

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL REALITY IN LATIN AMERICA (II)

By René Acosta Polanco

Country of Origin: Dominican Republic

Serving in: Dominican Republic

RELIGIOUS PANORAMA OF LATIN AMERICA

Latin America has been permeated by an avalanche of anti-values promoted under the banner of New Age and that of so called postmodernism. These currents and new religious groups struggle to control the thoughts and the system of beliefs of the Latin-American man and woman. This new religiosity is characterized by a decline in traditional religious beliefs, by a personal religiosity, for a religiosity that offers a salvation of the “here and now”, a religiosity without doctrine or foundation.¹

Our continent confronts serious challenges and problems in the religious and spiritual order that forces us to formulate answers and alternative solutions. There are a large number of Christians without churches and searching for spiritual significance that has taken many to see the church as a point of reference, more than a place to belong. One can observe a tiredness and exhaustion of the so-called historical churches, founded on dogma and excessive institutionalism. The hunger for a satisfactory answer in the spiritual order has given place to a supermarket of religious offers that has surpassed the limits of traditional and historical religions.

Every day new groups appear that try to respond to man's need to feel accepted in the midst of urban anonymity; one observes, also, a strong shade in the therapeutic and in New Age that project a cosmic religious experience of personal well-being without God.² The religious and spiritual condition that our continent lives are symptomatic of what men and women live now and will in the future.

The Bible, the Word of God, clearly shows us what our Iberian region lives in the religious order. “Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you with fine-sounding arguments” (Col. 2:3-4). “The Spirit clearly says that in latter times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:1-2).

LATIN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

In the Catholic Church today, even though they talk about secularism and pluralism of religion in Latin America, there are serious debate and contradictory positions. In spite of the fact it is possible to find arguments and evidence of secularization there remains a solid position that sustains that such secularization would lead to freeing of religion and spirituality from the control of the “official” and “state” religion which has made religion an instrument of power.³

¹ José Ma. Madones, *¿Adónde va la religión?* (Madrid, 1996).

² John M. Kelly, “La búsqueda del Dios vivo”, *Discurso*, Universidad de St. Michael, marzo 1996.

³ Robert A. White, *La Iglesia y la comunicación en América Latina* (Bogotá, 1988).

In the 60's it was normal to talk about Latin American as a predominantly Catholic region. But Latin American Catholicism presents a different face, and every day weakened and suffering from doubts. Data speaks of progressive decline of spiritual credibility, social influence and a notable decrease in the number of members.⁴ The surveys done in a predominately Catholic country like Spain, speak for themselves. In 1970, 64% of the population was practicing Catholics and by 1990 this had dropped to 27% showing a decrease of 37%.

Among some of the sociological causes which have led to decrease in membership in the Catholic Church are: the struggles over Liberation Theology, the direct participation of some Catholic leaders in politics; lack of pastoral care of their members; their associations with the corrupt political elite who have impoverished many of the countries on the continent. People perceive the Catholic religion as imported, something imposed, as the religion of the Conquest and colonization, not as a religion as you freely choose.

To continue with the signs of the decline and stagnation of the historical churches, José Mardones shows that in this era of “feelings”, Christianity without emotional experience is not attractive. He show that the mere rational presentation of faith, although this is very important, may be blocked by postmodern discrediting of reason and with the weariness produced by predominant functionalism based on achieving results. He also affirms that there has been cultural suppression of religious experience. Following the suggestions of psychoanalysis the desire to express our faith emotionally was repressed and now it reappears in the deformed manifestations that have invaded many religious groups.⁵

In light of the previous comments, it is possible to see polarization between the historical churches, which emphasized the intellectual aspect of the faith in detriment to the emotional, and the groups which do not emphasize reason and critical thinking about faith, giving rise to a fog of disordered emotionalism.

LATIN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM

Protestantism in Latin America and the Caribbean is the result of the arrival of the so-called mission churches and the transplanted denominations.

The following is the family tree of the Protestant movement, which consists of the classification by families of denominations of the Latin American and Caribbean Protestant movements.

- A1.0 Liturgical tradition (1517)
- B2.0 Separatist Evangelical tradition (1521)
- C3.0 Adventist tradition (1831)
- D4.0 Pentecostal tradition (1901, 1906)
- E5.0 Other non-classified Evangelical churches⁶

⁴ Robert A. White, *Pluralismo religioso en América Latina* (Bogotá, 1990).

⁵ José A Mardones, *Movimientos sociales versus divino* (Estella, 1996).

⁶ Clifton L. Holland, *Hacia una clasificación de grupos religiosos en América Latina* (Costa Rica, 2004).

Statistics indicate the surprising advance that Latin American Protestantism has had since the 60's. In 1993, 12.4% of Latin Americans were Protestants, making a total of 51 million, 8 times more than 1960 when there were 6.7 million Protestants. According to the projections, by the middle of 2005 it is estimated that there will be 75 million.⁷ The data shows that Central America is the region of Latin America where proportionally more people have been converted to Protestantism in the last 15 years. And according to the numbers, in a study in the beginning of the 80's, if Protestantism continues its rate of growth, by 2010, between 80 and 90% of Guatemalans will be Protestants; 60% of Brazilians; 40% of Chileans; 30% of Bolivians and 60% of El Salvadorans.⁸ In fact, as we already completed three fourths of this period it is important that we reevaluate these estimates. They seem to be very inflated and it is necessary to affirm that conditions change.

Everything seems to indicate that cultural factors contribute to the growth of Evangelical Protestantism. They have a lot to do with idiosyncrasy, culture and emotionalism. Latin American Christians like to sing with emotion, listen to the message, and "feel the presence of God". They don't like intellectual spirituality. Today's Christian rejects the religiosity of the past which was very dogmatic and intellectual in nature.

Religion in the past was sad, formal and dismal, full of rhetoric and monotonous worship ritual. According to Gonzalez, worship today is more intense, the Latin Christian enjoys the celebration, enjoys the expression of joy and happiness.⁹ And in fact, what is wrong with celebrating the great news that God is with us? The Latin Christian likes to live out the message of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstance; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thes. 5:16-19).

PENTECOSTAL GROUPS AND THEIR REPERCUSSION IN LATIN AMERICA

Pentecostalism within the Latin American Protestant movement has become a very interesting theme among experts in the field. I would like to be clear that the statistics that were presented belong to all the churches of the Latin American Protestant movement. There are those who say that rather than talk of Latin American Protestantism, we should talk about Latin American Pentecostalism. Tradition Pentecostals with the new Pentecostal groups represent the largest number of Latin American Protestants.

The history of Latin American Pentecostalism started with an "awakening" associated with a missionary called Willis C. Hoover, with the Methodist church in the city of Valparaiso in Chile and continues with Francescón and the Assemblies of God in Brazil. Later the Pentecostals diversified and expanded.¹⁰ From the decades of the 50's, Pentecostalism represents the face of Latin American Protestantism. According to the statistics, in 1938 the Pentecostals had 14,500 members; in 1950 they had a million members; and in 1980 they had 37 million and according to the projections, they talk about 65 million of this new century.

⁷ Patrick Johnstone, *Operación Mundo* (Bogotá, 1995).

⁸ Robert White, *Pluralismo religioso en América Latina* (Bogotá, 1990).

⁹ Valentín González, "Como aceite y el agua", *Revista alternativa*, abril/mayo 1993 (San Juan, P.R.).

¹⁰ José Míguez Bonino, *Rostros del protestantismo latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires, 1995).

Religious and Spiritual Reality... II (René Acosta)

Among the factors that have influenced the growth of the Pentecostal movement are:

- Because of the growth of religious syncretism, Latin Americans are ripe for Pentecostalism.
- The Pentecostal movement has the ability to enculturate in each people group.
- Pentecostal churches have “Latinized” with their leaders and constitutional rules.
- There is national leadership.
- They are more expressive emotionally.
- There is more community spirit.
- They are more aggressive in communicating the Gospel.
- They are more identified with the poor and the needy.¹¹

THE FACE OF NAZARENES IN LATIN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM

The Church of the Nazarene started their work in the past century in Latin America. Our church is one of the younger daughters of the Holiness Movement and has had relative success in both the theological evangelistic task and in community service in the religious life of our continent. We are small segment of the historical reality in Latin American and part of the religious universe of evangelical Christianity and we are advancing little by little towards consolidation. Starting from the 1980's, our church has experienced a new dimension of growth. According to the latest statistics from our Regions, the Church of the Nazarene reached a membership of 297,197 full members,¹² distributed by Regions:

<i>Region</i>	<i>Total membership</i>	<i>Countries served</i>
Caribbean Region (Hispanic Area)*	17,000	3
Mexico, Central America & Panama Region (MAC)	121,936	7
South America Region (SAM)	157,631	10

Although Nazarenes are not a large population, we must recognize that in the past 24 years, the church has experienced important growth, if we compare it with the first decades of our church in Latin America. We represent 0.05% of the total population of Latin American which totals 551 million inhabitants.¹³

LATIN AMERICAN PROTESTANT HOPES

Along with the recent phenomenon of post-denominationalism and the formation of national denominations (not related to foreign denominations), Latin American Protestant Christianity is involved today in a dynamic process, expressing their desire to find their own identity as Latin American Evangelicals.

¹¹ John M. Kelly, *Desafíos y religiosidad en América Latina* (Universidad de St. Michael, 1996).

¹² Statistics of the Church of the Nazarene in Latin America and the Caribbean, www.nazarene.org, 2004.

* It should be noted that the French, English and Dutch Areas of the Caribbean, with membership of 116,664, of which 100,000 belong to Haiti, the country which has the most members in the denomination, after the United States.

¹³ Statistics of Population in Latin America (CEPAL, 2004).

Religious and Spiritual Reality... II (René Acosta)

The accelerated growth that most of the denominations and independent churches are experiencing, especially Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches, has brought with it the need to explore more deeply the relationship between the Gospel and society, the church and culture and the significant role they need to play in the historic socio-religious process of the continent.

One of the vital aspects that new generations have to deal with is the question of their own identity. In 1992, during the 5th Centennial of the meeting of the two cultures (as the Spanish Enterprise of the conquest of the Americas is euphemistically called), Pope John Paul II in Santo Domingo expressed that the Protestant sects are disintegrating agents of the cultural and religious unity of Latin America. Of course the Pope forgot that it was the Catholic religion, in their role as accomplices, who contributed to the destruction of our cultural values and exterminated a great portion of our native peoples.

The important question is this: have our Protestant churches experienced true transference of ecclesiastical leadership and an incarnational process to identify ourselves automatically as Latin Americans? Fifty years ago this preoccupation was central to the illustrious Scottish writer, John A. Mackay, who spent a great amount of time analyzing and doing missiological studies in South America and became an expert in the cultures and religion of our countries as few Europeans have achieved. He feared that the work of Protestantism was scarcely scratching the surface of the Latin American soul, without achieving true changes in a culture formed by centuries of Catholic religiosity.¹⁴ Many religious groups today that are experiencing growth have taken into account Mackay's preoccupation.

THE SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Spirituality is one of the themes most frequently misinterpreted by evangelical Protestants. A serious reflection about spirituality continues to be a forgotten assignment for most Latin American evangelical churches.

Most of the present spirituality is not anchored in theology and in spite of the fact that there is a lot of religious expression, our people lack a clear concept of the matter. What is really going wrong? What is it that Latin American evangelicals lack? Something must be wrong, for example, when our personal piety, based on individualistic ethics, has not been able to penetrate social behavior on a day to day basis in our lives. The divorce between piety in the church and life in the world is evident; between individual religiosity and social behavior; between puritan morals and Christian life. The answer to what has gone wrong could be: "We lack soul", and the soul in our case is spirituality. Here we are not referring to disembodied spirituality or religious ritual, but rather spirituality as "A lifestyle oriented towards accomplishing the purposes of God for human life and for the totality of his creation", a spirituality which is evident in how we think, how we feel and how we act coherently with Jesus Christ as the model of the new humanity and with dependence on the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Today everyone accepts that the word "religion" is losing significance when it is referring to the spiritual life of the believer. This is because spirituality is related more to an

¹⁴ Valentín González, *Búsqueda de identidad del protestantismo latinoamericano* (Pasadena, California, 2003).

¹⁵ Harold Segura C., *Hacia una espiritualidad evangélica comprometida* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2002).

Religious and Spiritual Reality... II (René Acosta)

authentic relationship with God than as an expression of belonging to a certain religious tradition. But what we observe in our continent is the continuing tendency to separate the religious from the spiritual. There is a deep suspicion that the religious institutions are not precisely the best place to satisfy human spiritual hunger.

According to what has already been said, in the measure that institutional programs and doctrine of a religion are distant from people's daily needs, there will be more of a probability of a division. This leads us to think that many people reject religious institutions as a source of spiritual sustenance and they are looking for other means within themselves or in other communities.

Our spirituality should be every day, expressing relational and behavioral attitudes. The following questions should be dealt with in our pastoral theology:

- How should we deal with secularism that is invading our core values?
- How can we respond to a desperate society which is fed up of lifeless discourses and inconsistent piety?

Paul in his Epistle to the Romans answers the first question when he says, "Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1-2). Secularization in the church can be identified as worldly; it is returning us to the world. Secularization makes us lose our identity and we allow the fashions, the era with its values to mold us. The practice of piety makes us like God and we should be able to live in the world but be different than the world (John 17:15-17).

The answer to the second questions obliges us to go back to Pentecost, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Church of the Nazarene was born in the fire of a spiritual revival and should continue like this in order to finish the mission. We need to reestablish our historic memory.

Dr. Ralph Sockman said that "Revival is not going through the city playing the drums; revival is a return to Calvary in an attitude of sobbing and humiliation."¹⁶

The power of the Holy Spirit is indispensable for our missionary task. It is impossible to convince the world of sin merely from intellectual arguments. We need the dynamite, we need the passion, we need the fire of the Spirit, we need to put our knowledge and our programs under the control of the Holy Spirit and then Latin American society will receive the rains of his grace through the testimony and impact of our ministry.

¹⁶ Quoted by William Fisher, *Urgente, necesitamos un avivamiento* (Kansas City: C.N.P., 1983).