

The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala

By Timothy J. Steigenga. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001. 220p.

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The Politics of the Spirit is Timothy Steigenga's long-awaited quantitative study of religious affiliation and political behavior in Central America. What he has done in this spare and conscientious study is to take to task the "conventional wisdom" about Protestantism in Central America. This is a formidable endeavor, given the flood of scholarly literature that has been produced by anthropologists, historians, and sociologists about Protestantism, and especially Pentecostalism, in Latin America over the past two decades. Because Pentecostalism seemed to emerge in Central America during the region's political crisis of the late twentieth century, much of this literature carried with it a highly deterministic subtext, defined by Max Weber and by models of political behavior borrowed from the United States and European experiences.

In general, much of the existing work on political behavior and religious affiliation in Latin America and in Central America in particular has been idiosyncratic, anecdotal, intuitive (if often based on sound intuition), and contradictory. In this study, Steigenga takes the central but fuzzy precepts laid out by this earlier work and tests them in two cases, Guatemala and Costa Rica. His findings, based on surveys, interviews, and statistical analysis are so surprising and so persuasive that they force us to reconsider whether our conventions on this topic contained any wisdom at all.

There are two overarching hypotheses that drive this study. The first is that in Central America, Protestants (whom Steigenga differentiates throughout as Mainstream Protestants, Pentecostals, and Sects—a potentially problematic term that he uses to refer to such groups as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Adventists) make up a political monolith, whose theological conservatism and religious affiliation translates into political quiescence at best and blind obedience to oppressive governments at worst. This hypothesis lies at the heart of Steigenga's study of Guatemala, where repressive government, 36 years of civil war, and a virulent counterinsurgency led briefly by the Pentecostal general, Efraín Ríos Montt, would seem to offer a transparent example of the confluence of evangelical religious affiliation and political conservatism. Costa Rica, by contrast, which has a smaller Protestant population but a long-standing democratic tradition, would have seemed to offer a test case of whether Central American Protestants are more likely to be political and progressive in a more open society. The second operative hypothesis for this study is the Weberian equation of Protestantism and capitalism, recently updated by Amy Sherman, who argues in her 1997 work on Guatemala (*The Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Guatemala*) that Protestants can be shown to have adopted new patterns of thinking, which are demonstrably conducive to socioeconomic advancement that also enhances the development of democracy.

In his careful analysis, Steigenga unpacks these hypotheses element by element. His overall conclusion is that evangelicals, taken as a group (something he wisely advises us not to do), do indeed have a strong tendency to respect political authority, but that respect is present regardless of a given government's political context. In a

series of surveys, which examine religious conservatism, political conservatism, and political affiliation, Steigenga is not able to identify any single pattern to support the notion that religious affiliation is the determinant of conservative political behavior in Central America, in either Guatemala or Costa Rica. What he does find, however, is that certain types of religious behavior (as opposed to affiliation) can drive political behavior.

In addition, he finds no evidence of the prosperity-enhancing behaviors described by Sherman (except among Guatemalan Neopentecostals, for whom material prosperity is theologically mandated). What Steigenga finds instead is what he describes as a "change in perception of economic status" [emphasis mine] (p. 42). While Protestants are not distinguishable from Catholics by any quantifiable economic measure, Protestants nonetheless typically perceive a causal relationship between religious affiliation and economic advancement, thus giving some credence to Anthony Gill ("The Economics of Evangelization," in Paul Sigmund, ed., *Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America*, 1999) and others who advocate the rational economic model for religious change in Latin America.

For this reviewer, however, the real treasures in this little jewel box of a book are the secondary findings. Because Steigenga conducted his research among Catholics as well as Protestants, some unexpected congruencies emerge. Perhaps the most important of these is that in Guatemala, 50% of Mainstream (non-Pentecostal) Protestants and many Catholics perceive that they have experienced glossolalia (speaking in tongues), the defining experience of Pentecostalism, or some other miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The most common of these was miraculous healing, an event that no less than 71% of Guatemala Catholics report having experienced (pp. 45, 82). This revelation leads Steigenga to the conclusion that religion of all kinds is becoming "Pentecostalized" in Guatemala, as it is to a lesser extent in Costa Rica (p. 46).

This Pentecostalization of religion has serious implications for the development of civil society, the author suggests, because while he finds no consistent template for voting, political affiliation, or political participation across the lines of religious affiliation, he does identify clearly definable patterns across the spectrum of religious behavior, specifically in the area of charismatic behavior. The surprising evidence here suggests that charismatic religious experience, regardless of whether it is in a Pentecostal, Mainstream Protestant, or Catholic context, is a significant predictor of political variables in both Guatemala and Costa Rica. In Steigenga's words, "the experience of speaking in tongues appears to be associated with higher levels of political quiescence" (p. 93). The reason for this is not entirely clear, although he indicates that it may have to do with the inward focus of charismatic behavior, which is likely to negatively impact voluntarism or involvement in political or other nonreligious social movements. But in these matters, denominational lines blur, for, as Steigenga notes, "charismatic Protestants may have more in common politically with charismatic Catholics than they do with other Protestants" (p. 93).

Another unexpected finding in this study is the apparent relationship between Protestant biblical literalism and the empowerment of women. Although gender was tangential to the larger concerns of this book, Steigenga surveyed respondents on their views of women's participation in the domestic and public spheres as a variable in his surveys on theological conservatism. While the work of Elizabeth Brusco (*The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia*, 1995) and others has suggested a causal relationship between women's membership in evangelical churches and the "reformation of machismo," the conventional wisdom heretofore was that Latin evangelical women nonetheless model themselves after the subservient "virtuous woman," the ideal type for many North American fundamentalists. In this study, Steigenga discovered an entirely different set of attitudes, based not only on behavior, but upon theology: Both

doctrinally conservative Protestant and Catholics were likely to see gender equity, not subservience, as an ideal type. In the too-short chapter he devotes to gender, the author concludes that "measures of doctrinal orthodoxy are excellent predictors of positive attitudes toward gender equity across religious groups and across genders" (p. 132).

Clearly, Steigenga's work leads us to the juncture of important future studies. Its provocative and meticulous conclusions, laid out cleanly without rhetorical flourishes or over-reaching analysis, suggests exciting new venues for research in ecumenical political behavior, gender analysis, and religious behavior in civil society. There may be scholars in the field who will disagree with his conclusions but who will also find it impossible to ignore them.