On the Metamorphosis of Anti-Protestant Tensions in the Shadow of US Imperialism in Latin America and its Interpretation (1930-1990)

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Both leftist and conservative Catholics often described the remarkable growth of the Protestant evangelical churches in Latin America as the "invasion of the Protestant sects". For the former, Pentecostals, along with the more recent wave of conservative evangelicals, helped to reinforce the existing social order in Latin America, thus representing a powerful current of regression and a tool to be wielded by authoritarian regimes. The latter, on the other hand, denied that the sects were a religious phenomenon at all and saw the spread of Protestant missions as the result of a US-promoted conspiracy to break the hegemony of the Church of Rome in that quintessentially Catholic continent. Numerous academic works undertaken in various disciplines of the social sciences (sociology, political science, anthropology), however, have judged this "conspiracy theory" – even if largely true – insufficient in explaining why evangelical missionary groups have been so successful in winning a substantial popular following in Latin America, given the criticism of the Protestant presence from both liberationist and conservative sides – two sides of the same coin, that is, the Catholic Church's "intransigent" opposition to modernity, the Reformation, and the privatization of faith. This essay tries to prove the opposite by following the complex transformation of this multifaceted anti-US and anti-sectarian Catholic prejudice in the recent history of Latin America.

Keywords: Protestantism in Latin America, Anti-imperialism, Liberation Theology

1. *Reports from Patagonia*

Toward the end of the 1920s, during a series of conferences dedicated to the problem of the rise of Protestantism in Latin America, the Italian Jesuit Camillo Crivelli – who had been called back to Rome

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after long service in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua[1] – recalled a curious anecdote, the protagonist of which was Theodore Roosevelt. In 1912, he recounted, the former president of the United States took a trip to Patagonia in the company of the famous Argentinian explorer Francisco Pascasio Moreno[2]. When they arrived at the shores of the Nahuel Huapi lake, the two engaged in a long conversation on the infinite natural resources of that unexplored country. At a certain point, *el Perito Moreno* asked Roosevelt whether he thought that some form of absorption of those Latin countries by the United States was possible in the short term. The response of the former president was more or less, «I think it would be a long and difficult process as long as these countries remain Catholic». The story, Crivelli pointed out, had been circulated by the Italo-Argentine naturalist Clemente Onelli who, the Jesuit reported, did not immediately pay much attention to the incident, which Moreno in person had shared with him. A year later, however, when he read in the newspaper that the Methodist Church in the United States had allocated 25 million dollars to finance a missionary campaign in South America, suddenly he began to eye everything with a vague suspicion. When, in the course of his many trips to the Argentine hinterland, he encountered itinerant preachers handing out Bibles on street corners and more Ford cars than he had ever before seen in Buenos Aires, Onelli finally understood why his explorer friend been so serious about the words Roosevelt had addressed to him under a cypress tree in the middle of Patagonia.

Recounted by Crivelli in the midst of what had all the connotations of a large-scale campaign against Protestant proselytism – initiatives that, especially in Latin America, were beginning to seriously worry Rome – the prophecy attributed to Roosevelt was to linger for

[1] See *Diccionario Histórico de la Compañia de Jesús. Biográfico-temático*, ed. por C.E. O'Neill y J.M. Domínguez, vol. II, Madrid, Alcobendas, 2001, pp. 1005-1006. On his pedegogical-evangelization efforts among the indigenous people of the Tarahumara Mountains, see M. De Giuseppe, *Gesuiti in Messico: Lettere dalla missione Tarahumara*, in «Annali di storia dell'educazione», 10, 2003, pp. 355-384.

[2] The anecdote is told by Crivelli in *Los Protestantes y la America Latina: Conferencias, Acusaciones, Respuestas*, Isola del Liri, Publicaciones del Pontificio Colegio Pio Latino Americano, 1931, pp. 102-103. The date that Crivelli gives for the trip to Patagonia is inaccurate: in 1912 Roosevelt was, in fact, busy campaigning for the Republican nomination against President Taft and only went to Argentina and Brazil in the winter of 1913-1914.

a long time in the repertoire of circumstantial evidence. It was taken up in the anti-Protestant pamphleteering of the 1930s and 1940s, in an attempt to demonstrate how the numerous American missionaries travelling throughout the South American continent from the beginning of the century were, in fact, agents – and not even very covert agents – working for an imperialist design. After infecting the healthy body of Latin Christianity with "Protestant heresy", it would be assaulted and subjugated with the domination of money and mercantile enterprise.

It was an accusation that would prove resistant throughout the subsequent of years and changes in ideologies. In Nicaragua, in 1982, the newspaper of the Sandinista National Liberation Front – the political and para-military formation committed to defending against the Contras' attacks of the popular revolution that, three years earlier, had put an end to the Somoza dictatorship – dedicated three issues to denouncing the "invasion of the sects" of Baptists, Methodist, and above all Pentecostals, maneuvered by the United States to sow discord in the Christian camp that resisted the snares of imperialism[3]. In 1985, however, then president of the Latin American Episcopal Council (Celam) Bishop Antonio Quarracino, dusted off the conversation between Roosevelt and Moreno to demonstrate the geopolitical interests of the United States behind the proliferation on the continent of what were defined – without any ecumenical qualms – as Protestant "sects"[4], even in the language of bishops' conference documents and papal addresses.

[3] A. Reyes, *La invasión de las sectas*, published in three parts in the Sandinista newspaper «La Barricada» on March 3, 4, and 5, 1982. The contents are given in C.L. Smith, *Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict in Sandinista Nicaragua*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 222-223.

[4] "Sects", whose methods of evangelization were not very respectful of missionary fair play, were also a serious obstacle to the progress of ecumenical relations in the South America. See Antonio Quarracino, *America Latina y ecumenismo*, in «Mensaje Iberoamericano», 237-238, 1985, pp. 13-15. The third general conference of Celam, held in Puebla, Mexico, at the beginning of 1979, had spoken at length about the dangers of these sects (we will return to this later), and Celam dedicated more than one study to this theme between 1981 and 1984. On several public occasions in the same years, Pope John Paul II did not fail to speak out against what he called «religious groups» that were disrespectful of true freedom of worship and «predatory wolves» that threatened the flock of the Catholic Church. Finally, in 1986, there was a study on the phenomenon of sects or new religious movements sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, and the Pontifical

Perhaps this convergence between a Marxist newspaper and the head of the South American bishops is what Alberto Methol Ferré – a Uruguayan intellectual who has recently returned to prominence after Pope Francis's ascension to the papacy[5] – had in mind in an article that appeared in 1985 in «30Giorni» in which he cited Roosevelt's legendary answer. He dismissed it as an origin myth of an interpretation of the religious transformation of the Latin American continent based on cliches and false beliefs, such as precisely that one, which too simplistically traced the uncontrolled growth of Protestant sectarianism to an international Masonic, imperialist, and anti-Catholic conspiracy. It demonstrates the vice of avoiding coming to terms with a reality that resists being bound by certain historical and ideological schemes, which – according to Methol Ferré – always trap «both Catholics and Marxists» in an «anti-imperialistic infantilism that reduces history to a detective story»[6].

After the end of the Cold War, a few years before the emergence of a religious sociology that claimed to be free of ideological precepts, this theory was already circulating in the pages of a religious newspaper that worked closely with the Communion and Liberation movement. Its dissemination, thanks also to the famous work of the American anthropologist David Stoll[7], was to set the tone of the work of

Council for Culture. A synthesis of these interventions in the early 1980s can be found in P. Canova, *Un vulcano in Eruzione. Le sette in America Latina*, Bologna, Emi, 1987. An overview of the issue through the beginning of the third millennium is given in G. La Bella, *La libertà religiosa in America Latina dopo il Concilio Vaticano II*, in *La libertà religiosa in Messico. Dalla rivoluzione alle sfide dell'attualità*, a cura di P. Valvo, Roma, Studium, 2020, pp. 229-253. Also, implications for the mission, religious freedom, and ecumenism of the Catholic Church's rejection of proselytism after Vatican II – not limited to the Latin American context – have recently been addressed from a canonical point of view by P.-M. Berthe, *Prosélytisme et évangélisation. Réflexions autour des textes du Magistère et des canons 211 et 748 §2 du Code de droit canonique de 1983*, in «Revue de Droit Canonique», 69, 2019, pp. 141-174.

[5] It seems that the influence of this Catholic thinker on the future pope's intellectual formation was significant, see M. Borghesi, *Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Una biografia intellettuale*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2017, in particular pp. 155-192.

[6] A. Methol Ferré, *CIA o non CIA… è questo il problema?*, in «30Giorni», 8, 1985, here p. 19.

[7] D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990. In this work, which soon became a reference point for subsequent studies on Latin American Protestantism, Stoll tried to blur the contours of that "conspiracy theory" against US imperialism that he had helped corroborate and spread with his fieldwork in Guatemala during the 1980s.

scholars for at least a generation. This was no coincidence, given that in the early 1980s Methol Ferré was also making a name for himself on the European scene for his sharp criticism of the subalternity of a Catholicism that was limited to opposing modernity, both in its reactionary and progressive forms. The latter was directed against liberation theology, the latest of the "theologies of secularization" that the Enlightenment paradigm had sown in Christian history. These forms prevented any possibility for the church to generate alternative models to the dominant culture, which instead tended to take advantage of the church and hold it hostage to imitative experiments[8].

It was an interpretive key that taught a good number of historians and sociologists of Latin American Christianity how to make Émile Poulat's intuitions on the genesis of 19th century intransigentism and its diachronic development useful in analysing the evident political alterations of some expressions of liberation theology, including them all in that great «defensive cycle» of the history of relations between the church and the modern world that has swung between unconditional surrenders and equally unconditional defences[9]. But, at a historical level, how productive can the decision to compare Christian experiences and theologies be, when they are so different from one another, if not in fact in opposition to each other at the level of their basic options and their responses to the pressure of the contemporary world?

The question of the "anti-Protestant" interpretation inevitably arises, even if we choose, as in this case, to only analyse a single aspect of the problem at its crucial points. Here we focus on the relationship between Latin American Catholicism and the other churches for a

[8] Here it is enough to refer to the Italian translation of his collection of essays, *Il risorgimento cattolico latinoamericano*, Bologna, Cseo, 1983 and to the examination that Borghesi makes of it in his intellectual biography of Pope Francis.

[9] Methol Ferré, *Il risorgimento cattolico latinoamericano*, cit., in particular p. 131. Conforming to this template are: the research of the Argentine sociologist Fortunato Mallimaci, a prolific scholar active since the 1980s, who recently reiterated this idea in the entry on *Liberation Theology in Argentina* compiled for the *Dictionnaire historique de la théologie de la libération*, éd. par M. Cheza, L. Martínez Saavedra et P. Sauvage, Paris, Lessius, 2017, pp. 54-57; the Mexican sociologist R. Blancarte, whose early works include *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993; and the renowned Franco-Mexican historian J. Meyer, who argued this point in at least a couple of his works from the early 2000s devoted to two controversial figures in the twentieth-century Latin American church: *Samuel Ruiz en San Cristóbal: 1960-2000*, Mexico City, Tusquets Editores, 2000 and *Oscar Romero e l'America Centrale del suo tempo*, Roma, Studium, 2006.

specific period, that lasting from the crisis of liberalism to the neo-liberal transition that followed the crumbling of the Yalta configuration, to use a dating internal to the history of the continent, to consider the accusation that Protestants were the spiritual arm of US imperialism. This also what the Church of Rome had done in those same lands in regard to the Catholic monarchies of the Iberian Peninsula. Can we then lump together, under the label of "anti-Protestantism," various phenomena such as the aversion to Christian otherness expressed by the Catholic intransigentism of the first half of the 20th century (the one that brandished the anecdote about Roosevelt as if it held yet another proof of the liberal-Masonic-Protestant plot against the true faith) as well as the appeals in which the liberationist theologies declared their inability to compete with the "rapacious" Protestant missionary movement?

It is not very convincing to interpret this the issue under the lens of anti-imperialism. Nor can this single optic serve to make sense of both the opposition to Roosevelt's brand of pan-Americanism – which cultivated the idea of a continent united by the United States' muscular strength and civilized by Protestantism – and the experiences of the struggle against widespread interventionism that Reagan – taking cover behind that "Christo-Atlantism" that seemed to have sealed the peace between Roman Catholicism and North American liberal culture – used to cleanse Central America of any aspects unwelcome in Washington, at the cost, however, of tearing the religious fabric of the area and breaking diplomatic ties with the Vatican at several points.

Essentially, the question of whether and how it is possible to trace a common genome of an intransigent cast in very dissimilar forms of religious intolerance seems to ask historians for an effort of analysis that congeals factures, continuities, turning points, and epochal events in a metamorphosis of anti-Protestant, and consequently anti-imperialist, polemic. Such an effort of analysis is also fused with the cultural patterns, theologies, and revolutionary outbursts that, from time to time, steered the history of the continent. These elements also varied in relation to the progressive redefinition of the hegemonic pressures exerted by the United States, the religious premises that conditioned them, and the missionary practices that expressed them[10].

[10] This evolution has been highlighted by a series of recent studies aimed at demonstrating how the continuous contact between mission peoples and missionary elites has, in the long run, reconfigured the traditional categories of American missionary

This is what this work intends to offer. While not claiming to provide an exhaustive survey of the studies on the topics dealt with, I will attempt to cut through the dense web of issues in order to trace the red threads in a warp that is difficult to restrict to some consolidated framework of Catholic apologetics or read in the controversial bursts of a historiographical debate on the causes of Latin America's Christian present and the destiny of its theologies. It is a debate that has used the concept of metamorphosis to define a wide range of religious phenomena but not, it seems, to describe the course of an anti-Protestant sentiment that – faced with the first cracks in the confessional unity of South America in the second quarter of the century – welded itself to that «widespread organicist essence of Latin American architecture and social imaginary [that are] a lasting legacy of the colonial era»[11]. It metabolized Vatican II's change of pace in relations with the churches, opening up to a form of critical awareness of Christian diversity and even of the "foreign" nature that put down roots within it. It was diluted in the criticism of the failed recipes for a developmentalist technocraticism that, through the control of imports and "missionary crusades", attempted to solve the problems of underdevelopment, winding up instead by accentuating the old imbalances between the hemispheres. Finally, it was camouflaged in the explosion of guerrilla insurgencies when the evangelical element of Latin American Protestantism became one of the main instruments in the struggle against liberation theology and which was eventually left behind by a new current of studies. These tried to surmount in other ways the problem of the growth and evolution of a Protestant Christian presence that, once foreign and in the minority, had man-

practices, cleansing them of the arrogant paternalism of the colonial phase and endowing it with a cosmopolitan ethos that was unknown to the pioneers of the early 20th century. The most recent works exemplifying this trend (with a glance at Asia and the Middle East) are: D.A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World and Changed America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017 and M. McAlister, *Epic Encounters; Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001. On the value and limits of this turning point in scholarship, see M. Del Pero, *Religione, politica estera e attività missionaria: Importanza e limiti del global turn*, in «Il mestiere dello storico», 13, 1, 2020, pp. 22-36.

[11] L. Zanatta, *La sindrome del cavallo di Troia. L'immagine del nemico interno nella storia dell'America Latina*, in «Storia e problemi contemporanei», 17, 35, 2004, pp. 107-135.

aged to become a bastion of Catholic confessional monopoly that was considered impregnable.

2. *The Crisis of 1929 and the Decline of Pan-Americanism: The Persecutions in Colombia*

It is not surprising that we find Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of this story. The creator of a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine that bears his name, Roosevelt has always been credited with marking the end of the undisputed hegemony of British rule in South America and its replacement by American power, a mission that his successor, Taft, carried out more discreetly and effectively[12]. But that was not the only transformation to affect the southern hemisphere in the first decades of the century. In the United States, a wave of historic fundamentalism was reaping support among Presbyterians, Methodists, Southern Baptists, and early Pentecostals[13], many of whom joined the struggle against those who questioned the inerrancy of the Bible, those who spread evolutionary theories, and those who facilitated the spread of the socialist disease in the nation through welfare policies[14]. Quickly won over by this surge, many non-denominational missionary organizations in the Sun Belt began to pour into Central and South America at the exact moment when the great missionary agencies of mainstream Protestantism, European as well as North American, had begun to leave that portion of the hemisphere on the back burner. Instead, their newfound ecumenical impetus was directed toward the

[12] R. Nocera, *Stati Uniti e America Latina dal 1823 ad oggi*, Roma, Carocci, 2009 and M. Del Pero, *Libertà e Impero: Gli Stati Uniti e il mondo, 1776-2016*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2017. On Theodore Roosevelt in particular, see R.H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt's Caribbean: The Panama Canal, the Monroe Doctrine, and Latin American Context*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

[13] In reference to this topic, see the latest, first-rate work by F. FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2017.

[14] The term "fundamentalism" was coined in this period to summarize all those who – in the divinity schools and churches of both north and south – opposed the new exegetical, theological, and social trends that, thanks to the spreading liberal current, were seen to be corrupting Protestant Christianity in the United States. In 1920, Curtis Lee Laws, a conservative Baptist publicist, spoke for the first time of the need to convene a General Conference on the Fundamentals in order to curb liberal theology and to recover the authentic spirit of the faith of the fathers of the nation, FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, cit., pp. 71-72.

Far East, where it was believed that more evolved philosophical and social systems were a guarantee of success for missionary efforts[15].

Thus, the sparse, non-Catholic presence in what had once been Lusitanian-Spanish colonial space grew denser. It was the product of missionary enterprises of European nations where Protestantism had triumphed or of liberally oriented Protestant denominations (mostly Episcopalian, Baptist, and Presbyterian). Despite their efforts to replicate among the indigenous populations and large urban areas the same welfarist zeal that animated them in the industrial suburbs of New York, Boston, and Detroit, they barely managed to transcend their characteristic colonialism even though they remained dominant until the 1930s. The growth of biblical fundamentalism, which soon became the main current in North American evangelicalism, also profoundly reconfigured the objectives and strategies of missionary activity. Indeed, what brought these Christians to the equator was now no longer the mission of regaining the masses of dispossessed persons at the mercy of Catholic obscurantism and indigenous peoples who had not even been touched by Christianization for the gospel. Above all it had become the conviction that a land so abundant in harvests, if vigorously reaped, would make it possible to hasten the realization of millenarian predictions that – only after World War II, however – would catalyse an entirely new evangelical mobilization[16].

There was such a powerful wave in the first decades of the 20th century that the Catholic episcopate began to be convinced that dollars and cannon had opened large enough breaches in Latin America as to portend an imminent spiritual invasion of the continent, as the Nicaraguan Bishop Pereira y Castellon wrote to the cardinal of Baltimore, James Gibbons, in 1912[17]. In the end, such fears seem to have

[15] B. Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and the Role of the Protestant Missionary Movement*, in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity. Ecumenism in the Churches, 19th-21st Century*, ed. by L. Ferracci, dir. by A. Melloni, Vol. I, *Dawn of Ecumenism*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, pp. 412-429.

[16] On this issue, see A.M. Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, and M. Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2014.

[17] «There are other, more important interests than these fleeting mundane concerns: in the wake of this material conquest will come the spiritual conquest […] the wave of Protestantism is seeking to advance by first sending the dollar ahead to our fields and town – and thus opening a breach in our defenses»; J.E. Arellano, *Breve Historia de la Iglesia en Nicaragua*, Managua, Manolo Morales, 1986, p. 81.

had some foundation, given that it would have been very difficult for the newcomers to emerge from the shadow projected by confessional state forms without the help of those liberal governments that, at the beginning of the 20th century, were responsible for the destiny of the nation-states born from the collapse of the Catholic colonial empires. In the initial phase of the independence process, the first liberal elites – often at the head of conservative and authoritarian regimes – saw Catholicism as the only ideology capable of providing stability for the national identities that were still fragile and frayed. At the dawn of the new century, however, a new generation of politicians – seduced by the development of Anglo-Saxon liberalism and anxious to forge a future of prosperity and progress for their countries – began to look favourably on the possibility of breaking up the Catholic hegemony on the southern continent.

From Zelaya's Nicaragua to Cabrera's Guatemala and, in a lesser degree, from Porfirio Díaz's Mexico to Solares's Bolivia – while the marines occupied Haiti (1915-1934), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), and invaded Cuba (for the second time in 1917 and held it until 1922), and US exports to Latin America tripled in value – even Catholicism paid the price of the manifest destiny that had advanced well beyond the isthmus of Panama. More or less everywhere, the liberal regimes of Central and South America proceeded to abolish every type of privilege granted to the Catholic Church. One by one they declared the separation of church and state, expropriated the property of the clergy, took control of education away from religious institutions, and, above all, opened the doors to Protestant missionaries from the United States. As well as bringing a religious orientation that was considered more liberal and suitable for turning a profit, these missionaries usually made way for large flows of foreign capital.

This forced "idyll" between the two continents came to an abrupt halt with the crisis of 1929. The collapse of stock and commodity prices suddenly brought individual national economies, all centred on the same agrarian-exportation model, to the brink of bankruptcy, forcing the Latin American governments to resort to protectionist and nationalist economic policies. Along with the liberal economic system, the crash of 1929 also undermined the ideology of Pan-Americanism. In the long term, however, it did not succeed in completely compromising inter-American relations or prevent a redevelopment of the hemisphere's organization, as clearly evidenced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's launch of the so-called "good-neighbor policy"

and the depth of economic integration achieved in the following decade[18].

In any case, faced with the economic disruption caused by the end of the model of exportation and the starving masses that besieged the large urban centres, the general Latin America public became convinced that the ills afflicting the continent were due to the ineptitude of the previous political classes, both liberal and conservative. They were seen as not only having generated false progress but also of having exposed the interests and needs of the poorer classes to the rapacity of oligarchies and foreign powers, starting with the United States. It would be this ground, fertilized with malaise and discomfort, that would bring forth a new right-wing political culture that, from town squares and barracks, elevated a group of *caudillos* to power. These strongmen represented a popular sovereignty, setting themselves up as guardians of the collective ethos and the peoples' defenders against their internal and external enemies[19]. Beyond the various national versions, what the regimes of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, and Jorge Ubico y Castañeda in Guatemala had in common was a radical aversion to representative democracy and an idea of society resembling a homogeneous and unanimous organism.

In short, the twilight of liberal democracy, its mechanisms of mediation, and, above all, the United States' role as the bulwark of European culture in the Americas had arrived, even in Latin America. From its ashes would arise a composite cultural movement that would prove at times prone to, at times hostile to, the new political course, taking on the mission of a new definition of the contents and values of this emerging Latin American identity, free, independent, and, above all, Catholic. The antennae of Catholicism, both Roman and continental, would have no difficulty in perceiving the deep moods of this cultural resurgence that, in addition to redeeming the church from its long liberal captivity, seemed for the second time to

[18] J.D. Doenecke and M.A. Stoler, *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies, 1933-1945*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

[19] V. Castronovo, *Piazze e caserme: I dilemmi dell'America Latina dal Novecento ad oggi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007 and L. Zanatta, *Io, il popolo: Note sulla leadership carismatica nel populismo latinoamericano*, in «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 5, 3, 2002, pp. 431-440.

reveal that southern land to a western Christianity cyclically prey to regenerative anxieties[20].

There could be no place for any form of diversity – whether ideological or Christian – in this new political sphere, saturated with Catholicity and organicist imagery. The case of Colombia shows this well. In 1948 – counter-cyclically with respect to the brief democratic spring that the continent was experiencing after the end of the war – a coup crushed the challenge made to the traditional political order by the progressive liberal Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Among those who paid the highest price for the season of violence and instability that lasted until 1958 were the many Protestants in the country, on whom the accusation of conspiring with the old liberal party and foreign democracies fell without distinction. Colombian Catholicism had a role in providing religious justification for the government's persecution. In fact, the Catholic episcopate were convinced that Protestant proselytism, which was stronger and more widespread than elsewhere, represented a threat to the revival of Catholicism after a long period of marginalization and conflict with the political powers during the years of liberalism (1930-1946). During the decade of *La Violencia*, they launched a fierce defamation campaign against foreign missionaries[21]. To the classic lexical handbook of intransigence, which described the Protestant presence with all the possible variants offered by gnostic nomenclature – «plague», «infection», «epidemic», «infiltration»[22] – were added the very words pronounced by Roosevelt on the banks of the Nahul-Huapi to predict the "plutocratic aggression"[23] clothed in philanthropy that the United States would use to plunder the Latin American continent.

It was the *Revista Javeriana*, the press organ of the Society of Jesus in Colombia, that served as a platform for the visceral anti-liberalism targeting Protestantism, pointing to it as a Trojan horse for the

[20] G. La Bella, *Roma e l'America Latina: Il Resurgimiento cattolico sudamericano*, Milano, Guerini, 2012.
[21] See R. Arias, *El episcopado colombiano: Intransigencia y laicidad (1850--2000)*, Bogota, Uniandes-Icanh, 2003.
[22] A rich overview can be found in E. Restrepo Uribe, *El Protestantesimo en Colombia*, Bogota, Ed. Lumen Christi, 1944.
[23] In the words of F.J. Gonzalez SJ, *El major obstáculo de la solidaridad Americana*, in «Revista Javeriana», 15, 73, 1941, pp. 135-139, here 137.

penetration of Yankee culture into South America[24]. The Colombian people were warned not to fall into the trap of a policy of good neighborliness, a precursor of the suffocating North American imperialism that – in addition to putting a strangle-hold on the destiny of the nation – threatened to «snatch away their faith and tear apart their national unity»[25]. Political authority, therefore, had the duty to use every means provided by the constitution – and force, if necessary – to stop the evil plans of the United States to not only destroy the blossom of the Colombian nation but also to poison the wells of the *pax religiosa* that Roman Catholicism, in its unique Hispanic formulation, had guaranteed the entire continent for centuries. If this balance was disrupted, one commentator concluded, a religious war would be waged, bathing with blood the Protestant religion with all its progressive façade, leaving Latin Americans again «ruined and without hope, ready to continue working like slaves in the fields and the mines, for the benefit of the capitalists of other nations»[26].

Happy to shout «Arriba España, católica e imperial!»[27], a reinvigorated Catholicism – dazzled by Francoism and the dream of building a Roman Christendom that was no longer subservient to liberal elites – thus launched itself in pursuit of an enemy that it indiscriminately identified as liberal, positivist, Masonic, and Protestant. The prophecy about the rude awakening that awaited the peoples of South America once they came out of the torpor they had been forced into by the plutocratic domination of the rich nations, howev-

[24] See, for example, D. Restrepo SJ, *Panamericanismo e Hispanoamericanismo*, in «Revista Javeriana» 11, 37, 1939, pp. 156-160.

[25] «Arrebatarle su fe y despedazar su unidad nacional»; this complaint was made by Bishop J.E. Ricaurte in a letter to the US ambassador in Bogota reported in *Protestantismo en Colombia*, in «Revista Javeriana», 21, 100, 1944, pp. 38-40, here 38.

[26] «Arruinados y sin esperanza, dispuestos a seguir trabajando como esclavos en los campos y en las minas, en beneficio de los capitalistas de otras naciones»; A. Granados SJ, *Orientaciones: La propaganda protestante y la politica de buena vecindad del Presidente Roosevelt*, in «Revista Javeriana», 11, 106, 1944, pp. 303-306, here 306.

[27] It was the typically Falangist exclamation that, in 1937, Laureano Gómez – future leader of the Colombian Conservative Party and *bête noir* of the Protestants during his time in power at the beginning of *La Violencia* (1950-1953) – had used to greet some of General Franco's emissaries who were visiting Bogota. This was recorded by the liberal intellectual Germán Arciniegas in 1952, in a work written in exile that was long censored in Colombia: *Entre la libertad y el miedo*, translated by H. de Onís as *The State of Latin America: Twenty Nations Between Freedom and Fear*, New York, Knopf, 1952.

er, mentioned neither any alliances with the movements pressing for the emancipation of the subordinate classes from outside of corporatist society nor any clear will to free the native peoples from a racial segregation (perpetuated even within the church itself) that not even conversion could shatter[28]. In fact, there was a direct connection to the 1930s when, taking advantage of the twilight of democracy in Europe, the Catholic Church harboured the illusion of restoring an entirely Catholic political and social order that would put it centre stage again. Likewise, there was another connection to the contemporaneous post-war period, with the tendency to relaunch an atrophic model of a confessional state, which was completely inadequate in a Western society that was becoming increasingly plural. In possession of a device for social redemption as an alternative to both the class struggle and liberal capitalism, this remnant of Hispanic Catholicism, a national bastion, resisted the new rise of liberal-democratic values under the banner of Atlanticism[29].

3. *The 1960s: Underdevelopment, Dictatorships, and Transversal Anti-Imperialism*

It was a sort of *reconquista*, this one without genocidal overtones, that hit Latin America at the beginning of the 1960s. This time it was an empire descending from the north, anxious to recover the ground lost in the populist decade and to respond in kind to the spreading fascination with Castro next door. Meanwhile, on the other side of the ocean, at the end of Pius XII's pontificate, a generation of missionaries (Combonians and Xaverians as well as from other orders and *Fidei donum*) once again began to dream of the Indies from the shores of a Europe that had been exhausted by ideological opposition[30]. With remarkable timing, while the heads of states of the

[28] A. Riccardi, *La Chiesa cattolica e il mondo degli altri*, in *Chiesa cattolica e mondo cinese tra colonialismo ed evangelizzazione (1840-1911)*, a cura di A. Giovagnoli e E. Giunipero, Città del Vaticano, Urbaniana University Press, 2005, pp. 11-20.

[29] On phenomena equivalent to what occurred in Colombia in the populist and anti-democratic Brazil of the 1930s and 1940s, see the recent work of E. Helgen, *Religious Conflict in Brazil: Protestants, Catholics, and the Rise of Religious Pluralism in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2020.

[30] On the paths, protagonists, models, and cultural transference of this missionary mobilization, see *Mission religieuse ou engagement tiers-mondiste? Des clercs entre*

two hemispheres were signing the plan of intra-American cooperation known as the Alliance for Progress in Montevideo on August 17, 1961, the papal legate was at the University of Notre Dame formalizing the Holy See's proposal to relocate to Latin America, within a decade, a tenth of the missionaries, both male and female, who were stationed elsewhere[31].

In the United States, the concurrence of a sequence of disparate elements – the apocalyptic climate generated by the first nuclear tests, the spiritual representation of the competition with the Ussr, the definitive urbanization of the South, and the conservative reaction to Johnson's Great Society – had bolstered the growth curve of the Christian Right. In their eyes, the mission to halt the decline of morals that threatened to destroy the "objective" norms of private morality and public ethics was combined with the eagerness to ride the renewed global momentum of American power, finding a millenarian interpretation of the role of the United States in salvation history. These were the years, moreover, when the first experiments in radio and televangelism saw the light of day, consecrating public media stars like Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim Bakker in the eyes of the American public. All of these were connected in various ways to that conservative political activism that would give rise to reactionary platforms such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition in the 1980s[32].

Naturally, similar transformations also had an impact «on the face and activities of American missionary efforts. It was a missionary outreach that, in fact, became more and more evangelical with the – contextual and unstoppable – decline of the traditional Protestant missions and their substitution with a form of missionary activity that was as decentralized as it was widespread in its global diffusion»[33]. The first wave, at the beginning of the century, therefore, was linked to the fundamentalist revival that ran through the historically Prot-

Europe et Amérique latine dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, éd. par O. Chatelan, Nancy, Éditions Arbre Bleu, 2020.

[31] This concurrence is captured in R. Bruno-Jofré and J.I. Zaldívar, *Monsignor Ivan Illich's Critique of the Institutional Church, 1960-1966*, in «The Journal of Ecclesiastical History», 67, 3, 2016, pp. 573-592.

[32] P. Naso, *Il libro e la spada: La sfida dei fondamentalismi*, Torino, Claudiana, 2000.

[33] Del Pero, *Religione, politica estera e attività missionaria*, cit., p. 26. See also M. McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

estant churches in particular, spreading to the poorest pockets of the South American population, where the failure of liberal policies and of Catholic welfare was more tangible. The second wave, then, arose in the post-war period out of the charismatic awakening on a global scale of the Pentecostal churches and – especially in the United Sates – out of the undermining of the traditional political apathy that characterized the evangelical world[34]. These fertilized the ground in which a complex stratification of movements and experiences would take root, destined to have long-term effects whose reverberations are still present and visible and on which much recent research has been focused[35].

The pouring of this competitive and hyperactive mass into the spaces of a continent where conquest and colonization had left long and persistent shadows triggered a process of rejection with unpredictable consequences. An all-out «philanthropic invasion» was what Catholic priest Ivan Illich called the scene unfolding before his eyes in Mexico on April 20, 1968, when he explained to a group of Catholic students in Chicago about to leave for South America why he had dedicated the previous six years at the head of his centre in Cuernavaca «to obtain the voluntary withdrawal of all North American

[34] Here it is necessary to include a brief note on Billy Graham. He was a point of reference for "political" evangelicalism who – leaving the old anti-liberal prejudices with all their controversies to the more conservative fringe – was actually the one who allowed the churches of the South to fully enter into the nation's political life, even into the chambers of power. (Rather casually, Graham was at the side of both Republican and Democratic presidents: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. Finally, Nixon made use of his celebrity with calculated opportunism). There is a vast bibliography on Graham so, in addition to S.P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, I prefer to refer the reader directly to FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, cit., pp. 143 ff.

[35] C. Napolitano, *Nella forza dello spirito: Una lettura "interna" del pentecostalesimo*, in «Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni», 82, 1, 2016, pp. 28-71. Although dated and engulfed by a tide of much more up-to-date and specific studies on the Pentecostal movement, the work of Harvard theologian and sociologist Harvey Cox – *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Reading, PA, Addison-Wesley, 1995 – remains valuable. On the phases and forms of "Pentecostalization" in Latin America, see P. Freston, *Pentecostalism in Latin America: Characteristics and Controversies*, in «Social Compass», 45, 3, 1998, pp. 335-358 and the recent work by R.R. Gladwin, *Streams of Latin American Protestant Theology*, Leiden, Brill, 2020.

volunteer armies from Latin America»[36]. Sponsored by the Catholic Church in the United States and financed by Fordham University, the Center for Intercultural Formation (Cif) was entrusted to Illich's care in 1961. Its goal was the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual formation of missionary personnel for South America. It was a task that Illich undertook without, however, the slightest intention of becoming merely a recruiter for what he caustically and provocatively defined as «travelling salesmen for the middle class 'American way of life'»[37]. In fact, he was convinced that the success of a great missionary mobilization was based, not on the number or the zeal of its personnel, but on the effectiveness of a kenotic action towards the people of the mission. This was the reason he saw to it that those who knocked at the doors of his centre had their preconceptions and cultural assumptions shattered before they were immersed in the reality of Latin America. His intention was to develop a counter-model missionary detached from the prototype of an American conquistador swathed in napalm[38], resembling instead a "substitute" sower of a land that would, sooner or later, see local churches grow in abundance[39].

This was a tendency that had already been noted in the Protestant world given the spread, already starting from the early 1960s, of studies with emblematic titles such as John Carden's *Ugly Missionary* or the Lutheran James Scherer's *Missionary Go Home!* They both responded to the United States' new hegemonic responsibility from backgrounds within that liberal furrow of US Protestantism that called for a thorough, and possibly self-critical, re-discussion of the role that the evangelical churches had carved out for themselves in the global projections of their nation. This was the same world where an island of moderate evangelical progressivism like Wheaton College was rereading the anthropological classics of the 1940s and

[36] As a point of reference, see the editor's introduction to the first volume of Illich's *Opera Omnia* in Italian, I. Illich, *Celebrare la consapevolezza*, ed. e trad. F. Milana, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2020, pp. 14-90. I.D. Illich, *Yankee Go Home: The American Do-Gooder in Latin America*, in *The Church, Change, and Development*, ed. by F. Eychanger, Chicago, Urban Training Center Press, 1970, pp. 45-53, here 47. Of interest, but less pertinent to the analysis, is T. Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.
[37] Illich, *Yankee Go Home*, cit., p. 48.
[38] «The US way of life has become a religion which must be accepted by all those who do not want to die by the sword or napalm», Illich, *Yankee Go Home*, cit., p. 49.
[39] I. Illich, *Mission and Midwifery. Part II: Selection and Formation of the Missioner*, in *The Church, Change, and Development*, cit., pp. 98-111, here 101.

1950s (Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Bronislaw Malinowski) in order to trace the theoretical foundation of a missionary practice free from ethnocentrism; it was the same world where, meeting for a 1973 missionary conference in Bangkok, the participants joined the appeal of church leaders from Asia and Africa for a "missionary moratorium" against the cultural dominance of the West, drawing accusations back home of having betrayed the dreams of the forebears who, fifty years earlier, had given themselves a generation to complete the apostles' mission[40].

Returning to Illich, his personal battle against a church stuck in colonial era categories and methods was not overshadowed by any confessional polemic. In his eyes, the only fault line dividing humanity was the one running between the opulence of the imperialist north and the structural and endemic poverty of the south. His Cuernavaca centre was a thorn in the side of every form of spiritual colonialism, even after the church sanctioned it[41]. Illich had re-established it under the name Centro Intercultural de Documentación (Cidoc)

[40] On the basis of these premises, and also thanks to Billy Graham's encouragement, a diversified movement of evangelical churches, willing to question the cornerstones of their missionary vocation, was born. The process culminated in the convening of a world conference on evangelization in Lausanne in 1974, but it was not without tensions and differences and wound up fulfilling only a small part of its intended function. The speech by the Ecuadorian theologian René Padilla sparked a fuse. In it he indicted the cultural imperialism of the West conveyed by US missionary efforts and forcefully questioned missionary practices still bound to ethnocentric visions and colonial styles. See A. Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective*, Oxford, Regnum Books, 2008, pp. 17-52. On the Bangkok missionary conference sponsored by the World Council of Churches at a time when the latter's centre of gravity was shifting from the North Atlantic axis to the southern latitudes where young churches were breaking free from the religious colonialism of the previous century, see K. Kunter und A. Schilling, *«Der Christ fürchtet den Umbruch nicht»: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen im Spannungsfeld von Dekolonisierung, Entwestlichung und Politisierung*, in *Globalisierung der Kirchen: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, hrsg. von K. Kunter und A. Schilling, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014, pp. 19-74.

[41] On the disciplinary proceedings initiated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith against Illich, see G. C. Zizola e A. Barbero, *La riforma del Sant'Uffizio e il "caso Illich"*, Torino, Gribaudi, 1969. For a historical reconstruction of the affair, see the details – however contradictory – provided by S. Scatena in *In Populo pauperum. La Chiesa latinoamericana dal Concilio a Medellín (1962-1968)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008, pp. 270-292, and the personal memories offered by P. Prodi in *Giuseppe Dossetti e le officine bolognesi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016, in particular pp. 205-219.

in order to safeguard its independence and secularity, and it was, for much of the sixties, the think-tank of a pastoral outreach that was more attentive to the challenges of the Latin American reality. It was also the crossroads of that generation of theologians, almost all with a European training behind them in Rome, Paris, and Leuven, which would be decisive for the birth of liberation theology in the following decade. Indeed, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Enrique Dussel, Hugo Assman, and Ruben Alves all passed through Cuernavaca, but so did the most advanced reference points of a religious sociology that was still in its infancy: Leuven's François Houtart, who had founded the Federación Internacional de los Institutos Católicos de Investigaciones Sociales y Socio-Religiosas (Feres) with the goal of promoting sociological investigations of Latin American Catholicism[42]; and, from Santiago, Chile, the Jesuit sociologists Renato Poblete of the Centro de Investigaciones Socioculturales Cisoc-Bellarmino and Roger Vekemans of the Centro para el Desarrollo Económico y Social de América Latina (Desal), both of whom, however, supported developmentalist policies.

This generation, especially Houtart, was inspired by the experience of Joseph Cardijn's Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (Joc), which deeply shaped the actions and mentality of the South American Catholic laity of the mid-twentieth century, as well as by an avid reading of the best that European Catholic culture had to offer: from Emmanuel Mounier's writings on personalism to Louis-Joseph Lebret's ideas on development. They reframed the disappointment aroused by the failure of economist reformism that had dominated the developmental policies of the early 1960s within an interpretation of the continent's underdevelopment as the product of social, even more than economic, disadvantage. Whether it was a question of investigating the social causes of this underdevelopment or of denouncing the predominance of technology and profit over communitarian organization, when the missionary work of the Protestant churches was examined, polemical vitriol and confessional rancour gave way almost everywhere to a serious and committed study of Christian otherness. In fact, of the 43 volumes published by Feres, there were two

[42] As noted in his biography (C. Tablada Pérez, *The Decline of Certainties: Founding Struggles Anew*, Panama, Ruth Casa Editorial, 2018), François Houtart was a correspondent for the CIF Reports from its inception in 1962 and a great admirer of the work carried out by Illich in his centre in Cuernavaca.

studies on Protestantism in Latin America. With a rigorous set of graphs, statistics, and maps, they aimed at offering – apart from any apologetic argumentation – «an honorable and frank consideration of its existence»[43], as Houtart stated in the introduction to the first volume.

Obviously, the compunction to highlight an instrumentalist aspect remained. The United States employed it in continuing to use the Protestant missions to expand its interests in South America during the years of the Good Neighbor Policy, which «spoke of Protestantism as the only bridge of union between the two hemispheres»[44]. There also remained the proselytizing flipside of their activism in the educational and welfare fields, a «real danger to the faith of those native populations already grafted into the Church by baptism and to their desire to remain in her».[45] Neither the first nor second aspect, however, were treated in isolation with respect to the Catholic Church's deficiencies in dealing with social problems, which were making Latin America an easy field of conquest for North American missionary efforts.

There is certainly a clear shift from the old intransigent paradigm that held until the decade prior, both in the tone and formulation of the problems, but – more than the general easing of inter-ecclesial

[43] These were the two volumes of *El Protestantismo en América Latina*, ed. por P. Damboriena SJ, Freiburg-Bogota, Ed. Feres, 1962-1963, here vol. I, p. 13. As Houtart himself acknowledged in his biography (Tablada Pérez, *The Decline of Certainties*, cit., p. 101), the Spanish Jesuit Prudencio Damboriena did not prove to be a suitable editor for the work. In fact, in the first draft, the volumes were characterized by a general, latent anti-Protestant sentiment that forced Houtart to undertake a delicate and patient rewriting of the material. Damboriena's intransigent background was no secret, however. In 1961, the Jesuit, who was also a consultant of the Sacred Congregation of the Council, had already published a voluminous study on Protestantism that did not use particularly ecumenical language (*Fe Catolica e Iglesias y sectas de la Reforma*, Madrid, Ediciones Fax, 1961). And in 1962, he participated in the 15th Missiology Week in Burgos with a contribution on *El protestantismo en Iberoamérica*, in which he presented the Catholic Church as the only bulwark against the penetration of Marxism in Latin America. The piece was later published in *Iberoamérica. La Iglesia ante sus problemas*, Burgos, Instituto Español de San Francisco Javier para Misiones Extranjeras, 1963, pp. 316-336.

[44] «Hablaba del protestantismo como del único puente de unión entre ambos hemisferios», *El Protestantismo en América Latina*, vol. I, cit., p. 26.

[45] «Auténtico peligro para la fe de aquellas poblaciones indias injertadas ya en la Iglesia por el bautismo y su deseo de permanecer en ella», *El Protestantismo en América Latina*, vol. I, cit., p. 120.

relations already perceived at the dawn of the Council by the most sensitive areas of the Catholic Church – the merit of this change of pace should be assigned to the sociological ability to intercept the efforts of a Latin American episcopate in search of a new continental self-awareness and, at the same time, of a sociologically informed reading of the problems and religious realities in Latin America[46]. It was no coincidence that the Feres study returned to the words that, at the regional conference of the bishops of Central America in 1956, had combined a denunciation of the pervasiveness of the Protestant missions and the «immense riches» they brought with them with the awareness that proselytism flourished where poverty, ignorance, and the Catholic Church's blameworthy negligence reigned[47].

The FERES publication was joined by at least two other studies on Latin American Protestantism, which were part of the «Sondeos» series from the Cidoc of Cuernavaca. One was the first documented analysis of the persecution of evangelicals in Colombia during the decade of *La Violencia*. The other, also published in 1968, was a historical study of the evangelization strategies of the Latin American Mission (Lam) that, over time, has become the main agency of Protestant missionary efforts in South America[48]. The dissemination of both studies must be read in the light of the basic grammar of Illich's thought. The intent with the first was to denounce a church that, from the fortress of a confessional state, poured hatred on the besiegers in order to defend the garrison of an equally foreign culture that, centuries ago, had made progress by relying on the violent arm of the

[46] Scatena, *In Populo pauperum*, cit., pp. 25-126 and Ead., *Il Celam di Manuel Larrain: Uomini e strumenti dell'"aggiornamento latinoamericano"*, in *L'America Latina fra Pio XII e Paolo VI: Il cardinal Casaroli e le politiche vaticane in una chiesa che cambia*, a cura di A. Melloni e S. Scatena, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006, pp. 29-148.

[47] «The penetrative strength that Protestantism is able to achieve is due, in great part, to the immense wealth that it has been able to gather in the United States of America. But, if we study the matter in depth, we see clearly that the religious ignorance of our people is the principal cause of the defections we deplore. A people well-instructed in our faith and practicing their religious duties will never fall prey to Protestantism». Latin American Episcopal Council (Celam), *Primera Carta Pastoral del Episcopado de Centro América, Panama, May 1956*, pp. 4-5, in *El Protestantismo en América Latina*, cit., p. 38.

[48] This refers to J.E. Goff, *The Persecution of Protestant Christians in Colombia, 1948-1958*, in «Sondeos», 23, Cuernavaca, Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1968; and R.S. Rosales, *The Evangelism in Depth Program of the Latin America Mission*, in «Sondeos», 21, Cuernavaca, Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1968.

colonial powers. In the second, the story of Kenneth Strachan and his Evangelism in Depth Program – a continent-wide evangelization campaign begun in 1948 and still in progress at the time – demonstrated the possibility, even for conservative evangelical denominations like those supporting the Latin American Mission, to take root in the living fabric of South American society as well as to engage in a missionary effort capable of overcoming the traditional confessional barriers that divided Protestantism.

The judgment of these *lovanillos* on Christian diversity in Latin America was not from a theological perspective, nor did they speak the language of apologetics in the manner of Illich's scathing critique that blasted the codified *loci* of a missionary culture eager to go along with the imperialistic bent of Western policies on the continent. In the decade that paved the way for the student movement of 1968 with a torrential outpouring of sociological studies, faced with a developmental model that was often imposed with military force, riding the long wave of enthusiasm sparked by *Populorum progressio* and the Medellín conference, the traditional elements of anti-Protestant polemics were taken up and recomposed with a specific interpretation of the continent's socio-economic situation. This reading saw the common enemy as Latin America underdevelopment, the historical product of the capitalist expansion of other countries – the United States, first and foremost – as well as the effect of state violence that held most of the South American nations in check after the season of upheaval inaugurated by the Brazilian coup in 1964 had gained ground.

It was precisely the bloody experience of the crisis of democracies that, in a certain sense, acted as a watershed between a history of boundless competition and a phase in which the most advanced sectors of Catholicism and Protestantism began to see themselves as the initiators of a liberating process of raising awareness rooted in a collective experience of poverty and oppression. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was no coincidence that the World Council of Churches (Wcc) – whose relations with US evangelicals were certainly not marked by cooperation due to the way in which they engaged with the WCC through their National Association of Evangelicals (Nae) – offered shelter to a generation of exiles hunted down by the military juntas of their respective countries for having suggested their communities use an alternative of Christian resistance against a power established outside of democratic norms.

Along with the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire – who was forced into exile after a military coup ended the government of João Goulart – the Uruguayan Methodists Julio de Santa Ana and Emilio Castro took asylum in Geneva, fleeing the repression of Juan María Bordaberry (Castro would later serve as the Wcc's secretary general from 1985 to 1992). Likewise, the Argentinean jurist Leopoldo Juan Niilus, a Lutheran who had been banned by the government in Buenos Aires in 1969 for criticizing the military junta that had taken power for their lack of respect for human rights. It was thanks to their contribution, coordinated by the Argentine Methodist José Míguez Bonino[49], that the commission Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina (Isal), established by the Wcc as early as 1961, and Sodepax, a joint Catholic-Protestant workgroup on society, development, and peace established in 1968, were training centres of ecumenical reflection for almost fifteen years. They covered issues related to the emerging liberation theology as well as served as forges for international networks, which were decisive in launching ecumenical campaigns in defence of civil rights[50].

It was, therefore, the common need for liberation from the domination exercised by the economic empires of the North operating with the complicity of military dictatorships and not in defence a Hispanic national Catholic identity, which no one believed in anymore, that was the basis of the desire to understand and, if necessary, deplore a Christian otherness accustomed to gaining political support and financial resources from abroad. There was no trace of bellicose rhetoric in the language of scholars like Houtart, and the radicality with which Illich exhorted the military churches (all of them) to return to proclaiming the gospel from a position of weakness did not at all conceal the intention to fan the embers of guerrilla insurgency. Nevertheless, the postulate of a Protestant co-responsibility in the dramas and social delays of the continent remain at the root of an interpretation of the Latin American reality – and its consequent

[49] On Bonino, human stronghold of Protestant liberation theology in ecumenical circles in Geneva and president of the Wcc from 1975 to 1983, see O. Pedroso Mateus, *José Míguez Bonino and the Struggle for Global Christian Unity in the 1970s*, in *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, cit., pp. 237-253.

[50] On the history of Isal and the contribution made by this Protestant and South American "cell" exiled in Geneva, see A. Schilling, *Revolution, Exil und Befreiung: Der Boom des lateinamerikanischen Protestantismus in der internationalen Ökumene in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015.

liberating praxis – that the counter-revolutionary resurgence of the following decades would be in charge of demonstrating.

4. *The 1970s: Latin America in Flames and Churches Held Hostage*

If the goal of the Alliance for Progress had been to accompany the economic development of South America with a consolidation of democracy, the nine coups that took place in the region in the program's first five years certainly did not indicate success. In the twenty years that followed the failure of Kennedy's grand plan, the United States was, in fact, forced to recognize its inability to reconcile hegemony and democracy on the continent and to come to terms with, or even prefer, military regimes in the name of security. In the end, this option did not displease Nixon too much when, in 1969, the Rockefeller Report confirmed that – although the United States' lucky star had temporarily dimmed in Latin America, its ability to guide that unfortunate continent out of the spiral of underdevelopment was still intact. For precisely that reason it was unnecessary to disdain the friendship of military governments, the only ones that guaranteed order and stability in the region[51]. In any case, it was not out of compunction of conscience regarding the methods of government adopted by the South American generals that Nixon decided to send Nelson Rockefeller to Latin America. It was the Catholic Church that most worried him, marked as it was by revolutionary ferment and radical theological tendencies. The meeting with the Colombian President Carlos Lleras Restrepo, the first South American head of state to cross the threshold of the White House after the installation of the new administration, was decisive. He said that he was convinced that there were two main threats to the southern continent: communism and revolutionary priests. Lleras Restrepo also provided Nixon with two pieces of evidence to prove that what he was saying was true: the fascination that Camilo Torres wrought on many foreign clergy[52] – in 1967, amidst the clamour of the interna-

[51] Cf. N.A. Rockefeller, *Rockefeller Report on the Americas: The Official Report of a United States Presidential Mission for the Western Hemisphere*, Chicago, Quadrangle, 1969.

[52] On the affair and its reporting in the international press, see P. Lernoux, A. Jones and R. Ellsberg, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1993.

tional press, the Maryknoll congregation expelled three US missionaries who had joined the revolutionary forces in Guatemala – and the growing number of Christians who participated in protests against the war in Vietnam in the streets of both continents[53].

Based on unpublished documentation, Theresa Keeley recently demonstrated that the report that Rockefeller presented Nixon after his tour of South American capitals was in no way intended to fuel the president's or the Cia's concerns about what was simmering in Latin American Catholicism after Medellín[54]. On the contrary, Rockefeller was of the opinion that the Catholic Church could become, for the good of the entire continent, the impetus of what he defined in a note in the margin of his report as a «quiet revolution»[55], that is, a radical and necessary change in the way of addressing Latin America's social urgencies that would cut off leftist and rightist extremism, exactly as the episcopate had shown itself capable of doing in Medellín the year before, catalysing the grassroots demands for reform and then transforming them into concrete pastoral guidelines. The White House's special envoy was, essentially, of the opinion that the Catholic Church could still prove to be a valid ally to the United States in intercepting and taming the continent's tremors before they degenerated into revolutionary earthquakes on the condition – and here he showed that he was fully in tune with the Colombian president's concerns – that the flaws in the ecclesial structures that made them extremely «vulnerable to subversive penetration»[56] be remedied.

Ultimately, Rockefeller commented in the margins of his report, faced with the demographic explosion underway, which risked jeopardizing the programs and forecasts of the Alliance for Progress, it was, if anything, the resolute line against contraception taken by the Roman Magisterium in *Humanae vitae* that could cause some incon-

[53] As far as Catholics were involved, see P. Adams Moon, *«Peace on Earth: Peace in Vietnam»: The Catholic Peace Fellowship and Antiwar Witness, 1964-1976*, in «Journal of Social History», 36, 2003, pp. 1033-1057. On American Protestantism with a liberal imprint see J.K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left*, DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. On religious pacifist activism during the Cold War in general, see A. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, New York, Knopf, 2012.

[54] T. Keeley, *Medellín is «Fantastic»: Drafts of the 1969 Rockefeller Report on the Catholic Church*, in «The Catholic Historical Review», 101, 2015, pp. 809-834.

[55] *Ibidem*, p. 824.

[56] Rockefeller, *Rockefeller Report on the Americas*, cit., p. 31.

venience to US interests in the region. According to Keeley, the bad reputation built up around Rockefeller's report is totally undeserved. Many people, on pure speculation, have held that it was a sequence of encrypted messages that a tycoon on a business trip transmitted to Washington to order a retaliation against revolutionary priests and their distorted political suggestions. Keeley's theory is quite plausible, but difficult to explain to the victims of a settling of scores between the United States' security apparatus and Christian dissent in Latin America, which undeniably took place, often leaving the unmistakable trace of blood on the hands of the US military schools that trained the guardians of order in the southern hemisphere[57].

The attention paid by Jimmy Carter to human rights policies in his very first steps after taking office were hardly noticed by those who were drowned in the tide of repression and militarism that engulfed Latin America during the 1970s. To be precise, at least in Nicaragua, the decision to revoke the almost unconditional support that Washington had until then granted the dictatorships did have some effect. It gave new strength to the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Fsln) that, since the 1960s, had been looking for the right moment to give the Somoza dynastic regime a decisive boot. Escorted by a cheering crowd, not unlike the one that had greeted Castro's entry into Havana exactly twenty years earlier, the movement that headed down the streets of Managua on July 19, 1979 towards the government palace owed its victory to the contribution of urban and rural factors, the local ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the middle and entrepreneurial classes, all tired and frustrated by the long authoritarian government of the Somoza's as well as by its high level of corruption.

From Washington's point of view, the greatest danger was that the Sandinista victory would create a domino effect in Central America (and beyond), since Nicaragua at that moment was not the only country simmering with the fire of revolution. In neighbouring Guatemala, the total number of guerrillas was close to 6000. In El Salvador, Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte's weak government was besieged by the revolutionary forces of the Frente Farabundo Martí. In Colombia, the first public appearance of the Cuban-financed Movimiento 19 de abril (M-19) dated back to 1974. And in

[57] As in the case of Oscar Romero's murderers. See L. Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004.

Peru, the armed struggle was led by Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist-inspired guerrilla movement founded in the early 1970s by a group of students and professors from the University of Ayacucho.[58]

It was, therefore, necessary to act as quickly as possible to prevent the spread of the communist virus to the rest of the Caribbean basin, but with the embassy in Tehran still crowded with US hostages and the Soviets entering in force in Afghanistan, the Carter administration was proving to be far from able to handle the situation. In May 1980, Reagan, who was close to obtaining the official candidacy of his party in the November elections, received the Santa Fe Report, drafted in the New Mexico town of the same name by a team of experts, mostly from Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies[59]. The gist of the signatories' premise was that, because of Carter's idealism and Kennedy's haste in accepting Cuba's independence, the United States' global supremacy was now also threatened from Latin America, a place that the State Department had only worried about marginally until then. The urgency, then, was to re-establish, as soon as possible, the United States' strategic superiority over its neighbouring continent, even before South Asia. Human rights, democracy, and the fight against poverty could all wait.

5. *The 1980s: Reagan's Gamble in Nicaragua*

Reagan tried to solve the problem. He was determined to restore the United States' global supremacy and thus willing to drag the small countries of Central America onto the stage of world tensions in order to transform them into the latest strategic scenario of a bipolar dispute[60]. It was decided to begin with Nicaragua where, Reagan had once said, the previous administration's weakness had allowed «a Marxist sanctuary» to be established only two days' drive from

[58] Cf. *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, ed. by D. Castro, Wilmington, DE, SR Books, 1999.
[59] Cf. *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties, Council for Inter-American Security*, ed. by L.A. Tambs, Washington, DC, 1980.
[60] R.L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1994 and, on Central America, W.M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Harlingen, in the southernmost tip of Texas[61]. Planned as an operation to be entered in the annals of counterrevolutionary strategy, the secret war against Sandinista Nicaragua would leave the United States with a particularly hefty bill. Militarily, the Contras' efforts, financed by Washington for a total of more than 322 million dollars, was completely irrelevant, except for the trail of blood and the siege psychosis that led the Sandinistas to militarize the country and curtail efforts for national pacification[62].

In US politics, the clumsy attempt to circumvent the Boland Amendments – by which congress prohibited financing the Contras in order to push the administration towards a diplomatic solution to the conflict and avoid further tensions with the Soviet Union – caused Reagan a scandal of Watergate proportions that almost cost him the presidency[63]. On the international level, the choice of reading the hard-line engagement with Managua and the Sandinistas' tenacious resistance in ideological terms ended up encapsulating Nicaragua in the sympathy of the vast anti-imperialist front that, from the four corners of the globe, pointed to the United States' complicity in the slaughter of democracy wreaked by the military regimes in Latin America.

The Christian churches also had their share of misfortunes in the events in Central America. As a demonstration that not everything about the past US policy in Latin America should be discarded, the Santa Fe Report reproposed the idea of closely monitoring the subcontinent's religious landscape and of finding a way to inoculate some anti-Marxist antidote into its makeup, especially where sectors of the Catholic Church were liberally spreading anti-US sentiment[64].

[61] LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, cit., p. 448.
[62] R. Sobel, *Contra Aid Fundamentals: Exploring the Intricacies and the Issues*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 110, 2, 1995, pp. 287-306.
[63] M. Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power*, Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 2014.
[64] On this point, conservative political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, has something interesting and more specific to add in *The Hobbes Problem: Order, Authority and Legitimacy in Central America*, speech presented at the December 1980 Public Policy Week of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC, 1981. Here Kirkpatrick, who had already criticized the hard line adopted by the Carter administration towards the military regimes in Latin America in a famous article in «Commentary Magazine» in 1979, identified three risk factors for US policy in the area: Cuba's activism in support of the rebels, the diplomatic networks built up in the region by European social

The one who received that document was a president who owed part of his electoral success to the deliberate and carefully managed use of fundamentalist rhetoric and the support of a conservative Christian network, the Moral Majority[65]. It was not difficult, therefore, for Reagan's detractors to point to Pentecostal churches and American missionary corporations that had sprung up in Central and South America with the support of an unparalleled financial and media network as the spearhead of a religious offensive aimed at countering the prominence of a grassroots Catholicism considered, without much nuance, potentially subversive[66]. It was a tactic that seemed to give greater satisfaction to Washington strategists, especially those concerned with Nicaragua. Nonetheless it was complicated by a deep rift between those who, both Catholic and Protestant, were committed to a political project with increasingly Marxist overtones and other Christians who, faced with the growing spiral of violence, preferred to abstain from fighting and from open opposition to the regime. The publications on the ground came from various perspectives (sociology and anthropology, a concern for pastoral issues, Protestant and Catholic), and were inspired by designs of liberation, anti-colonialism, the promotion of the developing world, or all three at once. They had the task of unmasking and documenting the unfolding events first-hand.

democratic forces, and the energies invested by Catholics in denouncing the violence perpetrated by military juntas against political opponents.

[65] There is a wide range of studies dedicated to the topic of the intersections between foreign policy and the evangelical community in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. On the correlation between executive agencies and religious lobbies and on the influence of the presidents' faith, see S. Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, New York, The Guilford Press, 1995 and W. Steding, *Presidential Faith and Foreign Policy: Jimmy Carter the Disciple and Ronald Reagan the Alchemist*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. For a closer look at the advocacy efforts in defence of human rights and religious freedom carried out by churches globally, in addition to the work by McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has no Borders*, see the thorough study by L.F. Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and US Foreign Relations*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2020.

[66] Exemplary of this trend are the studies by D. Haslam, *Faith in Struggle: The Protestant Churches in Nicaragua and their Response to the Revolution*, London, Epworth Press, 1987, and M. Dodson and L. Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Along the same lines, see T. Bamat, *Salvación o dominación? Las sectas religiosas en el Ecuador*, Quito, Editorial El Conejo, 1986.

The first of these salvoes came from the Instituto de Estudios Politicos para America Latina y Africa in Madrid, a recently-closed research centre that, at the time, boasted a direct intellectual affiliation with the thought of Illich and Freire. Aimed at investigating the "matriz imperial" of the United States' strategy of eroding the cultural and educational heritage of Latin America, a study by Ana María Ezcurra directly attacked the Institute of Religion and Democracy (Ird) in Washington, a conservative think-tank that – since 1981 – has acted as a clearinghouse for contact between US intelligence and the evangelical churches in Nicaragua, as well as a megaphone for anti-Sandinista propaganda among the country's indigenous organizations[67].

The North American Congress on Latin America – active since 1967 – published a report in 1984 that was equally explicit in its accusations, denouncing the underdevelopment and social problems that were holding South America back. In this case, the finger was pointed at development programs promoted by the Central American Mission – founded in Mexico at the end of the 19th century by a dispensationalist preacher from Dallas, Texas, that, over time had become a veritable anti-Marxist propaganda machine in the region – as well as against Christian organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ – which with a global budget of 90 million dollars, did its best to keep South American youth and students away from political and social commitment[68]. In short, it was an international barrage of information that responded to the official reports provided to the American public by the State Department[69]. It covered, at the same

[67] A.M. Ezcurra, *La ofensiva neoconservadora: Las iglesias de USA. y la lucha ideológica hacia América Latina*, Madrid, Iepala, 1982. In another study (*The Vatican and the Reagan Administration*, New York, Circus Publications, 1986), Ezcurra argued that the IRD had cleverly exploited the conflict between the Sandinistas and the indigenous Miskitus, seeing it as an excellent opportunity to weaken the Sandinista junta, especially in the eyes of the churches that supported it, and had developed very close relations with the leaders of Misurasata, one of the indigenous organizations most adamant in opposing the Sandinistas' agrarian and cultural policies.

[68] E. Dominguez and D. Huntington, *The Salvation Brokers: Conservative Evangelicals in Central America*, in «Nacla Report on the Americas», 18, 1, 1984, pp. 2-36.

[69] For example, Departments of State and Defense, *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America*, Washington, DC, June 1986, or Department of State, *Human Rights in Nicaragua Under the Sandinistas: From Revolution to Repression*, Washington, DC, 1987. H. Belli, *Breaking Faith: The Sandinista Revolution and Its Impact on Freedom and the Christian Faith in Nicaragua*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books for the Puebla

time, the advance of an anti-imperialist opinion movement mobilized by local periodicals and press outlets[70].

Meanwhile, still in the field, there were those who reached similar conclusions, but from work in anthropological research. One of these was the American David Stoll, who worked in Guatemala on a close study of the work of the Instituto Linguistico de Verano, a controversial organization founded in Mexico fifty years earlier by the Central American Mission missionary William Cameron Townsend for the evangelization of Amerindian populations that had been transformed into a recruitment agency for native peoples willing (but mostly forced) to join the paramilitary groups armed by General and fervent Pentecostal Efraín Ríos Montt to carry out a scorched earth campaign against the leftist guerrilla opposition[71]. Another was the Argentinian Blanca Muratorio, also an anthropologist with a European academic background, who, during roughly the same years, was engaged in field studies of the pastoral laboratory that the Diocese of Riobamba had become. Riobamba, in the Ecuadorian region of Chimborazo, was guided by Leonidas Proaño, «Bishop of the Indians» and leading figure of that group of bishops (he, Manuel Larraín, and Helder Camára were all connected to Illich's centre in various ways) that, in the 1960s, had paved the way for a series of

Institute, 1985, denounces the Sandinistas' persecutory policies against the Christian churches. In a similar vein, other studies were also commissioned in North America by political bodies close to the Reagan administration such as the Ird mentioned above: K. Ptacek, *Nicaragua: A Revolution Against the Church?*, Washington, DC, Institute for Religion and Democracy, 1981 and C. Mullay and R. Barry, *The Barren Fig Tree: A Christian Reappraisal of the Sandinista Revolution*, Washington, DC, Institute for Religion and Democracy, 1984.

[70] For the Catholic side, see E.T. Brett, *The US Catholic Press on Central America: From Cold War Anticommunism to Social Justice*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, while for the small but vociferous evangelical opposition to Reagan's policies, see D.R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. In post-conciliar Italy, the most advanced circles of Catholicism soon became interested in the Nicaraguan case also: M. De Giuseppe, *L'altra America. I cattolici italiani e l'America Latina: Da Medellín a Francesco*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2017, p. 181 ff.

[71] D. Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America*, London, Zed Press, 1982. On the civil war in Guatemala during the Ríos Montt years and the price paid by the already harassed indigenous communities, see Stoll's *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

continent-wide initiatives for the renewal of pastoral outreach[72]. In this most arid region of Ecuador, the system of haciendas had long survived the collapse of the Spanish Empire, and the chronic lack of priests had left the indigenous population abandoned to a feudal system of exploitation. Here the organization World Vision took root rather effortlessly. It was one of the largest religious Ngos in the United States that – from Korea, through equatorial Africa, to South America – disseminated successful humanitarian programs thanks to its network of contacts on Capitol Hill and its extraordinary ability to tap into economic resources from governmental agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development, and from the country's major corporate donors[73]. To its detractors, World Vision was a showcase of those rice-bowl Christians who profited from the material needs of the underprivileged in order to gain proselytes. It actually encountered some problems in the process of adapting to the Central American reality. In 1981, the Catholic organization Pax Christi publicly denounced it as a covert instrument of the CIA while similar accusations abounded in the international press thanks to reports and journalist investigations in Honduras, Guatemala, Haiti, and of course, Nicaragua[74].

It is a fact that, within two decades, the Chimborazo region had the highest Protestant presence in all of Ecuador, and the more World Vision and the Gospel Missionary Union took hold of the Quechua population, the more problems Bishop Proaño had to face with government authorities. However, Proaño acknowledged, when the agrarian reform opened the indigenous communities to Protestant missionaries, who had previously been kept on the margins of the hacienda system, the Catholic clergy had not reacted with any

[72] B. Muratorio, *Protestantism and Capitalism Revisited in the Rural Highlands of Ecuador*, in «The Journal of Peasant Studies», 8, 1, 1980, pp. 37-61 and Ead., *Protestantism, Ethnicity, and Class in Chimborazo*, in *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador*, ed. by N.E. Whitten, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1981, 506-534.

[73] The history of World Vision is recounted in D.P. King, *God's Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

[74] *Human Rights Reports of the Mission: Honduras, Salvadorian Refugees*, in «Pax Christi International», October 1981 and, regarding the press, F. Viviano, *CIA Church Group in Honduras*, in «The Guardian», 26 August 1981, p. 13; J. Stein, *CIA's 'Secret Army' Moves from Thailand to Bolivia*, in «Latin America Press», 21 December 1978, pp. 7-8. See also, Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, cit., p. 268.

hostility. Additionally, inspired by liberation theology, many of the future leaders of the association of indigenous evangelicals created in 1985 to divide the Movimiento de Chimborazo had been trained by the popular radio schools founded on his initiative in the 1960s[75]. It had been almost thirty years that he had been working to release the indigenous Ecuadoran population from poverty through a gradual process of conscientization and, less than two years after his retirement, Proaño had to recognize that, in the space of a very short time, a missionary machine oiled by US money had succeeded in penetrating the entire region. It built dozens of churches, fed villages, educated droves of indigenous children and, above all, divided the political consciousness of entire communities to help soften the impact on the ruling classes[76].

In Guatemala, ironically, it fell to Bishop Mario Enrique Ríos Montt – brother of the Pentecostal general who was governing the country with an iron fist while personally leading a campaign for a renewal of morality through Sunday sermons on state television – to publicly denounce the pincer movement closing in on Latin America from, on the one hand, Marxism (with liberation theology) and, on the other, capitalism (with the invasion of the Protestant sects) thanks to contributions from foreign powers[77]. Meanwhile, in Chiapas, the increasing number of violent episodes against the missionaries of the Instituto Linguistico de Verano – who had been tarred with the accusation of "cultural aggression" since 1980 – forced the government in Mexico City to call for their expulsion following the example set in Ecuador, Brazil, and Panama. In November 1984, Girolamo Prigione, the apostolic delegate who had been sent to re-establish diplomatic relations with Mexico as well as to encourage the conservative tendencies in the Mexican church *in loco*, expressed the

[75] L.E. Proaño Villalba, *Creo en el hombre y en la comunidad*, Otavalo, Gallocapitán, [2]1984, pp. 221-223.

[76] M. Belén Ávalos Torres, *Del discurso religioso al discurso reivindicativo: Teología de la liberación en la construcción del movimiento indígena de Chimborazo, años 1964-1984*, in *Protestantismo y Catolicismo Indígena desde una Perspectiva Antropológica*, ed. por J. Illicachi Guzñay, L. Garcés y R. Ramos, Riobamba, Ecuador, Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, 2018, pp. 21-60. A complete profile of Proaño can be found in the same collection, R. Arteño Ramos, *Evangelización y revolución: Leonidas Proaño*, pp. 175-218.

[77] M. Simons, *Latin America's New Gospel*, in «New York Times Magazine», 7 November 1982. See also, Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, cit., p. 34.

hope that, sooner or later, the Instituto would be banned from the entire continent[78].

Prigione's wish came close to fulfilment in full. By the end of the decade, the Instituto Linguistico's activities, in fact, were temporarily limited to Colombia and Peru, but the Mexican church wasted no time in equipping itself as best it could, facing the lit fuse that, a few years later, would ignite the revolutionary powder keg of the indigenist movement. In 1986, the bishops' conference called the apologist Flaviano Amatulli – who had long missionary experience among the Chinatecas communities of the department of Oaxaca and was the author of a sort of doctrinal handbook against uncontrolled sectarianism – to direct the department for the preservation of the faith[79]. This is why it seemed clear to Methol Ferré already in 1985 that the Latin American Catholic church had found the cure for its divided and polarized soul in its anti-Protestant roots, rife with rampant anti-imperialism.

6. *The End of the Blocs and the Limitations of a "Cold" Interpretation*

In the early 1990s, as the tide of ideological conflict receded, many scholars thought themselves on solid ground facing a dry and objective fact: that the Protestant upsurge of the past decades had profoundly altered Latin America's Christian physiognomy and that the rise of an age liberated from ideologies allowed – and to some extent imposed – the study of this phenomenon from a more scientific and detached perspective. This was not, however, like the situation of the

[78] T. Hartch, *Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, State Formation, and Indigenous Mexico, 1935-1985*, Tuscaloosa, AL, University of Alabama Press, 2006, pp. 168–175.

[79] F. Amatulli, *Diálogo Con Los Protestantes: Nueva Edición,* Veracruz, Mexico, Hidalgotitlán, ²1994 (the first edition is from 1983). Amatulli, who died in 2018, has recently caused more than a little embarrassment to the Mexican Church that – with the winds of intra-Christian relations having changed in Latin America as well – has been forced on several occasions to distance itself from the anti-ecumenical positions publicly expressed by the priest of Apulian origin in some articles that have also appeared online: F. Amatulli Valente, *¿Es posible el diálogo con las sectas?*, in «Aleteia», 20 May 2013, https://es.aleteia.org/2013/05/20/es-posible-el-dialogo-con-las-sectas/, and Ead., *Apologética y Ecumenismo: Dos caras de la misma moneda*, in «Aleteia», 4 August 2014, https://es.aleteia.org/2014/08/04/apologetica-y-ecumenismo-dos-caras-de-la-misma-moneda/.

1960s, when the illuminating rationality of secularization had precipitously decreed an eclipse of the sacred[80]. There was, therefore, haste to abandon any analysis of a historical-political kind in order to channel the research in the area into patterns of a predominantly social and socio-historical nature, which were considered more suitable to explaining how evangelicalism and Pentecostalism had slowly filled that anomie (the Durkheimian term most widely used in this kind of literature) produced by the rupture of traditional community ties in the continent's transition to an established free market economy.

It bears repeating that the keys to success of these new churches were their ability to be the leaven of a long-dormant modernization[81]; to adapt to the religious cosmologies of the indigenous peoples and to the needs of the urban entrepreneurial classes (spinning a message of salvation that was a consolation for the former and a consumer good for the latter[82]); to remedy the loss of the pillars that supported the traditional structures of agrarian society (replacing the *caciques* with miracle workers in white suits[83]); to repropose themselves as so-

[80] This is a theory that has been floated by a rich editorial current that includes – in addition to *Fire from Heaven*, the aforementioned study by Cox – G. Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du mond*, Paris, Seuil, 1991; J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994; P.L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1999; and J. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, London, Penguin Press, 2009.

[81] This is argued by the sociologist of religion Jean-Pierre Bastian in *The Metamorphosis of Latin American Protestant Groups: A Sociohistorical Perspective*, in «Latin American Research Review», 28, 2, 1993, pp. 33-61 and in *La Mutación Religiosa de América Latina: Para una sociología del cambio social en la modernidad periférica*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990. Along the same lines as Bastian, see D. Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990.

[82] R. Santana, *Campesinado indígena y desafío de la modernidad*, Quito, Caap, 1985. There are many scholars who insist that the spread of Pentecostalism coincides with the rise of the market economy and neoliberal ideology. Among these, see S. Coleman, *The Faith Movement: A Global Religious Culture?*, in «Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal», 3, 1, 2002, pp. 3-19, and J. Comaroff, *The Politics of Conviction: Faith on the Neo-Liberal Frontier*, in «Social Analysis», 53, 1, 2009, pp. 17-38.

[83] The topic was actually developed starting in the 1960s by a stream of studies in the sociology of religion that was still very doubtful about the modernizing force intrinsic to Latin American Protestantism. According to some, this is the source of the negative judgment that has long weighed on Pentecostal churches and their lack of capacity or propensity for class mobilization. The Chilean case, which presents

cial mediators in countries where recurring authoritarian tendencies wound up thinning the areas of popular participation[84]; and, finally to be enthusiastic in facing a religious supply that multiplied according to the rules of the market (with the consequent evolution of the pastor from televangelist to charismatic entrepreneur[85]).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the image of Latin American Protestantism as a bloc included rather wholesale in the sphere of anti-Marxist reaction has, over time, given way to a richer and more piecemeal representation. This more fragmented depiction gives due prominence to the individual national realities where, starting from the end of the 1980s, the transition towards representative democracy took place, albeit amidst oscillations and dangerous regressions (as in the Guatemala of Jorge Serrano or the Peru of Alberto Fujimori), thanks also to the contribution of non-Catholics[86].

In a picture that was becoming more and more complex, it was thus natural that there should be less and less room for what Stoll – the same man who, in the 1980s, had peppered his field research in Central America with denunciations of the religious conflict provoked by the United States' intervention in the region – dismissed as a "conspiracy theory," that is, a reading of the Protestant advance as purely a strategy of imperialist expansion[87]. He did so in a 1980 book destined to change the perspective of studies on South American Protestantism, given the proliferation, from that point on, of the manneristic habit of forcing the continent's religious dynamics into

an "autochthonous" Pentecostalism dating back to 1910, the year the Pentecostal Methodist Church was established, has been analysed from this perspective by C. Lalive d'Epinay, *El Refugio de las Masas: Estudio Sociologico del Protestantismo Chileno*, Santiago de Chile, Editorial del Pacifico, 1968. More attentive to enhancing the modernizing aspects of Protestant presence, from the same years, is E. Willems, *Followers of the New Faith: Cultural Change and the Rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile*, Nashville, TN, Vanderbilt University Press, 1967.

[84] D. Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World, Their Parish*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002.

[85] Regarding Brazil, and in particular the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus founded by Edir Macedo in 1977, see L. Silveira Campos, *Teatro, templo e mercado: Organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal*, Petrópolis-São Paulo, Vozes, Simpósio/Umesp, 1997. More generally, on the communicative strategy of neo-Pentecostalism, see E. Pace, *Il carisma come impresa*, in «Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni», 82, 1, 2016, pp. 72-86.

[86] Encapsulating and explaining everything very well, although limited to the early 2000s, see *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. by P. Freston, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

[87] Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, cit., in particular pp. 305-331.

historical schemas that were as suggestive as they were anachronistic – Reformation and Counter-Reformation, *translatio imperii* and various retaliations linked to the decline of a golden age[88] – and of reading liberation theology along the lines of an ideological movement tending to entangle the poor of South America in an experience of political redemption that, instead of liberation, led to violence, uprooting, and further oppression. It was thus no surprise – said the Franco-Brazilian philosopher and sociologist Michael Löwy, between bitterness and ostentatious detachment – that, from the Andean sierras to the urban slums, trying to escape hunger or the death squads that sowed terror in Ríos Montt's Guatemala[89], the marginalized of the continent were finding refuge in a form of Christianity that promised peace and salvation far from the ideological fray and the political struggle, even if it shortened individual and collective aspirations within the horizon of a Christian moralism made up of few and simple rules[90].

A mixture of historical evidence – which absolutely no one denied – and a return to anti-Protestantism, the "conspiracy theory" would thus have fulfilled its task of reuniting the Catholic Church in the face of the Protestant threat, moreover, relieving it from having to deal with its own faults on the political level and delays on the pastoral level. This interpretation can be considered correct in part, but it does not do justice to the complexity of that delicate moment in the history of Latin American Catholicism. That, in the eyes of the church, the so-called phenomenon of sects had reached the proportions of danger on a continental scale is seen in the number of times (thirteen) that the question was mentioned in worried tones

[88] While Stoll used Jedin's categories to try to explain the historical dynamic between liberation theology and conservative Pentecostalism, Martin, in *Tongues of Fire*, instead read the balances between the two continents in terms of an eternal struggle between Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon culture that had seen the decline of Spain's supremacy in Europe and that, with the rise of the United States' imperial star, had moved to the New World.

[89] A complete and historically informed reconstruction, enriched by field research dating back to the early 1980s, is provided by V. Garrard-Burnett in *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. A student of Stoll and a passionate scholar of Guatemala, Garrard-Burnett is also the author of *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem*, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1998.

[90] M. Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, London, Verso Books, 1996.

by Celam's third general assembly, held in Puebla in 1979[91]. And it is no mystery that in Latin America – with the exception of the pockets of resistance to the military dictatorships that, in many cases, still require historiographical efforts to break them apart from the testimony of survivors[92] – ecumenical dialogue has struggled to get off the ground, weighed down by recent trauma, an incapacity to embark upon the path of doctrinal debate, and reluctance to choose a common opposition to the process of secularization[93].

Not long ago, Jeffrey Gros, a leading voice in the ecumenical movement in the United States, pointed out that it had not escaped his notice that, of the sixteen documents of Vatican II, only three were not mentioned at Medellín in the assembly's acts, two of which were the declaration on religious freedom and *Unitatis Redintegratio*[94]. This is true, but it should be remembered that someone else had already shed light on the matter before him, demonstrating how that conference's ecumenical substance was contained in a liturgical act sufficient on its own to make the sacramental separation between Christians appear senseless: the intercommunion spontaneously requested by the eleven non-Catholic observers present at Medellín (a number that would never be so high in Celam's subsequent plenary sessions) and its concession by the assembly's leaders[95]. It should also be added that the 1986 study in which the Secretariats for Unity, for Non-Christians, and for Non-Believers denounced the challenge posed by fundamentalist "sects" in Latin America. Unafraid

[91] At the subsequent plenary of Santo Domingo in 1992 that number rose to 17. I am taking these numbers from the table of indices at the end of *Enchiridion: Documenti della Chiesa latinoamericana*, a cura di P. Vanzan, Bologna, Emi, 1995. The Official English Edition of the Documents of Puebla: *Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America: Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops: Conclusions*, Washington, DC, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979.

[92] For an overview of the Southern Cone countries, see V. Straßner and S. Ruderer, *Ecumenism under the Military Dictatorships of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay: A Comparative Study*, in *A History of the Desire*, cit., vol. III, *Dialogues and Experiences*, forthcoming.

[93] M. do Nascimento Cunha, *Navigating the Ecumenical Waters: A Latin American Perspective*, in «The Ecumenical Review», 65, 2013, pp. 203-204.

[94] The third is *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, the decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches. J. Gros, *Struggle and Reconciliation: Reflections on Ecumenism in Chile*, in «International Review of Mission», 97, 384, 2008, pp. 53-54.

[95] O.J. Beozzo, *Medellín: Inspiration et racines*, in *Volti di fine Concilio: Studi di storia e teologia sulla conclusione del Vaticano II*, a cura di J. Doré e A. Melloni, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000, pp. 361-394.

of touching a raw nerve in relations with Washington[96], it declared that «powerful ideological forces, as well as economic and political interests, are at work through the sects, which are totally foreign to a genuine concern for the "human"»[97].

Having said this and made the necessary clarifications, it remains difficult, however, to agree with those who would make the anti-imperialist and anti-Protestant posture assumed by Latin American Catholicism on the crest of the Cold War the umpteenth proof of that supposed «genetic continuity between "intransigent" and "liberationist" Catholicism» reproposed by Jean Meyer at the beginning of the 2000s: the same integralist spirit, the same aversion to liberalism, but interpreted according to a revolutionary vision of history and political processes[98].

Behind a positioning that seemed to align the different souls of the church against the advance of the "sects" and the international network that supported them, there were, in fact, very different assessments of what the nature of this threat was and, above all, of what reform interventions were necessary to both contain it and, at the same time, heal the vulnerability of Catholicism in the face of a capitalism that was conquering the soul and destiny of the continent. When the time came at Puebla to translate this transversal anti-sectarian sentiment into concrete pastoral strategies, the difference emerged sharper than ever. That conference, however, was only the

[96] Historians and journalists have often spoken of a «Holy Alliance», but tensions and differences between Reagan and the Vatican on nuclear policy (and also, by the way, on what was happening in Central America) have recently emerged from the archives of the first US ambassador accredited to the Vatican, William Wilson, and the National Security Council, studied in depth by M. Gayte in *Les États-Unis et le Vatican dans les années 1980: Au-delà de la "sainte alliance"*, in «Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire», 111, 3, 2011, pp. 105-117; Ead., *Complot contre les évêques? La réaction de Washington et du Saint-Siège à The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response (1981-1983)*, in «Revue française d'études américaines», 126, 4, 2010, pp. 92-111; and Ead., *Quand les cardinaux font de la politique: Les relations entre les cardinaux américains et Washington pendant les présidences de Ronald Reagan et George H.W. Bush (1981-1993)*, in *Les cardinaux entre Cour et Curie: Une élite romaine (1775-2015)*, éd. par F. Jankowiak et L. Pettinaroli, Rome, École Française de Rome, 2017, pp. 96-108.

[97] Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Secretariat for Non-Christians, Secretariat for Non-Believers, and the Pontifical Council for Culture, *Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Challenge (3 May 1986)*, in «L'Osservatore Romano», English edition, 19 May 1986, pp. 5-8.

[98] Meyer, *Oscar Romero*, cit., p. 33.

act that set up a confrontation between Rome and liberation theology that continued with increasing intensity over the next decade[99].

In reaction to fears of an irreversible "Colombisation of Celam" that was already in progress thanks to the leadership of Archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo, a plan prevailed that strengthened the ecclesial anchorage of Latin American Catholicism so that it would not end up carried away by Marxist movements. Meanwhile, those who held that the strategy of transplanting fundamentalist churches in order to divide and weaken Catholicism should be answered by relaunching a message of liberation (collective and not individual!) from the structural sin of exploitation and violence against the poor. They were opposed by those whose only urgency was to defend the perimeters of a confessional majority that had resisted the dominant culture by clinging to the «truth of God about humanity and the world»[100].

At its root, the pretence of a rejection of Christian diversity behind which the Latin American church simulated a unity that existed only in the eyes of those hoping to see it was an image that had been shattered by contrasting visions and paths, not the composed pose of a family photo. This distinction was very clear to those like Enrique Dussel who had programmatically chosen not to pursue the chimera of a narrative devoid of impartiality. In his *The Church in Latin America*, a multi-voiced history destined to play a significant role in the panorama of studies in Latin American Christianity, he called to account a Church of Rome too busy striking blows against liberation theology to expeditiously realize who – behind the curtain of anti-communism drawn by the media – was working to divide it and, in the long run, contend with it for control of the masses[101]. It is

[99] S. Scatena, *La teologia della liberazione in America Latina*, Roma, Carocci, 2008, and G. Miccoli, *In difesa della fede: La Chiesa di Giovanni Paolo II e Benedetto XVI*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2007, in particular pp. 31-70.

[100] John Paul II, *Opening Address at Puebla*, in *Evangelization at Present*, cit., I.1. Against what they defined as «selective memory», they interpreted Puebla as essentially in continuity with Medellín's innovative impetus: B. Bravo Rubio e M.A. Pérez Iturbe, *Al bivio: La III Conferenza dell'episcopato latinoamericano (Celam, Puebla 1979)*, in *Da Puebla ad Aparecida: Chiesa e società in America Latina (1979-2007)*, a cura di M. De Giuseppe e G. La Bella, Roma, Carocci, 2019, pp. 41-58.

[101] E. Dussel, *From the Second Vatican Council to the Present Day*, in *The Church in Latin America. 1492-1992*, ed. by E. Dussel, Tunbridge Wells, UK-Maryknoll, NY, Burns and Oates-Orbis Books, 1992, pp. 153-182. On the thread that connects the contributions in this work, see L. Ceci, *Una storia della Chiesa latinoamericana*, in

a sign that, not necessarily at the price of an auto-da-fé or ideological abjuration as premises to methodological rigor, historical analysis can again say something relevant about the relationship between Christians in Latin America in the final, perhaps hardest, throes of the Cold War.

«Studi Storici», 34, 1, 1993, pp. 219-237. In 1973, Dussel founded the Comision Ecumenica de los Estudios de Historia de la Iglesia en America Latina (Cehila) that, under his leadership, between 1977 and 1994 published the *Historia general de la Iglesia en América latina* (9 vols.).