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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP IN CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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*JEWS OF THE AMAZON: SELF-EXILE IN PARADISE.* By Ariel Segal. (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999. Pp. 341. \$29.95 Cloth.)

*PROTESTANTISM AND POLITICAL CONFLICT IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISPANIC CARIBBEAN.* By Luis Martínez-Fernández. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Pp. 246. \$30.00 Paper.)

*SECRET DIALOGUES: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS, TORTURE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AUTHORITARIAN BRAZIL.* By Ken Serbin. (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. Pp. 312. \$50.00 Cloth, \$24.95 Paper.)

*THE POLITICS OF THE SPIRIT: THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PENTECOSTALIZED RELIGION IN COSTA RICA AND GUATEMALA.* By Timothy J. Steigenga. (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2001. Pp. 201. \$56.00 Cloth.)

*THE SACRED WORLD OF THE PENITENTES.* By Alberto López Pulido. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. Pp. 108. \$40.00 Cloth, \$17.95 Paper.)

*U.S. PROTESTANT MISSIONS IN CUBA: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO CASTRO.* By Jason M. Yaremko. (Gainesville, Fl.: University Press of Florida, 2000. Pp. 200. \$49.95 Cloth.)

A growing realization has emerged that the religious sphere is both internally dynamic and profoundly affected by changes in the secular sphere. As scholars have abandoned the idea that religion is incompatible with modern life or the values of modernity, they are discovering that religious beliefs and identities undergo significant adaptive change and subjective reinterpretation across time and cultural boundaries. This focus on the adaptation of religion to changing social circumstances is leading scholars to search for explanations for religious behavior outside of the religious sphere or at the sites of interaction between the religious and secular spheres.

Six recent works on Latin American religion offer significant new insights on the historically and socially contingent processes that generate religious diversity, structure religious choice and religious identity, and drive religious competition. The complex relationships between religious and secular processes, particularly the relationship between religion and politics and religion and identity formation, are at the heart of these new books.

#### RELIGION AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Timothy Steigenga's *Politics of the Spirit* is one of the first systematic, quantitative, and comparative investigations of the relationship between religious affiliation, religious beliefs, and secular political structure. Using data from over 1,200 interviews in Costa Rica and Guatemala, Steigenga tests many of the hypotheses generated by the recent literature on evangelical Protestantism. Steigenga's quantitative, comparative approach allows him to control for the effects of political structure on the behavior of religious persons. Controlling for cross-national effects is particularly important since it reveals what aspects of religion are socially conditioned and which are universal.

Steigenga has chosen a strategy of most different cases to investigate the effect of political structure on political behavior. If political structure affects religious behavior, Costa Rica's more open political structure should encourage higher levels of political participation among religious groups than Guatemala's relatively closed political structure. The data, while bearing out the general proposition that political context matters, show that the relationship between social context and political participation is complex. All religious groups have higher levels of political participation in Costa Rica than in Guatemala, but the differences are significantly higher for Catholics than for Protestants. That

finding undermines both arguments: that evangelical Protestants are intrinsically quiescent politically and that evangelical Protestantism has an intrinsic affinity with liberal democracy. If the former were true, we would expect little variance in levels of political activity between the two nations. If the latter were true, we would expect Protestant political participation to outstrip Catholic participation in Costa Rica's liberal, democratic political environment.

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge from Steigenga's analysis is that religious beliefs have a much stronger effect on political behavior than religious affiliation. This suggests that the denomination- or affiliation-oriented studies that dominate the literature are bound to miss the most important religious determinants of political behavior. Because some of the most politically relevant beliefs are shared across denominations, their effects may only show up at the individual level and may be missed or misinterpreted by researchers looking for between-group differences.

Steigenga finds that conservative religious beliefs per se do not depress levels of political activity. Quite the contrary, conservative religious beliefs are positively associated with voting in both Costa Rica and Guatemala. The political effects of religious beliefs can, however, vary across political structures and between types of political activity. The most significant and cross-nationally consistent effect of religious conservatism is its positive relationship to the belief that legitimate government authority should not be challenged. Steigenga cautions that this should not be misconstrued to associate religious conservatism with political conservatism since a belief in submission to legally constituted authority would require support for elected governments, whether on the left or the right (145).

On the face of it, Steigenga's argument seems strange since the essence of political conservatism is support for the status quo. Nevertheless, Steigenga finds that, at least in Guatemala, religious conservatism is positively related to left ideology, further undermining both the conflation of religious and political conservatism and the notion that the experience of the U.S. Christian Right is a harbinger of religious politics in Latin America.

#### RELIGION AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Steigenga's conclusion that religious politics are complex and partly contingent on the local political structure receives historical support from Luis Martínez-Fernández's and Jason Yaremko's studies of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestantism in the Hispanic Caribbean. The two studies offer dramatically different descriptions of Protestantism's role in Cuban politics. Yaremko's central argument is

that Protestantism “facilitated” U.S. hegemony in post-colonial Cuba by promoting a model of religious and secular behavior rooted in North American, petit-bourgeois culture. In contrast to Yaremko, Martínez-Fernández begins his book with an explicit denial of the “widely espoused notion that the Hispanic Caribbean’s Protestant experience [in the nineteenth century] was essentially foreign and imperialistic” (2). Not only was Protestantism not foreign and imperialistic, according to Martínez-Fernández, it offered significant ideological and organizational support and leadership to Cuban nationalism and the independence movement. If both authors’ readings of history are correct, in a matter of less than a century Cuban Protestantism transformed itself from a bulwark of national political liberalism to a bailiwick of neo-colonialism. How did this happen?

Martínez-Fernández and Yaremko agree that Cuban Protestantism in both centuries was strongly associated with liberal ideology, but secular influences and competition with the Catholic church profoundly influenced the way Protestants understood what liberal ideology and Protestant religion required of them. The transformation of Cuban Protestantism from a revolutionary to a neo-colonial social force was a direct result of fundamental changes in Cuba’s political structure at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Martínez-Fernández’s book carefully documents the complex relationships between social forces in the Hispanic Caribbean by focusing particularly on the relationship between Protestantism and five social actors: the Catholic Church, laboring masses, agrarian bourgeois, mercantile bourgeois, and the colonial state. Martínez-Fernández shows that native Protestants as well as foreign missionaries and Catholics turned religion to their specific needs, including their political needs. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Cuban and Puerto Rican colonial states and the Catholic Church were drawn into a situation of acute mutual dependence. Chronically short of priests, the Church in the islands was unable to minister to or hold the loyalties of the large slave and free, poor white populations. Unable to reach these populations, the Church was thus unable to socialize them into the cultural norms and ideas on which the colonial state rested. While the lack of lower-class support was troublesome in its own right, Martínez-Fernández argues that the industrial expansion of the sugar-based economies exacerbated both the Church and the state’s problems by drawing the plantation elite into economic alliances with Protestant England and the United States and by creating new work habits and lifestyles in which Catholic rituals and ethics were perceived as onerous.

The state’s need for ideological legitimation and the Church’s need for state enforcement of religious monopoly forged a stronger alliance between the Church and the colonial state than existed in Spain itself.

It also forced creole political dissent against *peninsulares* to take on religious dimensions. Much of the dissent expressed itself as anti-clericalism, but as an alternative to Catholicism, the Protestant religion appealed strategically and ideologically to Cuban liberals engaged in the struggle against the colonial state.

Martínez-Fernández's descriptions of the ways race, class, and religion interacted during the thirty-year revolutionary cycle leading to independence are particularly intriguing and shed important light on the reciprocal relationship between secular and religious influences. Racial and class segregation were characteristics of Protestant congregations in the Caribbean and contributed to the marginalization of blacks and mulattos. But when waves of working-class, black and mulatto Cuban exiles immigrated to the Florida Keys in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, they constituted a majority in church and polity. As a majority in a democratic state, these new immigrants gained valuable experience in self-government and found their way into self-governing Protestant churches led by radical Cuban nationalist pastors. When they returned to Cuba during and after the independence struggle, they brought with them a strengthened sense of political and religious efficacy and a radically liberal political ideology.

Yaremko acknowledges the existence of a liberal, nationalistic, native Cuban Protestantism during and before the struggle for independence, but asserts that it was mostly demolished by the independence struggle it helped to create. Extending the irony, Yaremko notes that post-independence laws guaranteeing religious freedom opened Cuba to North American missionaries with neo-colonialist mentalities.

Both the movement for independence and Cuban liberalism developed strong anti-Catholic rhetoric and drew support from Protestant theology and from the Cuban leadership of the Protestant churches. But U.S. interventionism in Cuba created dilemmas for Protestant politics in post-Independence Cuba. State recognition of Protestant religion and rites of marriage, baptism, and burial strengthened the appeal of Protestantism, and together with the proselytizing and educational efforts of the U.S. missions, contributed to a Protestant conversion boom. Rather than amplifying the nationalist tendencies of pre-independence Protestantism, the U.S. supervision of Protestant growth attenuated it. Rapidly growing congregations needed to rent or build meeting houses and needed pastors to minister to them. The most accessible sources of funding were the relatively conservative U.S. mission boards and the patronage of U.S. corporations. U.S. mission leaders came to depend heavily on both, and in doing so they placed the Cuban churches in a position of dependence on U.S. institutions and interests.

The limited historical scope of Yaremko's and Martínez-Fernández studies precludes either author from engaging in a discussion of

important conclusions to which their joint findings lead. A remarkable parallel emerges between the alliances and affinities of mission leaders and U.S. state and economic elites in the post-independence era and the pre-independence alliance between the colonial state, colonial elites, and the Catholic Church. In comparative historical perspective, the political implications of those alliances were different not because the theological nature of religious beliefs changed, but because the actors' interests were shaped by different cultural and economic influences and because the political context in which they pursued their interests had changed. In his conclusion, Martínez-Fernández expresses frustration that his defense of the liberal character of Protestantism in the nineteenth century led a colleague to label his book, pejoratively, "[Pro-] Protestant." In a comparative historical context, it becomes clear that the politics of religion are defined in large part by historical and social forces.

#### INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ELITES

The determinative effects of social class, institutional interests, political structure, and historical norms on religious behavior are also evident in Ken Serbin's *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil*. *Secret Dialogues* is one of the rare works that fundamentally changes what we think we know about the world. Serbin argues that even at the height of state repression when the Church was publicly criticizing the regime and promoting the Post-Vatican II ideal of a Popular Church, Catholic bishops did not definitively rupture the Church's relationship with the authoritarian state. Instead, Church and military elites privately attempted to salvage the long-standing traditions of institutional and interpersonal harmony and cordiality that had tied church and state together culturally and politically. The attempted reconciliation took the institutional form of a Bipartite Commission consisting of high-ranking clergy and military officers.

As Serbin himself suggests, his findings will likely force scholars to reconsider the definition of progressive and conservative in relation to the clergy and the military officers who took part in the Bipartite Commission (12). The nature of the evidence Serbin offers (General Muricy's personal papers and interviews with clergy and officers) may tend to lead readers to rethink conservative and progressive in terms of specific individuals rather than institutions or ideas, but the implications of the Bipartite are much broader.

For example, Serbin's reinterpretation of Dom Eugênio Sales as a defender of human rights, rather than as supporter of the military regime, has received much attention and perhaps rightly so. But Dom

Eugênio's advocacy on behalf of certain persons, or even on behalf of the principle of human rights, took place against a more important institutional backdrop. The Brazilian Church hierarchy's willingness to participate in the Bipartite shows church leaders remained strongly interested in maintaining traditional privileges and strongly committed to the principles of elite consensus and social harmony on which the relationship between church and state rested.

Church participation in the Bipartite problematizes definitions of progressive and conservative at the individual level by uncovering private regime criticism and the defense of human rights by some clergy and officers considered to have been conservative, and by uncovering the extent to which persons we have called progressives collaborated with the military. At the institutional level, the CNBB's (Brazilian Bishop Council) decision to participate in the Bipartite during a moment when the episcopacy was publicly promoting the Popular Church, forces a re-evaluation of the Church's motivations. Had the CNBB really intended to rupture ties with the state in favor of a new vision of society, participation in the Bipartite would have represented a counter-productive step backward toward older notions of the role the Church should play in society. Serbin argues that "the Bipartite reinforces the interpretation that the Popular Church was less a proposal for liberating the people than a way for guaranteeing the bishops' authority in Brazilian society" (12).

The ambivalence Serbin documents also provides important support and qualification for the strategic choice model of religion and politics.<sup>1</sup> The strategic choice model has conceived of churches as unitary actors who want to maximize membership, but seek state support including rents, subsidies and monopolies because proselytizing and pastoring are resource intensive. Anthony Gill's novel contribution to the strategic choice literature was to suggest church-state ruptures in Latin America occurred only if military policies became publicly unpopular enough to threaten the Church's ability to simultaneously support the regime and hold on to its membership base. The evidence from the Bipartite shows that the Church cannot be understood as a unitary actor and that the proper unit of analysis in deductive studies may be church leaders. Apparently, many Brazilian church leaders did not perceive the choice between regime support and public support as a zero sum game. Rather, leaders developed a diversified strategy, attempting to build public support through the Popular Church while bargaining behind the scenes to maintain political privileges and prerogatives secured before the hardening of the military regime.

1. For example, Anthony Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

## HIDDEN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITIES

While Steigenga, Yaremko, and Martínez-Fernández focus on experiences scholars have neglected or misunderstood, Serbin's work shows that some religious behaviors are purposefully hidden. Hidden religious experiences pose particular problems for scholars. Serbin's work on the Bipartite is a sort of best-case scenario involving many primary documents and many living actors whose extra-Bipartite activities were public and institutionalized. But much of the richness of Latin American religious life has not been so public, nor have its participants been able to openly contest for space in religious markets. López Pulido's *The Sacred World of the Penitentes* and Ariel Segal's *Jews of the Amazon* take as their subject groups who have not left ample paper trails. Nor have their subjects developed stable, public institutions to authorize and socialize members into official narratives or practices. Both López Pulido and Segal use ethnographic techniques to discover what gives shape and meaning to the religious practices of the *penitentes* and the Amazonian descendants of Jewish migrants to South America.

In the preface to *The Sacred World of the Penitentes*, López Pulido promises to give voice to a group "historically or generationally silenced" (ix), specifically to *los hermanos penitentes*, a group of lay Catholics formed during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century to compensate for the chronic lack of clergy in New Mexico. López Pulido argues that in the absence of regular priests, the *hermanos penitentes* created novel religious beliefs and practices, constructing a religious and civic Catholicism around the idea of *caridad*, or charity. The meaning of charity constructed by the *penitentes* went well beyond the idea of benevolent giving to the poor and encompassed a set of practices that encouraged *penitente* brothers to provide collective goods and services to New Mexican communities.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, *penitente* Catholicism was one of the few institutional structures for the construction of religion and civil society in isolated New Mexican communities. In the 1830s, as the institutional Catholic Church extended its reach into those isolated communities, bishops and clergy questioned the legitimacy of *penitente* religion and provoked its migration to the hidden margins of social and religious life. Bishops attempted to bring *penitente* religion under the institutional aegis of the Catholic church, laying down (with the implied threat of sanctions) a set of rules by which the *penitentes* would have to live to be recognized by the Church. *Penitente* spirituality was further marginalized, sensationalized, and labeled deviant by the Anglo-American culture into which New Mexico was inserted in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The book will disappoint readers expecting a description or expla-



nation of penitente practices or a rich collection of penitente narratives. López Pulido spends much more time documenting the marginalization of *penitente* communities than he spends explaining *penitente* spirituality. Moreover, López Pulido never addresses directly questions of class, status, or relations of power in the communities served by the *penitentes*. The communalistic and civic version of charity practiced by other Catholic lay brotherhoods and by Protestant clergy has often been characterized as patron-client relations, but López Pulido never discusses relations of power between *penitente* brothers and the New Mexicans who were the objects of their *caridad*. Nor does he attempt to discover to what extent the *penitentes* formed a kind of social elite, or whether and to what extent their charity reinforced traditional patterns of patrimonial power.

Eliding the question of how *penitente* practices affected relations of power before and after the arrival of competing institutions and actors is a significant shortcoming, one that raises other important questions about the marginalization of *penitente* religion. López Pulido promises that his study will give voice to the *penitentes'* story from their own perspective, but the majority of the text documents the attitudes of the institutional Catholic Church and sensationalist Anglo media toward the *penitentes*. One wonders why López Pulido does not spend more time explaining how, if at all, *penitentes* resisted the Catholic and Anglo-American elites and institutions that supplanted the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world of the *penitentes*. The accounts of Catholic clergy suggest that some *penitentes* assimilated into mainstream Catholicism while others did not. López Pulido is right to suggest that this shows only a partially successful effort by Catholic clergy to silence the *penitentes*, but one is left wondering what accounts for the difference in willingness to accept Catholic hegemony and how the decision not to assimilate might have affected *penitente* practices and identity. One wishes López Pulido had explored the possibility that the story of the *penitentes* is a story of conflict and assimilation not just of narratives, but also of local and foreign elites, traditional relations of community power, and new forms of organization and social structure.

Questions of identity, marginality and power, and what makes persons or places center or periphery are at the core of Segal's study of "Jewish mestizos" in Iquitos, Peru. Like Serbin, Segal uncovers evidence that leads us to question the categories we have used to classify religious persons and behaviors. In particular, Segal raises such question as, "who is a Jew?" and "what can Jewishness be?" The Jewish mestizos of Iquitos are descendants of mostly Sephardic Jews who migrated to the Amazon during the rubber booms of the 1800s. Many of these Jews eventually returned to their native countries, but left children and common-law wives who had been partially socialized into Jewish

religious identity and practices. The migrant Jews of Iquitos also left institutional and physical remnants of a religious way of life, including a Jewish cemetery and a Jewish civic organization. Families and parts of families who remained in the Amazon have created an eclectic kind of mostly private Judeo-Christian identity around these physical and institutional remnants and collective memories of what it means to be Jewish.

Segal argues that the process through which Jewish mestizos form their identity has much in common with *marranism*, the forced process through which formerly Jewish, New Christians developed their religious identity during the colonial period. The comparison shows that something is analytically useful about distinguishing between different kinds of syncretic processes and that the syncretism that blends Jewish with other religious identities follows a specific logic and constitutes a specific type of syncretism. Segal underscores the utility of the *marrano* concept by comparing Jewish mestizos in Iquitos to Jewish-Hindu, and Jewish-Moslem syncretic communities in Bombay and the Balkans. All three communities share, or shared, a voluntary sense of Jewishness through affective identification with Jewish ancestors and all three synthesized some distinctly Jewish ritual practices with elements from the culturally dominant, local religious communities in which they found themselves.

The singularity of Jewish syncretism becomes even more apparent when Segal describes the relationship between the *marrano* Jewish mestizos of Iquitos and *non-marrano* Jews in Lima and Israel. The descriptions of these relationships underscore the shifting nature of center and periphery and the role of race, class, and religious and secular institutions in defining religious identity. In the long history of Jewish identity in Peru and elsewhere, Iquitos was, during the rubber boom, more central to economic aspirations and more vibrant as a cultural center than Lima. Members of its Jewish community were able to maintain their distinct Jewishness while Iquitos was prosperous and connected to other economic centers. But after the rubber boom, Iquitos' Jews became increasingly marginal to the economic and cultural life of Peru and the Amazon. Out-migration, exogamy, and the lack of authoritative religious leaders and institutions broke the cycle of religious cultural reproduction and created a population no longer distinct from the class and racial categories into which other Iquiteños were sorted. All that distinguished Iquitos' Jews from their fellow Iquiteños was their internalized sense of being Jewish or having a connection to Jewishness.

By contrast, as Iquitos declined, Lima became the center of Peruvian life. The marks of distinction between Lima's Jews and other Peruvians solidified as Lima Jews circulated into the middle classes, consolidated

their religious institutions and leadership roles, and were racially categorized as white. By establishing and maintaining synagogues and rabbis and because of their privileged position in the class structure, Lima's Jews developed the institutional capacity and clout to authoritatively define who could be a Jew. That power was enhanced after the foundation of the State of Israel and the conflation of Jewishness and Israeli citizenship through right of return policies. Lima's Jews, because they had formal institutional representatives and lived in the national capital, found themselves in a privileged position as brokers of Jewish identity for other Peruvians vis-à-vis international Judaism and with the political representatives of the state of Israel.

#### SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RELIGION-SOCIETY CONNECTION

Religious beliefs, identities, and practices are embedded in broad social contexts. The notion that religion is a social phenomenon is not new. Indeed, one of the dominant paradigms in the sociology of religion was built around Peter Berger's assertion that religion is socially constructed.<sup>2</sup> But the complexity of the relationship between the religious and the secular spheres has too often been reduced to sweeping generalizations about the intrinsic tendencies of both. Perhaps the most important contribution of recent research on Latin American religion is its vigorous iconoclasm. New research shows that it is not only religion that remains vibrant in the modern world. Scholarship on religion is still capable of challenging analytical concepts and categories, capable of breaking down long-standing assumptions, and revealing hidden aspects of the Latin American experience.

2. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.; Doubleday, 1967).