
UNIT 10 CHURCH AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN LATIN AMERICA

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit seeks to introduce you to the role of the church in the Latin American society. In so doing, it will acquaint you with a number of key concepts frequently used in the studies of religion in societies in transition. It purports to explain in general terms the historical role the church has played in the Latin American society as well as the role in contemporary times.

The role of religion in society has been an important area of investigation among scholars. The media reports almost incessantly on religious rivalries manifesting in various forms in Northern Ireland, South Asia, the Middle East, Bosnia, Africa, and Latin America. The Iranian Revolution still causes disquietude in the West, in large part because it reverses the *sacrosanct* doctrine of the "separation of church and state." Yet in the United States as well as in Latin America, we now observe new faces of religion competing quite effectively in the political arena, and, in the process, putting their stamp on the issues of social transformation. The on-going processes of democratisation in most of the world, in particular Latin America, has unleashed a new era of strategic innovation which puts the issue of religious influence in societal transformation in new light. This also requires modification of the existing dominant theories of secularisation. In the following sections, you will be able to see how the role of the church in Latin America still continues to be fundamental, yet changing.

10.2 ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Most of the people living in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking nations of Latin America are Roman Catholics. This overwhelming presence of the Catholic Church, of course, is due to the colonisation of the region by Spain and Portugal. The Colonial period generally started in the 1500s, was consolidated by the mid 1600s, and was terminated in the early 1800s. Even after the attainment of political independence, the Catholic Church continued to exercise pervasive influence in politics and in social policy making in Latin America. In recent years, the Catholic Church has faced competition from the Protestant denominations and some of the local variants of the African religions in Latin America.

10.2.1 Historical

Before the contemporary period, certainly prior to 1960, the Catholic Church generally sided with the instruments of power: industrial, military, landed, and government elites. The nature of this alliance depended on the country and the time in which it was erected. As far as the social policies are concerned, in general the church remained passive. Despite a few notable attempts to curb its power, such as the efforts of the Revolutionary regime in Mexico after 1910, the church survived as a key institution by building an impressive array of bureaucratic offices and lay networks.

But since 1960, things have started to change. Diverse forces ranging from the Cuban Revolution and the emergence of an urban and increasingly industrialising society contributed to changes in the church's stance on major social policies. This was also the height of the Cold War and Latin America was mostly under military governments. But under the military authoritarianism in many countries of Latin America, a more progressive segment within the Catholic Church committed itself to be the "voice of the voiceless" in society.

The advent of **liberation theology** in the 1960s, the construction of small and large grassroots communities, and the encouragement of local level political organisation largely inspired by the church personnel indicated that perhaps a new church had come to exist. The new church emphasised the need to change unjust social structures. This stance gained popularity as some members of the clergy expressed their political activism through organising the poor. Some clergy themselves became the victims of governmental repression.

This political activism on the part of the church personnel in the 1960s and 1970s, itself a novelty in the Latin American context, gained much publicity as it unfolded during an era of authoritarian military rule in much of Latin America. As most avenues of social and political dissent were closed down by the military governments across this vast region, the Catholic Church became one of the main centres of opposition to the authoritarian governments.

10.2.2 Recent Challenges

The military governments relinquished power, one by one, since the beginning of the 1980s, and the process of democratisation culminated in a mostly democratic Latin America by the early 1990s. Only Cuba has defied the trend so far. As the nations of Latin America

experienced a greater democratisation of the political system, many of the pressure groups, political parties, labour organisations, and other popular sector groups, once banned or largely restricted under military rule, emerged with active agendas. The society in general now had many forums to express dissent. In this changed scenario, the progressive section of the Catholic Church faced increased competition from non-religious segments of the civil society. As the competition staged by the newly reinvigorated political parties, labour unions, and popular sector groups intensified, some church leaders debated a possible return to the pre-1960 era of less political activism.

A major challenge to the Catholic Church in recent years has been to carry out Pope John Paul II's call for a new evangelisation of the region. Transforming the radical activist groups toward this new conservative leaning of the church is not a small problem. Considerable bitterness still exists between the conservatives and the progressives within the respective church hierarchies in various countries of Latin America. The Catholic Church needs all the troops it can mobilise in response to increased political competition for the hearts of the people. In countries where political activism of the church never reached the level it did in Brazil, Nicaragua, or Peru, the challenge lies mainly in determining the particular types of activities that would keep the church from losing much of its popular constituency, especially the population of the poor and marginalised, to competing religions.

The second challenge faced by the Catholic Church is to restore its gradually diminishing institutional capacity. The ratio of Catholic priests to the total population has been steadily declining since 1970 in many Latin American countries. It is a real challenge to the church. Declining institutional capacity precludes certain type of popular mobilisation on the part of the Catholic Church that might be vigorously pursued by its competitors.

Another such challenge has manifested itself in the growing presence of the Protestant denominations in recent years. These Protestant denominations, especially the evangelical protestant variants, emphasise individual spiritual needs. In addition, their emphasis on the values of education, savings, thriftiness, honesty, and an individual commitment to make a better life within a limited material environment has gained them many new members at the expense of the Catholic Church.

Finally, all of the above challenges for the Catholic Church are linked to the broader challenge of creating a vibrant, participatory, and politically responsible civil society. This involves attempts to help create multitudes of voluntary associations as forums of popular expression at the community level. In addition, this challenge entails efforts to demystify, not necessarily challenge, authority, important for facilitating political democracy in Latin America.

10.2.3 New Church in Contemporary Times

One should not forget the fact that the Catholic Church, for that matter any religious organisation, mediates between popular communities and the larger social structures. Under competition from other religious and secular groups, the Catholic Church is learning to empower people at the grassroots. It is making efforts through multitudes of religious meetings to teach Latin Americans how to work in groups toward a common goal.

The Catholic Church insists on a middle ground between extreme forms of capitalism and socialism. Official bulletins of the church emphasise that these extreme forms of economic, political, and social organisation are incompatible with the Christian living; governments practicing these ideologies are therefore undesirable. However, in 1998 the Pope visited Castro's Cuba and the hope for religious freedom in Cuba has recently increased.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, one must be critical of the institutional dimension of the Catholic Church. In Brazil, Peru, El Salvador, and Chile, where the Catholic Church was once quite politically active, the increasing lack of institutional capacity has contributed to a decline in the extent of progressive activism. This is especially true if one is referring to grand political agendas, such as a radical transformation in favour of a more egalitarian power structure in society. In a post-Cold War climate worldwide and the elimination of the ideological threat from the former Soviet Union, the church realises that focusing on grand political designs would probably create more enemies; hence the concentration on small-scale initiatives.

The Catholic Church's institutional capacity, largely defined on the basis of the number of trained clergy in the total population of Latin America, although has declined, has to be viewed with much caution. While it is true that the church's influence in some pastoral areas has declined, it has indeed experienced surprising gains in its social involvement in the educational and social welfare activities. Taken together, these increased involvements have actually increased its political role in some of the key areas of decision making in Latin America.

10.3 CHURCH AND POLITICS

As has been mentioned earlier, the Catholic Church was always intimately involved in the Latin American politics. Prior to 1960, this link was sustained by the Church support of the *status quo*. Since Vatican II, in particular since the Cuban Revolution, its political role has taken various active forms and shapes, all in the pursuit of the same larger goal: to maintain its pervasive influence in all major areas of the Latin American society.

10.3.1 Traditional Political Role

In the colonial era, the Catholic Church had commanded greater legitimacy in influencing the structures of traditional authority in Latin America.

Since the attainment of political independence in the early 1800s, the gradual ascendancy of the modern state in the structuring of authority relations came into conflict with the traditional authority of the church. But despite the rise of the state, the Catholic Church continued to create space for itself in the popular mind. Over time, as the modern Latin American state failed to deliver the public goods, the church evolved and orchestrated innovative ideological compromises and new initiatives to sustain its influence in society.

10.3.2 Current Political Role

The new political role entails attempts to address the worsening social realities. These social realities are: intense poverty, growing power and social inequity, and the lack of

access on the part of the great majority of Latin Americans to formal education and health care. The recognition of these worsening realities is doubly important in the light of the obvious failure of the developmental ideologies pursued by various governments across the region. These failures on the part of the secular state have fuelled popular aspirations to seek refuge in the promised solemnity and spiritual salvation offered by the churches.

In the current political climate, this role is influenced by religious competition with the protestant churches as well. Among all protestant churches, the Pentecostal especially, being quite resourceful and organised, have made much headway all across Latin America. With many popular religions manifesting as well in a more organised form than before, Latin America has indeed become a marketplace for competing religions and the implications are far-reaching for society and politics.

The Catholic Church has consistently influenced the ideology of the Christian democratic political parties in Latin America, in particular in Chile and Venezuela. In the rest of the region, it has significant amount of support among conservative politicians in parties across the political spectrum.

10.3.3 Political Competition

Competition with other religious as well as secular groups in recent years has compelled the Catholic Church to consider important issues of democracy, human rights, and the usefulness of the marketplace in addressing some of the popular concerns in Latin America. Political competition has also prompted the Catholic Church to engage in areas of mutually beneficial cooperation with the government. In countries such as Brazil, in the areas of social welfare and education, the church has received impressive amounts of subsidies from the state. Establishing a presence in education has been the Church's larger strategy of assuring itself a prominent position in the national decision-making.

Under the new scenario in which the Church has to work for the loyalty of the masses, members of the Catholic clergy have opted for negotiation and conciliation with the various factions of the hierarchy. That, to some extent, has made the Church more democratic. Therefore, pressures from within and without have certainly made historically the most dominant institution in Latin America now more open to pragmatic ideas and strategies.

10.3.4 Religious Innovation

The Catholic Church is increasingly pursuing quite innovative strategies to withstand competition from other religious and secular forces. These ventures have materialised in different forms and shapes depending on the country and region in question. For example, scholars have noted much innovation in Catholic pastoral work in the Bolivian Highlands. In these highlands, the Church has increasingly used catechists as culturally adept intermediaries. These catechists, who are quintessential examples of missionary interaction at the grass-roots, represent the Church at the local level; they are also part of the local indigenous communities. The knowledge of both makes them effective intermediaries in linking the Church with these remote communities.

Similarly, in Venezuela for example, the Catholic Church has granted much pastoral autonomy to the local level religious personnel in the remote areas of the country. Members of the Catholic religious order in these vicariates and evangelical centres maintain nominal ties with the parishes under which they operate. They also display less formality and

dependence on the parish priests. Although traditionally more Catholic parishes are found in upper class neighbourhoods, in recent years, the number has grown in the poorer areas. Both are examples of the pragmatism displayed by an age-old hierarchical institution like the Catholic Church. These innovations are not only relevant to sustaining the powerful role for the Church in Latin America, but they are also instructive of the kind of global role the Church is poised to play in an era characterised by greater political and religious competition. Latin American societies are expected to be a large beneficiary of such overtures in Latin America.

10.4 MAJOR THEORIES ON THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY

In the global community of the early 21st Century, the simplistic assumption that church and state exist as separate entities will not do. Both spheres are bridged everyday by ordinary people and popular communities all over the world. Social scientists must abandon simplistic characterisation of religion in modern society and instead, focus on analysing the ways in which it interacts with politics at the national and local levels in facilitating and accommodating the forces of social change.

10.4.1 Theories of Secularisation

The **theories of secularisation** generally predict that the importance of religion, seen as a way of thinking, performing, and practicing daily rituals of life, and as the core organising principle of most patterns of individual behaviour, would decline with the growth of modern, industrial forces. The theory has been given a specialised development in an extensive literature of sociology and history, stemming especially from the analysis of Weber. The term "secular" refers to the worldly, the civil, or the non-religious, as distinguished from the spiritual and the ecclesiastical. For religious organisations, such as the Catholic Church, becoming more secular means less focus on otherworldly issues (such as life after death) and more on worldly affairs. Secularisation also means that functions once performed by religious organisations are now the primary responsibility of the non-religious organisations, such as the state or civil society organisations. With the advancement of civilisation and its emphasis on modern, technology-oriented, psychology based perceived construction of the world, theorists expect that the influence of religion would gradually decline commensurate with the increased complexity in society. Simple societies with rudimentary division of labour are more religious than others. Whether the persistence of religion makes secularisation theories irrelevant is currently in the forefront of social theoretical discourse.

With the emergence of the Christian Right in many countries of Latin America as a formidable force, both within many political parties and in certain geographical regions, it has become obvious that the influence of religion does not really disappear. It actually reasserts itself through multifaceted links with politics and society. This embeddedness must be decomposed to be properly understood. Secularisation theorists had simplistically imagined the spheres of religion and state or politics to be separate and stay as such. The experience in Latin America in the past thirty years has certainly proved this theory to be overtly simplistic.

10.4.2 Theories of Religious Competition and Innovation

Theories of religious competition and innovation posit that, with increased competition at the religious marketplace, organisations catering to the religious needs of people are

bound to innovate or face the danger of declining influence, even extinction. These theorists argue that religious organisations are likely to use modern mediums of transportation and communication to reach the followers residing in remote corners of the world. In the process, the churches are now using radio, television, documentary, and other communication channels, such as the computer and internet, to minimise the costs and maximise their productivity in terms of reaching out to many more potential members than they otherwise could.

As has been mentioned earlier, the Catholic Church, faced with diminished institutional resources and capacity is now quite keen on using modern mediums of communication to broadcast its message to millions of Latin Americans. These theories implicitly assume that religion does not disappear but it reappears in quite hybrid forms. Theories of religious competition and innovation, in other words, argue that the earlier theories of secularisation were wrong and were too simplistic in their assessment of the continued influence of religion in changing society.

10.5 SUMMARY

We have posited that historically the Catholic Church had been one of the most dominant institutions in Latin American society since the colonial times. However, with the advent of modernising forces, its influence has begun to decline in some areas of society. The Catholic Church, in the current climate of democratisation, faces challenges from other religious forces, such as the protestant denominations, and secular groups, such as political parties, labour unions, and community based popular groups. But in light of these competitive forces, the Church has not backed down. It has actually mustered its resources and in some cases has been able to compete effectively with other religions and secular groups. Needless to say, all of these religious and non-religious forces compete for the same constituencies for popular support and legitimacy. At the grassroots level, in various regions, such as Bolivia and Venezuela, the Catholic Church has been quite innovative in spelling out new strategies of popular mobilisation. The goal of maintaining influence on the population remains unchanged; only the means of attaining has changed.

In the process, these innovations have given more credibility to the theories of religious competition and innovation. The developments have certainly not gone as predicted by the theories of secularisation. The bottom line is this: religion does not disappear; it appears in modified and synthesised forms.

10.6 EXERCISES

1. Examine critically the historical role of the institution of church in Latin America since the Iberian colonisation.
2. What are the innovations made by the Catholic Church both in terms of ideology and institutions in addressing the socio-political issues of contemporary Latin America?
3. Discuss briefly the challenges faced by the Catholic Church in Latin America.
4. Explain briefly the theories of secularisation relevant to the modern Latin American societies.