pérez observes that the new media-based religious enterprises function parallel to community-based congregations, becoming, effectively, "deterritorialized" churches. He suggests that this emerging system makes the local congregation but one of many public spaces where believers can celebrate their faith (Pérez, 1997:21).

We are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of religious leader. Three to four years of traditional training in a theological seminary do not prepare one to become a religious entrepreneur adept at designing and implementing mass marketing strategies, preparing simple, repetitive

messages easily interwoven with dynamic images, negotiating effectively with diverse actors ranging from the commercial media to political parties, staging high-energy religious spectacles, and organizing highly-motivated teams of volunteers. While some Bible institutes are now offering courses in how to project an effective image on camera, most of the new religious entrepreneurs have learned their craft on the job.

On the other hand, most traditional, non-Charismatic pastors have little practical understanding of how the media have become the space where modern societies create meaning. They have little notion of how effectively to engage existing structures of cultural and political power, nor how to advocate on behalf of the silenced, the invisibilized, the excluded.

At a cycle of WACC conferences on *Communication, Politics and Religious Fundamentalism in Latin America* held in 2006, Chilean sociologist Arturo Chacón argued that Protestantism, with its emphasis on reasoned theological discourse, has served as a vehicle for modernization. If traditional Protestants have sold their soul to reason, suggested 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 argued 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 (Smith, 2007).

At that same conference, Pentecostal scholar Violeta Rocha observed that, "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" (Smith, 2007). That is, in the prosperity gospel we are confronted with the commodification of faith, and faith turned into a commodity can be an attractive consumer good. 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).

If one were to reduce the religious experience to a commercial transaction of symbolic goods, then these new religious emporia would seem to be making great strides in consolidating their market share and supplanting traditional symbolic goods with newer, shinier models that bring greater personal satisfaction to the consuming public. The increased cultural and political power enjoyed by the new religious entrepreneurs would seem to strengthen their hand.

What is not yet clear, however, is whether these new groups actually strengthen and deepen religious faith, or, on the contrary, strengthen the impulse toward individualism and secularism. Evidence suggests that a sizeable number of Latin Americans move from traditional religious groups to Charismatic groups, and then continue on to abandon institutional religion. One must also take into account the growing number of individuals who have felt used or abused by the world of religious spectacle – especially those who have brought to the altar their desperate need for health or prosperity. Nor is it clear whether traditional Christian denominations will be able to re-invent themselves in such a way that they might be able to draw unaffiliated Evangelicals back into the fold.

Political vision of Reconstructionists

I have emphasized the pervasiveness of the Charismatic movement, Neo-Pentecostal mega churches and prosperity theology in Latin America. One additional comment about the political theology often embraced by these groups is needed. In the 1980s, a new movement known as Dominion Theology or the Reconstructionist Movement surfaced among conservative Evangelicals. This group interpreted the Bible – especially the Old Testament – as commanding believers “to restore” each nation according to theocratic principles and to promote Evangelical moral paradigms. Reconstructionists affirm an eschatological and political vision founded on the belief that Christians were destined to govern the world.

Many prominent Evangelical politicians in Latin America have embraced this ideology. They

seek to bring others to their faith not only because of their propensity for proselytism but also because of their conviction that, once a nation reaches a critical mass of believers, the Spirit will pour out God’s justice and prosperity upon the population (Smith & Campos, 2012). Undoubtedly, this ideology is present, in one form or another, in other contexts and people need to be aware of its presence.

It is worth noting that nowhere that the Reconstructionists have held power or influence – in Guatemala, Brazil, Nicaragua, El Salvador or Peru, for example – have they been able successfully to model sound public governance nor successfully resolve such issues as systemic corruption and violence. But they are present, they have money, and they often have access to media and to opinion leaders.

Influencing public policy

Rolando Pérez observes that the emerging actors on the religious scene in Latin America no longer need to legitimize their discourse and actions through their relationship with traditional churches. By consolidating their presence in the media and by regularly sharing the stage with powerful politicians, a new generation of Evangelical leaders has developed its own moral discourse on political power as well as carving out a space from which to speak out on social issues. These pioneers are assuming unprecedented levels of civic protagonism for non-Catholic religious actors in Latin America.

Pérez also observes that some Evangelicals in the region are beginning to understand “evangelization” as not being limited to proselytism but also as influencing public policy. Evangelical political activists tend to take on issues that are typical of the conservative social agenda such as opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, preserving the “traditional family” and opposing the historic privileges granted to the Catholic Church. But, some are also creatively engaged with such issues as corruption, transparency in governance and the rule of law (Pérez, 2009:2-3).

In the rough and tumble world of Latin American politics, Evangelical politicians have yet

to demonstrate that their performance in public office differs substantially from the rest of the political field. Traditional politicians in Latin America, whatever their religious affiliation, learn to consolidate their hold on public office by developing their ability to sense the ebb and flow of public opinion, to provide services to their constituency and to take orders from their political bosses. When Evangelicals are thrust into this world, they often find themselves in over their heads.

After a careful study of the Evangelical federal deputies related to Neo Pentecostal mega churches in Brazil between 1999 and 2006, sociologist of religion Saulo Baptista documents that the Pentecostal pastors most likely to run for public office tend to be self-made charismatic leaders who have developed a powerful sense of their own spiritual gifts. Baptista concludes that traditional Evangelical discourse rooted in sobriety, honesty and reliability – values inconsistent with their actual performance in office – were no match for the dominant values of Brazilian politics: clientelism, corruption and authoritarianism (Baptista: 2009,66). As many of these pastors have taken the plunge into electoral politics, they end up demonstrating to their constituencies both their lack of experience in the public sphere and their lack of understanding of how government actually works.

Concluding words of advice

In my experience understanding our context is the first step in developing a strategy for influencing public policy as people of faith. Let me conclude with several concrete recommendations based on what I have observed in Latin America:

- If you are seeking to influence public policy, you need to have a clear sense of what you bring to the table. What is your negotiating position? What are the acceptable alternatives? Who are your allies? (The broader based your coalition, the better. Can you bring in representatives of other faith traditions? Of the academic and NGO communities? Can you forge useful alliances with the private sector without being perceived

as “selling out” to mercenary interests? Can you include groups representing other ideologies, political affiliations or points of view?) What kind of public pressure can be brought to bear by you and your local allies? What international partners are prepared to support your position and how?

- What are the ethical principles rooted in your lived experience as communities of faith that support your position? The need to clearly state these principles is one of the reasons that WACC has recently updated its core values statement, now called *Communication for All*. The product of an ongoing conversation with our members, we have been able to offer this document to members and allies as a clear statement of what we are about. We are thankful that WACC was given the opportunity to walk alongside the Council for World Mission (CWM) as it developed its own statement of communication principles. *Communication for All* describes who we are as WACC and who we aspire to be. It is a statement of the moral and ethical capital that we bring to the negotiating table, but it is also an open document, an invitation to further conversation that recognizes that we have no monopoly on moral discourse (WACC, 2013).
- Offer training to journalists, including the journalists in your own shop. For a time I served as an informal communication advisor to the Guatemalan conference of Catholic bishops. I recall one press conference when a journalist asked the bishop leading the conference: “What is a diocese”? Most journalists don’t know how churches work. Nor are they familiar with our history or our contribution to local culture. In today’s world, religion, increasingly, is front-page news. Your local editors may be open to a course on “Religion in the News” to help them improve their coverage. As a starting point, check out the many resources produced by the Religion Communicators Council in the USA. With time, you can produce and share additional resources rooted in and appropriate to your

context. (<http://www.religioncommunicators.org/resources>).

- Training should focus less on the minutiae of denominational politics and more on the role of religion and religious institutions in the current context and on human culture in general. In the same sense, your own journalists might lack the breadth of lived experience that would allow them to understand well a particular issue. Help them to grow! Provide them with the resources they need to expand their world, and the confidence to bring their own experience, their own language and culture, their own faith story to their journalistic task.
- Finally, you need to develop your credibility as sources and as honest brokers with serious journalists, academics and opinion leaders in your community. When a journalist calls you asking for background information on a particular issue, have something coherent and useful to say that won't be discounted as partisan bunk. (If no serious journalists, academics or opinion makers ever call you, you need to begin to develop and circulate thoughtful, constructive positions on the key issues facing your community. You need to be present in the forums where such issues are discussed.)
- Maybe the journalist or academic that comes to call has never been to a poor neighbourhood where the local church is the beacon for life and justice that offers women a safe space when confronted with domestic violence or offers kids a place where caring adults can help them with their homework after school so they don't get involved in gangs. Introduce them to the pastor of that church; to the woman that organizes the after-school program. Take the time to talk to him or her even if the piece isn't about you or your group.

Talking with journalists

On a few occasions, I have been privileged to spend hours talking to serious journalists or academics about serious issues like “What does the church

have to say about corruption in government, or the bill before the Guatemalan congress on the rights of children, or the role of the churches in the peace process.” Sometimes my name won't even appear in the piece as a source. But, if I've interpreted my position well, when I read the story I can see that I was able to shape the argument of the journalist and deepen his or her understanding of a complex issue.

In this same vein, I have received calls from journalists saying, “Can you suggest a reliable Evangelical source that will talk to me on the record, before Thursday, about the new municipal ordinance that won't allow churches to play loud music after ten in the evening?” I'll check with my pastor colleagues and they'll often respond: “A journalist? To be quoted in the newspaper? Forget it! They'll get it wrong! And I'll be presented as a whining buffoon!” Sometimes, no doubt, the journalist will get it wrong. So you go back to them and you continue the conversation. And maybe they'll run a follow-up. Maybe next time, if they are good journalists, they'll do a better job.

This never gets easy. It is not only messy but dangerous work. As communicators we must always be wise as serpents but gentle as doves. But in our globalized world, experience has taught us that silence and self-censorship are not the way of Jesus. Gently, insistently, clearly – we must participate effectively in the debates that shape the lives of our communities, we must work to broaden the debate and open media platforms to include the voices of the silenced (not just our voices), and the faces of the invisibilized (not just our faces). This, I am convinced, is the way of Jesus.

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