

# Christian Reorder in Latin America

By Fortunato Mallimaci; Translated by Alisa Newman

As part of the reconfiguration of social structures and beliefs in recent decades, Latin America has transitioned from a virtual Catholic monopoly to a plural and diverse Christian majority characterized by the spread of Pentecostalism and a growing number of people claiming no religion at all.

Secularization does not mean the disappearance or privatization of religious beliefs but rather their continuous reordering. Capitalism's multiple modernities are not linear, nor are they evolutionary; they are indeterminate and multidirectional, and no

one can predict their outcomes. Going beyond what is normative and prescriptive to analyze concrete situations is a challenge that scientific studies cannot ignore.

The historical foundation of the nation-state (alternating democracies and dictatorships under multiple neo-colonialisms), policies to expand citizenship—or not, the type of social framework, the formation of social movements and the role played by Christian movements—Catholicism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with Evangelicalism in the twenty-first—are a central part of the socio-religious narratives that have dominated our national histories.

The crisis of the state, along with privatization and deregulation, has dislocated not only our material existence but also our symbols, memories and expectations. During the longest democratic period the region has ever known, life is full of contradictions, both among states and within them—on the one hand, the heterogeneity of poverty and the penal/repressive control of populations destabilized by unemployment; on the other, the extension of new rights of citizenship to vast sectors of the population accompanied by an aggressive rebuilding of state and civil society capacities.



French nun Yvonne Pierron speaks during an ecumenical celebration in honor of French nun Leonie Duquet, kidnapped and murdered by navy forces during Argentina's military dictatorship. Photo: Daniel Garcia/AFP/Getty Images.

Categories such as time, space and promise have been reformulated in such a way that—especially for young people—time has been transformed into something instantaneous, into a permanent presence that makes it hard to plan for the future. The world-space has been expanded by new information technologies, and globalization and the collective promises of a better tomorrow have lost credibility, and this leads to many individual exit plans.

Meaningful institutions—the state, family, labor unions, churches, political parties—no longer create long-term legitimacies and are being eroded in our so-called “liquid modernity.”<sup>1</sup>

### Religious Institutions and Beliefs

A quick look at institutions and beliefs on the continent shows us an active market in salvation and a broad religious field with strong demands and multiple sources of supply. Religiosity does not end with institutions and religious beliefs are not only channeled through clergy.

In Brazil, Catholics make up 73.8% of the population and Evangelicals 15.6%, ranking it as one of the Latin American countries with the highest percentage (and absolute numbers) of Evangelicals (17,733,477 Pentecostals and 8,477,068 mission-oriented Evangelicals). The category “no religion” is as high as 8%.

Ricardo Salas confirms the growing plurality of religion in Brazil. “The Catholic Church may still be the majority religion (73%),” he writes, “but there has been sustained growth by Evangelicals (16%) (who, on the one hand, tend to look to their neighborhoods for meaning and, on the other, tend to be more indifferent toward democracy than Catholics) and other religions (4%).”

Uruguay, perhaps the most secular country in Latin America, has the highest rates of religious indifference

in the region. Unaffiliated believers account for 23.2% of the population and atheists and agnostics 17.2%. Uruguay has the lowest percentage of Catholics (47.1%) of any country in the Southern Cone. 11% of Uruguayans identify themselves as Evangelical and a little more than 2% as belonging to other religions.

In a study that combines census figures and ethnographic research, Mexican researchers using data from the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) analyzed the complex world of religious identity in their country. Renée de la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez Zúñiga found the “territories of religious diversity” in Mexico today to include 88.9% Catholics, a little more than 5% Evangelicals, 2.5% “non-Evangelical Biblical religions” and 3.52% no religion. “The dissidence is composed of a diversity of religious minorities, internally very disparate, where we find both firmly consolidated religions and a pulverization of religious offerings.”

The results of Argentina’s First Academic Poll of Religious Beliefs, carried out in 2008, also reflect the strong inroads made by Christian religions other than Catholicism. Argentina is still Catholic majority, but other denominations have expanded and diversified: 76.5% of respondents identified themselves as Catholic, 9% as Evangelical and 11% as indifferent (in other words, atheists, agnostics and no religious affiliation). The rest were divided between Jehovah’s Witnesses (1.2%), Mormons (0.9%) and other religions (1.1%), among them Judaism, Islam, Umbanda or other African-inspired religions, Buddhism and Spiritism. One noteworthy finding is that more Argentines have no religion or religious education (11.2%) than are Pentecostal (10.4%).

If we focus on the religion with the most followers in Argentina,

Catholicism, we find that three-quarters of Catholics practice their beliefs without the Church as an intermediary (65% practice their religion on their own and 10% never do). Among Evangelicals, in contrast, the split is more even: 55.8% connect with God through their church while 42.4% say they do so on their own.

As we have seen, Christianity, the overwhelmingly majority religion on the continent, is undergoing a profound transformation. On the one hand, the Catholic Church (which has difficulty maintaining a dialogue with emerging sects, obsessed as it is with the topic of sex and tangled up in its own dogmas and bureaucratic authority) is losing its hegemony to countless and diverse religious groups that “negotiate” their public presence, foremost among them the powerful and vital Evangelical movement. On the other hand, we are witnessing an “emotionalization” of beliefs that cuts across Christian groups that prioritize organization, authority and emotional community over dogma. Faith healing, speaking in tongues, ecstatic dancing, entering into trances, creating a climate of human warmth and seeking a direct connection to the sacred with no or little institutional mediation, along with “hyper-modern” use of the mass communications media and links to more “pragmatic” sources of financing are a part of both the Charismatic Catholic Renewal movement and the many different Pentecostal Evangelical groups.

In response to this religious nomadism, however, communitarian Catholic and Evangelical groups have emerged that offer certainty, security and totality to small groups, with the goal of achieving long-term continuity. Among Catholics, groups like the Legionaries of Christ, Institute of the Incarnate Word, Knights of Christ the King, New Catechuminate, etc. and, among Evangelicals,

the Assemblies of God, God Is Love, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and others create their own authorities, legitimacies, memories and relationships. The Catholic groups are in a state of permanent tension with local ecclesiastical authorities and have varied links to Rome. The Evangelical groups can be likened to small salvation businesses that act as micro-enterprises, with local inputs and legitimacy limited to their leader and congregation. The network structure makes these groups permeable but complicates the formation of shared national or regional policies. Ultimately, individualization and communitarianism are part of the same social and cultural process.

Long-term studies should keep in mind that Christian institutions maintain historical relations with the state, culture and society through negotiations and by the power they accumulated in each nation state.

Christianity—especially Catholicism—is a social space, not just an institutional one, with strong roots in Latin American society that go beyond the number of churches or clergy. A common and differentiated universe of belief feeds “diffuse Catholic imaginaries” that compete with other imaginaries in the current context of globalized communications, but that endure as symbolic capital always ready and available for use by different religious actors and constituting “natural continuity” in a “long Catholic tradition.” It is these different Catholic imaginaries that have been at stake in Latin America since the end of the Cold War, the triumph of the market and US global hegemony: a Catholicism based on certainties, another on emotions and a third on asceticism. Once more the question is whether to conciliate or confront “liberalism,” US imperial policy, modern values, hedonism and individualism, and whether the effort should be based at the level of the dominant or popular

sectors, the institution and/or society. While many Christian groups and movements join in criticism of unbridled market economics and the external debt, other issues, among them complicity with power, imposed dogma, and opposition to state-mandated reproductive health and sex education create strong divisions both within Catholic groups and between the Church and important segments of society.

The weakening of the social state and the privatization of public policy has created new spaces for religious groups, especially those with a strong institutional presence. One example is the increased role of religious groups in public education and social assistance. As a result, neither the state nor political parties can claim hegemony over popular spaces; instead, an assortment of religious groups enjoy so much legitimacy in this sphere that the state and party leaders are compelled to consult them and invite their participation in social, educational, cultural and employment-related activities.

In addition, the loss of credibility of government and party promises and mediation in the redefinition of the public and private spheres (an effort in which the women’s movement has played a central role) has opened a whole new range of spaces for religious leaders and their agendas. This explains the increasingly frequent appearance of priests, pastors, rabbis, imams and other religious leaders in mediating or managing social conflicts. They have more credibility as social actors than as “representatives of the sacred” or for their moral or religious recommendations, and they have the ability to claim greater institutional power.

Religious institutions do not consider themselves to be on the margins of political power, nor do state officials think of themselves as apart from religion. We have seen the

emergence of a political-religious sphere characterized by a back and forth flow that merits more transparency and analysis. Legal equality among all religious groups (or the effort to gain the same privileges as those enjoyed by Catholicism), as well as the quest for equality, justice and inclusion for all men and women, may represent a potential source of conflict among religions.

In conclusion, we must remember that in Latin America historically the great majority of believers have not been active members or daily participants in any religious group. Latin America does not have the same tradition of mass parochial culture that characterized Europe for many centuries. These are not “apathetic” or “passive” men and women who are “objects of manipulation” by their churches. Their religious beliefs influence their daily lives and provide answers to important challenges at the level of identity, belonging, family structure, etc. In situations of generalized anxiety or uncertainty, religious ethics are one of the main sources of meaning. The panorama of experiences ranges from believing without belonging to religious individualism. By affirming the primacy of emotional experience, Pentecostal groups—whether Catholic or Evangelical—do not respect, or simply reject, the imposition of religious authority through institutional symbolic violence. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Concept introduced by Zygmunt Bauman, referring to the privatization of ambivalence and increasing feelings of uncertainty, a kind of chaotic continuation of modernity. (Editor’s note)