

Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 35, No.4 (2003), pp. 886-888

Timothy J. Steigenga, *The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), pp. xviii+201.

Manuel A. Vásquez, University of Florida

Scholarship on Protestantism in Latin America has come a long way. Increasingly subtle studies of the complex and contradictory ways in which religion interacts with politics at the national and local levels have replaced sweeping generalisations about evangelical Christianity's latent capacity to usher in a democratic political culture in Latin America (David Martin, *Tongues of Fire : The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, 1990)) or about the presumed role of Pentecostalism in reaffirming patriarchal and corporatist arrangements destabilised by late modernity (Jean-Pierre Bastian, 'The Metamorphosis of Latin American Protestant Groups: A Sociohistorical Perspective.' *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1993), pp. 33–62).

In *The Politics of the Spirit*, Timothy Steigenga, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University, uses a judicious mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques to test specific hypotheses about the relation between what he calls 'Pentecostalized' religion – a pneumatic Christianity which stresses doctrinal orthodoxy, millennialism and judgmental images of God – and politics in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Drawing from personal interviews with Protestant and Catholic leaders and lay people as well as from extant ethnographic studies of local religion, Steigenga elaborates a survey instrument to answer three sets of questions. First, he asks, how does religious affiliation correlate with political orientation and action? The dominant hypothesis has been that membership in Pentecostal churches is closely related to political conservatism. Second, are there other religious variables beyond affiliation, such as theologies, and religious experiences and intensity, which affect political dispositions? Here Steigenga hypothesises that adherence to orthodox and charismatic Christianity may correlate with strong political partisanship. Finally, Steigenga asks about the impact that different political and social contexts have on the relation between religious and political variables : how do the level and direction of political engagement among evangelicals in Costa Rica, with a relatively high degree of democratic openness, compare with the situation in Guatemala, a 'political context that discourages overt political participation' (p. 6) ? Presumably, one would expect a greater probability of political conservatism and quiescence among Pentecostalized Christians in Guatemala. Steigenga also analyses the differential impact of rural and urban settings as well as the role of religious conflict and polarisation on political activity.

In answering these questions, Steigenga adds considerable subtlety to the field of religion and politics, rendering problematic the claim that there is a direct causal link between evangelicalism and democracy/development, either positive or negative. For instance, while he found that 'evangelicals are more likely than Catholics or the

non-affiliated to find certain political activities (such as working for a political party, criticizing public officials, and running for office) morally incorrect.’ His data show that ‘in terms of voting- differences between Protestants and Catholics were not significant, with Pentecostals actually voting slightly more frequently in Costa Rica. Protestant attitude about the morality of voting were also slightly more positive than those of Catholics ’ (p. 141). Moreover, ‘Pentecostals and Mainstream Protestants in Costa Rica and Guatemala held political views about women and the poor that were not significantly different from Catholics. Differences in party affiliation, ideological position, and approval of political figures and organization were minimal as well ’ (p. 142). Thus, Steigenga argues that people do not derive political orientations directly from religious affiliations. Rather, ‘Pentecostalized religious beliefs and practices such as millennialism and the charismatic act of speaking in tongue [which is now widespread among Christian churches] [are] better predictors of political quiescence across religious affiliations’ (ibid.). In other words, to the extent that we can establish a correlation, it is between ‘charismaticism’ and doctrinal orthodoxy, on the one hand, and political quiescence and conservatism (from example, the unwillingness to challenge political authority), on the other. Yet, even charismaticism does not automatically translate into retreat from politics, as in Costa Rica, where the more a open, democratic opportunity structure allows political participation for all sectors of society, including evangelicals.

In showing how the link between religion and politics is mediated by multiple factors, *The Politics of Spirit* makes a valuable contribution. The impact of evangelical Christianity is limited but still significant. Evangelicals in Central America tend to focus narrowly on the act of voting, associating more intense political involvement with a ‘ fanaticism’ that stands in the way of true faith (p. 148). Nevertheless, behind this electoral emphasis, evangelical Christianity is contributing to democracy at the micro level, strengthening civil society by ‘encouraging volunteerism, self-help, and strong ethic before the law’ (p. 149). The extent of this grassroots contribution, however, will again depend on religious context and the type of polity. In other words, there is no ‘ single political trajectory among evangelicals and charismatic Catholics ’ in Central America.

The call for social scientists to move beyond a focus on overt religious behavior, such as church affiliation and attendance, and to take the determinative power of religious ideas and practices seriously is not new. Steigenga, nonetheless, offers groundbreaking techniques for measuring this power. The strategy of generating ‘indexes’ of theological conservatism and religious experience and intensity and of correlating them with patterns of political thought and action is very promising. However, as Steigenga himself acknowledges, these indexical clusters will have to be disaggregated and refined, while keeping in mind that they are necessarily fallible and heuristic devices to measure salient aspects of religious life. For one thing, many Pentecostals place a premium on religious experience and intensity while drastically downplaying doctrinal orthodoxy. Thus, it only makes sense to talk about ‘Pentecostalized religion’ as an ideal typical construct, which highlights some socioreligious

dynamics in order to test specific hypotheses. In striving to identify comparative patterns of politico-religious practice, we need to keep in mind that evangelical Christianity in Latin America shows high variation and fluidity at level of religious thought, action and organisation.