



ISSUES IN BRIEF

Religion, Social Movements, and Zones of Crisis in Latin America



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Over the past two decades, Latin America has drawn considerable attention as a region of political and economic transformation, providing a global reference for democratization coupled with economic growth. Leftist

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governments in places such as Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, and Uruguay have enacted progressive reforms while countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Peru have reinforced neoliberal policies emphasizing free trade and foreign investment. With the decline of the Washington Consensus, Latin America's diverse political economy offers a range of visions for the future.

Within Latin America's contemporary political and economic landscapes, social movements have emerged as major political forces, bringing down governments in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and fighting for rights and recognition across the region. Meanwhile, dramatic increases in crime, especially linked to drug trafficking, have created a panorama of devastating violence. Paradoxically, then, the deepening of citizenship and democratic institutions associated with Latin America's so-called "pink tide," or turn to the left, has been accompanied by zones of crisis, where ordinary people suffer extreme levels of poverty and insecurity.

At first glance, *religion* seems absent from center stage in Latin America at the beginning of the 21st century. But a closer look shows the region's socio-political life to be permeated by religious discourses, practices, leaders, and institutions. As citizenship is constructed in both social movements and zones of crisis, religion shapes how people understand themselves, the trajectories of collective mobilizations, and individual survival strategies.

The Religion, Social Movements, and Zones of Crisis project has, over three years, brought together an interdisciplinary and international group of scholars to analyze the role of religion in social and political change in contemporary Latin America. (See box on page 3.) The case studies making up this project shed important light on the ways *religion can both foster and limit progressive reform*. They also examine the role of religion in zones of crisis, where the rudimentary rights of citizenship are notably absent. In a post-secular world, understanding the role of religion is one key to understanding the conditions of democratic citizenship, in Latin America as elsewhere.

The Multiple Roles of Religion

Religion has long played a key role in Latin American politics. But the nature of that role has shifted in recent decades, as has our understanding of the interplay between religion and politics. Rather than functioning as an omnipresent force that shapes whole segments of society, religion in Latin America today affects local cultures, social movements, political institutions, and zones of crisis in myriad ways. Rather than acting primarily through churches and clergy, religion affects politics through the everyday religiosity of non-elites, the discourses used by social movements, and the rituals used by average citizens to gain strength in the face of difficult circumstances (Cleary and Steigenga 2004).

► **Religion in Everyday Life:** Religion suffuses the language people use to describe their experiences and the actions they take to survive, to exercise cultural agency, to form political movements, and to make policy. A few examples from the research of our project collaborators presented at the project conferences make this clear.

■ In a Catholic house in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Capuchin friars provide medical care and psychological support — and distribute condoms — for people living with HIV/AIDS. Stitching together Catholic principles of care with public health’s emphasis on risk reduction, this house makes possible a “theology of prevention” which complicates the common narrative of Catholic inflexibility around homosexuality and condoms. (Fernando Seffner, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil)

■ In the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, a former U.S. Special Forces operative puts out water bottles for migrants dying of dehydration. A member of the Tohono O’odham nation, he describes his activism as “spiritual” but as independent from the church, reflecting the way he sees his own conversion from soldier to human-rights activist. He fights against Tohono O’odham’s cooperation with the border patrol, as well as against religious groups that accept Tohono O’odham anti-immigrant policies out of respect for the Indian nation’s sovereignty. (José Antonio Lucero, University of Washington)

In each case, we see religion providing not abstract values, but discourses and principles brought together in concrete, new practices to address critical problems.

► **Religion and Safe Spaces:** Religion can offer “safe spaces” for reconstructions of identities and social networks and for unique forms of experimentation (Brenneman 2011). Black Evangelical churches were key to the 1960s civil rights drives in the U.S., and Catholic churches to the spread of the Polish Solidarity Movement. The following examples give a sense of how religion in Latin America provides liminal spaces in conflictive contexts.

■ In the 1960s in Colombia’s conflicted countryside, Church-based radio and theater afforded a space for rural communities, and especially rural women, to discuss sensitive social and political topics — ranging from sexual abuse to social inequality and authoritarian

The Religion, Social Movements, and Zones of Crisis Project at Boston University

The Religion, Social Movements, and Zones of Crisis project, based at BU's Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs (CURA), began in 2010 with the goal of bridging two fields in Latin American studies that rarely interacted: social movements and religion. We sought to understand how religious discourses, practices, leaders, and institutions affect efforts to expand citizenship and secure lasting, progressive reform in the region.

In a series of three conferences held at CURA from 2010-2012, we brought together scholars of social movements and of religion in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, and literary criticism. Through research presentations and open-ended discussions, we explored the multiple roles played by religion in fights for rights and the construction of citizenship in social movements and locations of extreme poverty and violence. While focusing on Latin America, we also included scholars of the United States, South Asia, China, and the Middle East, to gain tools for research as well as a comparative understanding of what is unique about Latin America.

We presented our research to an international conference of social movement scholars and activists in Lima, Peru, in 2010 and organized a featured panel at the 2012 Latin American Studies Association Congress in San Francisco. The lively discussions that followed our presentations underscored the direct relevance of our research to current politics and scholarship, as scholars and activists related our work to processes of grassroots mobilization and research on religion and activism. Our theoretical discussions and research findings will reach a broad audience in a 2014 Special Issue of the *Latin American Research Review*, which we have been invited to guest edit.

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governments — in a non-polarized setting. Many of those whose consciousness was raised through these religious programs went on to become “secular” activists in subsequent decades of guerrilla war and peace initiatives. (Mary Roldán, Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center)

■ In Guatemala, Evangelical conversion provides gang members a means of exit. Despite the lifelong allegiance demanded of gang members and the threat of retaliation for deserters, conversion — if it is thought by others to be genuine — offers a way out. This exemption reflects a widespread popular belief that a man who has truly converted should not be punished. Even among active gang members God is feared, as summed up in their simultaneously reverent and irreverent expression “Don’t mess with Curly!” (Robert Brenneman, St. Michael’s College)

These cases highlight changes in networks, discourses, and identities in spaces separate from the harsh conflicts of daily life.

► **Religion and Repair:** Religion can function to repair, to provide meaning, and to foster agency in zones of crisis, creating new social forms in the face of the retreat of the state in social welfare policy and the collapse of economies in poor urban and rural settings (Smilde 2007).

■ In a violent favela of Rio de Janeiro, a paramilitary protection group enforces security — often through extortion and violence — under an anti-drug ideology of “clean communities.” At prayer meetings of an Evangelical Assembly of God congregation, the group’s leader links the enforcement of security with the vigilance of God, and reaffirms that the word of God will give community residents strength to resist the temptation of drugs. (Desmond Arias, John Jay College)

■ A woman places a life-size statue of Santa Muerte — a female grim reaper — in a public space in Tepito, a Mexico City neighborhood known for its history of contraband and crime. The statue attracts multitudes of devotees, ranging from ex-prisoners to thugs linked with drug trafficking to city policemen, many of whom attend with their families. Offerings and prayers to Santa Muerte are reminiscent of the Catholic rosary, and media attention becomes an integral part of the rituals. As elsewhere in Mexico, Santa Muerte brings together strangers and confers a sense of protection and safety as violent crime rises. (Laura Roush, El Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico)

As these examples make clear, simple assumptions regarding religion's creation of submissive, law-abiding subjects must be set aside for a more open-ended understanding of the full range of engagements between religion and citizens. This is especially evident in zones of crisis where the state is largely absent.

➤ **Religion in Democratic Micro-Publics:** Religion acts in multiple arenas in democratic politics. It shapes citizenship in civil society and social movements, where activists engage in a public politics of protest, seeking new radical or reformist bargains (Burdick 1998). It creates new discourses as actors test and push beyond their society's limits.

■ In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Afro-Brazilian gospel singers use biblical text and religiously-inflected historical analysis to fight racism through their music. God placed the Black voice in their bodies during the Atlantic crossing, they explain, to enable them to follow biblical prescriptions and sing and speak against racism today. (John Burdick, Syracuse University)

■ In Venezuela, the shift from representative to participatory models of democracy under socialist Hugo Chávez in the past decade-and-a-half finds its strongest origins in proposals written by theologians and members of Venezuela's Christian democratic party, COPEI, in the 1970s and 1980s, as they sought to strengthen and reform their party in accord with reformist Catholic notions of grassroots participation. Thus, the words and practices of a radical leftist movement were written by religious moderates two decades earlier. (Margarita López Maya, Universidad Central de Venezuela)

In these cases, religious networks and meanings provided spaces for reflection on and revision of existing understandings of democracy.

➤ **Religious Geographies of the Present:** Religion invests specific places and actions with particular meanings. It shapes hopes and fears, suggests timeframes for understanding daily experience, and offers visions of the future. Thus, religion can put everyday struggles in a context of ultimate values and sacred practices (Vasquez and Marquardt 2003; Hagan 2008).

■ In Venezuela, where the lack of housing constitutes a major crisis, Pentecostal squatters illegally occupy a vacant urban building. Their leader, a female pastor, speaks about the building they have taken over as "the promised land of milk and honey." She describes the occupation as following "the will of the Father," although "the Father" simultaneously references God, the holy spirit, Simón Bolívar, and Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez. (Rafael Sánchez, Amsterdam University College)

■ Indigenous activists in the Andes represent mountains as sacred beings with rights. In a hybrid discourse, they incorporate Quechua and Aymara values to advocate native rights to idle land as well as environmental protection. In a mining conflict in Peru, activists assert their claim that mountains are sentient beings in order to protest possible environmental harm. In response, national politicians argue in favor of economic development; Peru's president, Alan Garcia, states

flatly, “Sacred mountains do not exist.” (Marisol de la Cadena, University of California, Davis)

In these cases, contested spaces become sacred as marginalized actors fight for their rights.

► **Religion and Political Complexity:** During the 20th century, the political orientations of the major Christian groups in Latin America were generally clear. Catholic hierarchies were thought to be conservative, Liberationist priests were progressive, and Evangelicals were politically quiescent. While there have always been deviations from these norms, the first decade of the 21st century has seen an increased blurring of the lines between religious and secular identities and institutions (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997).

■ In Venezuela, during the conflictive 14 years of the Chávez government, the Catholic hierarchy has opposed the Chávez government while some Liberationist priests support it. However, at the ground level what matters most is with whom the priests work. Some Liberationist priests that teach at the Catholic University virulently oppose the Chávez government while others that work in the *barrios* support it. Those who mainly work with members of Venezuela’s middle class focus on valid critiques of the Chávez government’s threats against civil and political rights. Those who work in the *barrios* focus on the government’s clear achievements in terms of social and economic justice. Both sides justify their politics with reference to Liberation Theology. There is similar complexity on the Evangelical side where some middle-class “prosperity churches” support Chávez because his nationalism fits in with their own Dominion Theology — a theology that focuses on preparing “the nation” for Jesus Christ’s imminent return. (David Smilde, University of Georgia)

■ In São Paulo, Brazil, an organization fighting for housing rights in one of the city’s poorest regions formed a novel partnership with the Catholic Church. Unlike most housing groups, they achieved political strength and accessed federal resources through the advocacy of a Catholic priest, who exhibited a finely tuned knowledge of the city’s neighborhood and bureaucratic politics. The priest’s efforts, however, were opposed by São Paulo’s bishop, leading to contestation over the proper relationship between social movements and the Church. An Evangelical activist in the group locked horns with her Catholic sister over the presence of both alcohol and the Virgin Mary in the housing organization’s meeting place, which doubled as a bar. (Amanda Hornhardt, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil)

In these cases, easy assumptions of Catholic versus Evangelical or hierarchy versus parish priests need to be set aside to look at pastors and priests as they are inserted in particular social networks.

Religion and Secularity

Looking at religion in the social and political contexts of contemporary Latin America highlights the need to rethink some key assumptions regarding religion and secularity. Perhaps the central task is to deconstruct the essence of the divisions between “the religious” and “the secular.” What people think is properly religious and what they think is properly secular depends on historical, social, and cultural context (Vasquez 2010).

The literatures on social movements and the politics of reform in Latin America tend to assume the incompatibility of religion with struggles for equality and inclusion. In large part, this reflects an historical association of religion with conservative elites and institutions, while progressive change has been associated with secularity. Even when priests and nuns embraced Liberation Theology, their notion of how to achieve social justice followed the contours of contemporary leftist political theorizing. In addition, with the exception of those Liberationist clergy, progressive leaders in Latin America have tended to be anti-clerical.

However, this association between progressive grassroots action and secularity has never described average Latin Americans, for whom religious meaning, identity, and practice are fundamental to everyday life experience. This was highlighted to us at a social movements conference in Lima, Peru in May 2010, at which we presented our preliminary findings on religion and social movements to a gathering of more than two hundred activists and intellectuals. Turning the microphones around, we invited participants to share their perspectives on how religion entered into the social-movement activism in which they engaged, or which they studied. Our project's core themes clearly resonated, as for a full hour audience members told stories that ranged from spirit possession at rallies, to God directly intervening in battles with police, to the courage of Catholic priests in standing beside protestors.

We were struck by the many viewpoints and directions of inquiry that were raised, from sexual-diversity activists who experienced the Catholic Church's views on homosexuality as hostile — but wanted to find common ground with their families' religious practices — to indigenous women's-movement leaders who spoke of the protection offered to their bodies on the steps of Evangelical churches when the military came, in places where the state and the Catholic Church did not reach. We heard Marxist scholars puzzle over the need for theories of religion in political action, and victims of state terror explain that God turned the wind around and saved them from death. Indigenous anti-mining activists referred to mountains as “sentient beings,” so that the agency of figures in the landscape simultaneously figured into environmental catastrophe — the mountains were striking back — and stimulated an ecologically-based defense of the land in the face of state repression.

Talking about religion in this hands-on fashion was central for people in the thick of organizing. Once one is attuned to it, religion is everywhere in the social struggles we study.

Selfhood and Identity

Attention to the role of religion in contemporary Latin American society and politics also requires a rethinking of identity and selfhood. How do we conceptualize the forms of self-awareness Latin Americans have as citizens, as social-movement participants, as believers, and as churchgoers? Shared, public identities promoted by religious institutions and social movements play an important role in political and social life. To ex-gang members in Central America, for example, a public identity as *Evangelico* provides protection from retaliation and a rare pathway out of gang life.

At the same time, overarching public identities such as “Evangelical” or “gang member” do not always — or even often — correspond to the kinds of self-awareness that people experience in real-life social contexts. Selfhood is often characterized by fragmentation and hybridity. When we look closely at what people do and say in context, we see ambivalence, refusal, and contradiction; we see how people both invest in and subvert the discourses of political and religious movements and institutions.

In Porto Alegre, for example, a Catholic monk distributing condoms to homosexual men with AIDS experiences himself as neither a purely religious nor purely political subject as he acts in both realms simultaneously. He is inventing a new practice — the public display of condoms in a religious venue — without necessarily defining himself fully as a monk or an AIDS activist. Similarly, among devotees of the Santa Muerte cult in Mexico City, we see that prayer to the female grim reaper is accompanied by feelings of self-awareness that are simultaneously spiritual, political, and social. As devotees exchange handcrafted statuettes of the Santa Muerte in the midst of a public prayer ceremony, they invite divine intervention in the form of miracles, create a community among ex-prisoners, gang members, and police, and assert their

need for protection from a harsh economy and unresponsive government — all at the same time. They do not experience a single category of identity, but multiple identities together. And we cannot understand their actions — past, present, or future — without understanding this juggling, or coexistence, of multiple identities.

Attention to religion in contemporary Latin American politics and society also pushes us towards new ways of understanding *belief*. While religious institutions and social movements promote ideological value systems using the language of “beliefs” — with scholars often categorizing them as such — we need to pay attention to the performative dimensions of belief. That is, rather than treating humans as vessels that carry coherent, fully formed values (religious, political, or otherwise) which in turn shape practice — an orientation common in rational-choice models — our project reveals belief to be something that occurs and is experienced not before action is taken, but in the course of taking action. In participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, for example, participants do not enter into civic life with a pre-existing conviction that the envy and hostility that form part of grassroots community politics will harm them. But as they experience the difficulties of debate over months and years — and become democratic citizens in the process — they seek purification through religious ritual. Hence, rather than explaining grassroots community leaders’ references to envy and purification as stemming from a pre-existing religious belief in a non-human and potentially harmful force, these references are a part of narratives — stories — that these leaders tell themselves and each other to make sense of their past successes and failures in civic engagement. In considering the role of religion in politics, then, we need to focus not on pre-existing religious beliefs, but on beliefs-in-formation as they are performed in social and political contexts.

Incomplete Citizenship

Attention to religion in contemporary social and political struggles in Latin America leads to a renewed focus on dilemmas of incomplete citizenship. On one hand, religion is involved in key ways in the movements through which people demand their rights as modern citizens — rights for recognition, rights for voice, and rights to services and protections afforded by the state. On the other hand, we have seen religion as a medium through which people in zones of crisis engage their social context and seek solutions in the absence of the most rudimentary forms of citizenship (Levine 2012).

These dilemmas, whose roots extend back to the 19th century, have only become more complex in the 21st. The neoliberal reduction of the state typical of the 1980s and 1990s continues in full force in some countries and to some degree throughout the region. Leftist governments have tried to expand the state’s redistributive and social welfare capacities, but in some cases have created threats of their own to rights of freedom of expression and assembly. All countries in the region have suffered crises of crime and insecurity. And in all of these contexts, whether neoliberal or leftist, citizens increasingly demand recognition and well-being, in organized social movements and zones of crisis alike.

The Future

In Latin America’s post-secular future the impact of religion is not likely to play out in any one way. Evangelicalism, for example, is not producing one kind of citizen or shaping Latin America’s public sphere in one particular fashion (Freston 2008). At the same time, our cases show clearly that religion is involved in virtually all of the struggles that are shaping the region’s future, providing meanings and motivations, innovative and hybrid practices, spaces for experimentation, multiple views of democracy, claims on urban geography, and

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support for a variety of social and political projects. We cannot understand the dynamics of any initiative or path in Latin America — be it leftist, neoliberal, urban, indigenous, violent, electoral, and/or popular cultural — without understanding the multiple roles played by religion as citizens fight for new rights and reshape democratic politics. ●

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