



CALVIN'S INFLUENCE IN LATIN AMERICA: A SCATTERED INHERITANCE

A INFLUÊNCIA DE CALVINO NA AMÉRICA LATINA: UMA HERANÇA FRAGMENTADA

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an introduction to a research of the reception of John Calvin's theology in Latin America. The main questions that will guide this research are: how John Calvin's theology is understood in Latin America? What is the importance of this theology to Latin American context?

KEYWORDS

Latin America; John Calvin; Protestant Reformation; Latin American Protestantism.

RESUMO

Este artigo é uma introdução a uma pesquisa quanto à recepção da teologia de João Calvino na América Latina. As principais questões que orientarão esta pesquisa são: como a teologia de João Calvino é entendida na América Latina? Qual a importância desta teologia no contexto latino-americano?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

América Latina; João Calvino; Reforma Protestante; Protestantismo latino-americano.

I am currently researching the dissemination and reception of John Calvin's theology in Latin America. However, documenting the reception history and cultural influence of Calvin's theological corpus in Latin America is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the finished picture looks like, all the while unaware that several key pieces are missing. For example, while John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 edition) were translated into Spanish as early as 1597¹, most recent Spanish-language studies on Calvin cite either the English translation of Calvin's commentaries or the original Latin texts, which suggests that the non-specialist and/or lay person in Latin America has had limited access to the theology of John Calvin. Still, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about Calvin – or at least Calvinism – in Latin America by analyzing Protestantism's transformative role in the broader culture. There is some consensus among Latin American missiologists and church historians that Latin America never received an unmediated “Calvinist” interpretation of Christianity. Nonetheless, historian Florencio Galindo (1992, p. 7) argues that the evangelical/mainstream form of Protestantism exported to Latin America and the Caribbean was greatly influenced by a Calvinist ethos, which, while not necessarily identifiable with any one confessional tradition, nonetheless filters through most forms of contemporary Protestantism. There is, without question, a Calvinist presence in Latin America. Just how influential John Calvin himself has been on the formation of Latin American Protestantism remains an open question.

Until recently, Protestantism has not garnered serious historical analysis in Latin America, with most studies demonstrating either a Roman Catholic bias dismissive of Protestant sects as religious heterodoxy or reflecting the confessional interests of a specific Protestant group. Sociologist Jean-Pierre Bastian (1992, p. 313) suggests analyzing Latin-American Protestantism “from the angle of social political history, and in so doing to stress appropriately the actual part which Protestants

¹ By Cipriano de Valera, best known for the revised edition of Casiodoro de Reyna's Spanish translation of the Bible (1602).

played in specific political and social events”. This investigation embraces Bastian’s methodological direction by exploring Calvinism’s role in the development of the modern democratic state in Latin America in order to gain a tangible measure for evaluating Calvin’s influence on Latin American religion and culture (PORRAS, 1987, p. 149-157; MONDRAGÓN, 1999, p. 143-169; 1998, p. 179, 205). Providing a very brief introduction to a very broad and complex social phenomenon – the explosion of Protestantism in Latin America over the last thirty years – I seek to demonstrate how the specifically religious goals of Protestant evangelism have contributed to and nurtured the development of democratic values in Latin American culture.

Protestantism did not come to exceed 1% of the Latin American population until the 1940s and 1950s. Nonetheless, Protestantism has been a force for cultural change in Latin America, even if only as a marginalized minority population, since the earliest period of conquest and colonization (BASTIAN, 1990). While John Calvin and other church leaders in Geneva generally focused their evangelical efforts close to home – establishing churches in the rural environs near Geneva and supporting the persecuted Protestant churches in France and, to a lesser extent, the rest of Europe – in the 1550s Calvin also lent his support to the establishment of a French Huguenot colony in the New World. For a period of about five years (until the colony failed) the ministry of Word and sacrament was regularly celebrated in Brazil according to the Genevan rite in a region dominated by Catholic conquest. Then in the early seventeenth century the Calvinist/Reformed presence in Latin America was limited to the Dutch colony of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil, a community distinguished by its religious tolerance of Judaism and Catholicism, in marked contrast to Portuguese-Spanish Catholic intolerance that labeled Protestantism as heretical and enforced ideological and political homogeneity by means of the Inquisition (BASTIAN, 1990, p. 314-315). It wasn’t until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that North American and European missionary efforts established a permanent Reformed presence in Latin America, primarily in the English-speaking Caribbean, but also in Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Guatemala,

and several other countries (BAUSWEIN; VISCHER, 1999, p. 12-19). Still, we must resist the temptation to view Latin American Protestantism solely as the product of foreign missionary efforts. Protestant ideals arrived in Latin America long before the established Protestant churches and, while it is impossible to generalize a single path of Protestant development, a country-by-country survey of Protestantism reveals a gradual diffusion of Protestant ideas that provided fertile ground for later missionary efforts (MONDRAGÓN, 2005).

The Protestant Reformation in Europe and the Iberian conquest of Latin America were contemporaneous events. While Spain became the symbol of the Catholic Reformation in Europe, the New World became the laboratory for the systematic eradication of the Protestant heresy as the Portuguese-Spanish colonial territories established socio-political dominance through the marriage of church and state. In Spain the Inquisition sought to eradicate the “Lutheran” heresy (1520-1570), a policy exported to the New World with the establishment of Inquisitorial tribunals in Peru (1568) and Mexico (1571) that lasted until Latin American independence in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, Protestantism was viewed as both heretical and politically subversive – for Protestantism was the religion of England and the Netherlands, Spain’s maritime enemies, and the colonial governments feared supporters of independence might also adopt it. Accordingly, one method of evaluating the presence and influence of Protestantism during the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule is by analyzing the work of the Inquisition in the New World. The relatively few inquisitorial cases suggest there was minimal Protestant intrusion into the political and religious hegemony of Catholic New Spain (BÁEZ-CAMARGO, 1960)². However, these cases tended to target foreign nationals who were just as likely to stand out and be targeted for differences in language and appearance as they were for their heretical beliefs or criticisms against the Catholic Church. In other words, limiting our study to the documented heresy trials does not

² The author identifies 305 documented Inquisition tribunals during the three-hundred years of Spanish colonial rule and another 58 charged but not tried for sympathizing with the “Lutheran” heresy.

account for the possibility of native-born underground Protestant movements, a possibility addressed in the Inquisition's published guidelines for identifying potential adherents of the "Lutheran" heresy (BÁEZ-CAMARGO, 1960, p. 7)³.

Another source for evaluating and quantifying the presence of Protestantism during the years of colonial rule comes from analyzing prosecutions for the possession, sale, and/or distribution of prohibited books. Not only had many of Martin Luther's works already been translated into Spanish as early as 1520 (one year prior to his excommunication), the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America prohibited the reading or dissemination of unauthorized Spanish translations of the Bible. In fact, possession of a Bible – even an authorized Catholic version – could lead to an Inquisitorial investigation since, in the opinion of many clergy, an ignorant populace might stray from official orthodoxy by reading the Scriptures without the proper interpretation. Bernardino de Sahagún, a prominent Franciscan, was of the opinion that "no book of Sacred Scripture, not a single chapter nor any part thereof, translated into the vulgar tongue, should be possessed by any except the [authorized] preachers in that language" (CASTILLO, 1982, p. 82)⁴. In 1559, five years before the official publication of the papal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, an index of prohibited texts first appeared in Spain. These lists banned translations of the Bible as well as books from heretics like Luther and Calvin, and were used in Latin America by both the Inquisition and the governing authorities (who were responsible for inspecting trade vessels arriving in the New World). Yet, in spite of strict controls, heterodox literature entered the colony with ease as the commercial book trade in sixteenth-century Latin America remained international and cosmopolitan in character in great part because of a thriving black market from Europe and North America. In fact, Protestant

³ The author cites the relevant section of "El Edicto de Fe" entitled "Secta de Lutero" providing criteria for identifying heretics. Throughout the literature of the period, the term "luterano" (Lutheran) includes all Protestant heretical groups.

⁴ My own translation: "[Q]ue ningún libro de los de la Sagrada Escritura, ni parte de él, ni capítulo ni parte de él traducido en la lengua vulgar, lo tenga otro ninguno que los predicadores de esta lengua".

“propaganda” was not limited to the European Reformation as North American Calvinism, specifically the work of Cotton Mather (1663-1728), was disseminated in Latin America. According to historian Cristina Camacho (2000, p. 52), Mather’s Spanish-language catechism, *La fe del cristianismo*, is the first North American Protestant text written specifically for the promotion of Protestantism in the Latin American colonies. Furthermore, prohibited literature was not limited to the Protestant heresy, as the climate of repression fostered by the Inquisition – especially fearful of the secularizing forces of modern political liberalism – sought to limit the free exchange of ideas (PEÑA, 2000; CASANOVA, 1986).

Eventually the independence revolutions in Latin America (1808-1826) fostered a move toward modernization and secularization, and with the exception of Brazil, the new nation states adopted republican constitutions. However, these new constitutions were influenced more by the liberal Spanish constitution of Cadiz (1812) than the more radical French and U.S. constitutions. Naturally, the greatest challenge for these new republics proved reconciling Catholicism with liberal modernism. While the end of colonial rule also marked the end of the Inquisition in the New World, the spread of Protestantism in Latin America still depended upon the growth of political liberalism to promote religious tolerance and eventually allow for a more permanent Protestant presence in what were still constitutionally Catholic nations. For example, the trade agreements between Latin American countries and Protestant countries like Great Britain and the United States often hinged upon clauses authorizing Protestant foreign nationals the right to worship and build churches. For example, the first draft of the Anglo-Mexican Treaty of 1825 denied religious tolerance to British subjects since the Mexican president, Guadalupe Victoria, felt such a provision violated the Mexican constitution (BASTIAN, 1992, p. 320). According to Bastian (1992, p. 325), it is essential to understand the organic relationship between nascent Protestant groups and radical liberalism “which promoted democratic and secularizing political models, if we are to distinguish the indigenous from the imported aspects of Latin American Protestantism”.

Countering the thesis that Protestant missions were little more than religious justification for United States colonial activity, Bastian argues that when United States imperialism expanded into Latin America after 1860, Protestantism had already been a stable presence for more than two decades. Therefore,

The *raison d'être* of Protestant societies in Latin America during these decades had less to do with “North American imperialism” than with the internal political and social struggles in the continent, which can be summed up as the confrontation between an authoritarian political culture and those minorities that desired a bourgeois modernity grounded in the individual redeemed from his/her caste origin and based on the equality of a participatory and representative democracy (BASTIAN, 1990, p. 187)⁵.

José Míguez Bonino (1997, p. 4), while accepting Bastian's hypothesis that the rise of Protestantism as a political and cultural force in Latin America was primarily due to internal factors (namely, the popular yearning for political liberalization), warns that this marriage of convenience between North American missionaries (with their conservative and pietistic spirituality) and Latin American liberal intellectuals (with a more secularist orientation) contained within it certain irreconcilable differences: “I do not think it exaggerated to suspect that here we have a convergence of interests more than a similarity of ideas”.

Given Protestantism's role as a political and religious minority in Latin America it follows that the growth of Protestantism is linked to the growth of religious freedom, respect for individual human rights, and increased constitutional protection for religious minorities. However, Latin American Protestantism has often been characterized as politically conservative and world-denying in outlook for encouraging members to avoid direct involvement in social and political struggles (BARRO, 1994, p. 229-252). Such is the critique of

⁵ “[...] la razón de ser de las sociedades protestantes en América Latina durante estas décadas tenía menos que ver con el ‘imperialismo norteamericano’ que con las luchas políticas y sociales internas al continente que resumía en la confrontación entre una cultura política autoritaria y estas minorías que buscaban fundar una modernidad burguesa basada en el individuo redimido de su origen de casta y por lo tanto igualado en una democracia participativa y representativa”

Presbyterianism in Brazil articulated by liberationist Rubem Alves (1985), who argues that the characteristic feature of this brand of Protestantism is a complete and total agreement with a series of doctrinal affirmations (“right-doctrine Protestantism”). Most troubling for Alves is the fact that, at a time when many Protestants in Brazil were becoming involved in movements for social justice and reaching out to like-minded Roman Catholics, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil denounced such efforts as contrary to the gospel and banned from their communion pastors and lay persons involved in struggles for liberation. In fact, when the military regime in Brazil consolidated its power through acts of political repression in the mid-1960s, Protestant churches remained silent (some even openly supported the regime). This analysis of what Alves calls the failure of liberal Protestantism’s “utopian project” at the hands of “right-doctrine Protestantism” has often been applied *mutatis mutandis* to all of Latin American Protestantism. However, recent studies of Protestantism in Latin America contend that evangelicalism and social/political activism are not as incompatible as Alves suggests.

Alongside those Protestants who rejected liberation theology existed a movement of Protestant pastors and theologians, la Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (established in 1971) that sympathized with many aspects of the liberation theology movement, emphasizing responsible social action while generally remaining anti-communist. One of its members, José Míguez Bonino (1997, chaps. 1-3) argues in *Faces of Latin American Protestantism* that Protestantism in Latin America – whether Liberal, Evangelical, or Pentecostal – contains within it aspects of all “three faces”. I contend that a yearning for political and social change exists in all branches of Latin American Protestantism, and that only by ignoring those facets of the Calvinist/Reformed tradition that encourage political resistance and empowerment can Alves define Brazilian Presbyterianism – and by extension the entire Evangelical “face” of Latin American Protestantism – as irredeemably repressive. The truth is that in the last thirty years, as evidenced by increased political involvement and electoral victories by evangelicals and Pentecostals in Peru, Brazil, and Mexico, there has been a resurgence of a biblical hermeneutic

among Latin American Protestants that encourages Christians to embrace their civic responsibility. Some even see responsible political action as facilitating their calling to evangelize as political and religious minorities in predominately Catholic countries (MONDRAGÓN, 1998, p. 185). Protestants and Pentecostals in Latin America now number over 40 million, still a political minority, but in some countries a powerful voting block. Latin American countries with substantial Protestant populations include Brazil (20%), Nicaragua (20%), Chile (12%), El Salvador (20%) and Guatemala (40%), countries with a strong Calvinist/Presbyterian presence; even Mexico (4%), while still strongly Catholic, has between 4-5 million politically active evangelicals who have established political parties and affected national elections. Regardless of the numbers, the fact remains that Protestantism is a force of social and political change, and one which can benefit from mining the rich theological resources of the Reformed tradition – specifically the theology and pastoral practice of John Calvin – in order to empower Christian communities in their struggles within the church and in the broader civil society.

In 1947 Alfonso López Michelsen (1966) published an analysis of the Calvinist roots of Latin American political institutions in which he argued, using as a case study of the development of democratic values and Protestantism in his native Columbia, that the Calvinist tradition has shaped many of our modern political institutions. Michelsen focused not on what Calvin said about forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy) but on what Calvin did in organizing the civic and ecclesial life of Geneva, finding in Calvin's church order a representative system of government in which power flowed from the local to the national level and where no one person or group wielded unilateral power. For López Michelsen the church governance implemented by the Calvinist tradition is a direct antecedent and model for the modern secular representative democracy, and in direct opposition to the top-down episcopal model of the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, even though Calvinism has had a muted influence in his native Columbia (and the rest of Latin America), scholars have to consider that wherever there has been a Calvinist presence, however small, it has contributed to

the formation of democratic values. Carlos Mondragón argues that the Calvinist influence Michelsen has identified in Columbian political institutions ought to be expanded to include the rest of Latin America, especially when one considers the role of European political liberalism on the formation of independent nation states in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the influence of the French and North American revolutions, and the philosophical framework behind those revolutions – the political thought of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – two thinkers who stand within the Calvinist tradition.

Throughout Calvin's discussion on civil government in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* a distinction is maintained between the spiritual and temporal realms; they are two aspects of a single "twofold government". While the spiritual "resides in the soul or inner man and pertains to eternal life", and the temporal concerned with the "establishment of civil justice and outward morality" (CALVIN, 1960, 4.20.1), there is no inherent conflict between them. Thus, unlike the modern separation of church and state, in Calvin's theology these two realms interpenetrate each other, as manifestations of the one divine will. While Protestants in France endured much at the hands of a Catholic government, Calvin did not support revolutionary activities; his theological writings reflect great care and effort to prevent social unrest and disorder. Accordingly, each realm in Calvin's twofold government has clearly demarcated jurisdictions: the temporal government makes laws that maintain the social order while the spiritual government enforces discipline of church members. Not only is Calvin's position a contrast to Anabaptist separatism; it also opposes the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic view that the (visible) church is the highest civil authority. While recognizing a distinction between the spiritual and temporal realms, Calvin recognizes both jurisdictions as religious callings. In fact, the vocation of "magistrate" is for Calvin (1960, 4.20.2) a holy calling, "not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men". Consequently, the question for Reformed/Calvinist theology is *not* whether the church has the right to enter the public arena or exert political influence. Rather, the question becomes *how, and to*

what end? Given the fact that Calvin's theology was conceived in exile and addressed the many social problems confronting sixteenth-century Geneva, such as population dislocation and urban poverty, a critical retrieval of John Calvin's theology in Latin America will reveal its character as a political theology concerned with social transformation on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

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