

Social Forces, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Mar., 2003), pp. 1058-1059

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

By Timothy J. Steigenga. Lexington Books, 2001. 202 pp.
David Stoll, Middlebury College

Do Latin American evangelicals tend to be submissive to authoritarian regimes and politically reactionary? This is the widely held assumption that Tim Steigenga tested in a worst-case situation - Guatemala - and a best-case one - Costa Rica - with 780 interviews weighted toward evangelicals, especially the pentecostals, who dominate the Protestant spectrum in Latin America. Because Costa Rica is more peaceful and democratic than Guatemala, Steigenga expected Costa Rican evangelicals to be more active than Guatemalans, for whom evangelical churches presumably function as an apolitical haven from political violence. The Costa Rican sample indeed turned out to be more involved in politics than the Guatemalan sample, but the difference between the two was greater for Catholics than evangelicals. This was not Steigenga's only counterintuitive finding: a majority of Catholics said they shared some of the basic religious experiences of evangelicals, including being tempted by the devil, being miraculously healed, and undergoing personal conversion.

True to stereotype, evangelicals were more likely to reject certain political activities such as working for a political party, criticizing public officials, and running for public office. But they approved of voting at a higher rate than Catholics, suggesting that the oft-quoted Romans 13:1 - obey the government, because God has put it over you - may be a rejection of uncivil partisanship rather than civic responsibility. When Steigenga used multivariate analysis, Catholic/Protestant affiliation dropped out as a predictor of political conservatism. So did theological conservatism. What turned out to predict political conservatism were "pentecostalized" beliefs such as millennialism and speaking in tongues, which do not characterize all evangelicals and extend as phenomena into the Catholic population.

One reason Latin American evangelicals have a rightwing reputation is that many of their leaders have been influenced by the U.S. religious right. Yet Bible-thumping means very different things in Anglo and Latino contexts. Within the Protestant tradition it is a reaction to modernity. But within the Catholic tradition, it is a reaction against a hierarchical religious establishment, giving it egalitarian implications. Another of Steigenga's findings is that doctrinal conservatives (e.g., salvation only through Christ) tend to agree both that the poor lack the ambition to get ahead and that women should have equal rights with men.

Visionaries believe that born-again Protestantism is revitalizing civil society and democratizing capitalism in Latin America. Recently Amy Sherman has made this argument in a book called *Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Central America*

(Oxford University Press, 1997). Steigenga found that evangelical religion is indeed perceived as a path to material improvement but found not much evidence that it actually functions this way. Except for the neopentecostal subgroup, which scored higher on education, there were no significant differences in socioeconomic indicators between religious affiliations. In fact, religious orthodoxy (e.g., biblical literalism) was actually associated with lower socioeconomic status.

"Broad claims about political outcomes based on religious affiliation in Central America are generally misguided," Steigenga concludes. "The differences between Protestants and other religious groups are not nearly as significant as has often been assumed. While there is some correlation between Pentecostalism and political quiescence, this is better explained through an examination of religious beliefs and practices that cross denominational lines. ... Protestants and Catholics who experience... the 'pentecostalization' of their religious world are the most likely to display the politically quiescent or conservative tendencies that have been associated with evangelicals in general." That pentecostals are the fastest-growing religious constituency in Latin America guarantees that this is a debate that will continue, and Steigenga's survey research is a valuable contribution to it.