

Workshop Overview
Religious Responses to Violence in Latin America:
Christianity in Dictatorship and Democracy
Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, American University
January 14-15, 2013

Since its planning meeting March 26-27, 2012, this project has commissioned 14 original pieces of research. Our workshop on January 14-15, 2013, aims to explore the validity and utility of the initial project concept paper in light of this new work. Both the research and workshop participants are diverse, approaching the broad subject of religious responses to violence in different time periods and in different parts of Latin America, from different disciplinary perspectives. Our central challenge will be to advance toward a common framework that draws from the critical abilities of participants and the richness of the commissioned studies. We aim for a published volume that is as coherent as possible in illuminating the relationship between religion and violence in new ways. To facilitate our discussion, this overview summarizes underlying themes and central questions of the concept paper to help us refine previous hypotheses, revise paper drafts, and reflect on crosscutting themes in need of further research.

I. Past and Present

The project encompasses two historical periods of violence: the state repression and political violence of the 1960s-1980s and the more recent experiences of criminal violence. During the earlier period some Christian churches defended victims and denounced perpetrators of widespread state-sponsored violence, while others reinforced repression. They also responded to the dynamics of political violence, the recourse to force as a means to achieve (or prevent) fundamental social change. Religious doctrines that gained currency during this period, particularly in Catholicism, led important sectors of the church into prominent positions of human rights advocacy and support for democracy, filling a space in public life when ordinary politics were repressed. International religious influence (particularly from the United States) was important to the positions taken by Latin American Catholic and Protestant churches during this period, which also witnessed an unprecedented growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism.

Religion was central both to the formulation of a discourse around the idea of human rights and in social mobilization aimed at ensuring respect for human rights and an end to state-sponsored violence. Through their intellectual and spiritual presence, religious institutions often challenged the legitimacy of military rule and in most countries helped to galvanize support for its democratic alternative. Religious actors and values were also crucial in shaping the wide variety of practices associated with “transitional justice” – truth commissions, trials, and reparations. Is the role of religious actors and ideas under authoritarian rule and in fostering political transitions relevant in the contemporary context of electoral democracies?

In the last two decades religion has remained a dynamic force in Latin American societies, now governed by electoral democracies rather than military dictatorships, and a religious

landscape marked prominently by the presence of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. The rise of Protestant churches in Latin America has attracted scholarship on support from U.S.-based churches and U.S. “neoliberal” influence more generally. New Protestant doctrinal currents, such as the emphasis on individual salvation, in contrast to the community focus of grassroots Catholicism years ago, are believed to motivate withdrawal from public affairs and human rights advocacy. Although often depicted as apolitical and concerned solely with personal and communal religiosity, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are increasingly involved in the public sphere.

Political and religious changes create a new context for violence. Latin America’s democracies suffer from many well-known weaknesses, but for their own citizens as well as outside observers, perhaps their most egregious failure of governance is pervasive crime and related violence. The issue of “security” consistently tops public opinion polls and policy agendas across the region. Central America’s homicide rates are the highest in the world, and Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela lag not far behind. Criminal violence existed in the past, to be sure, but it was overshadowed by political violence (including that exercised by state agents). With the rise of transnational criminal networks and the end of internal insurgencies (except in Colombia), violence today is associated with non-state actors.

Workshop participants should consider, both in their own presentations and broader discussion, the adequacy of the distinctions – above all those about “violence” – drawn in the original project concept paper. Are the two periods appropriately interpreted by the difference between “state” and “non-state” – or between “political” and “criminal” violence? How are religious responses conditioned by who perpetrates violence? How do religious responses reflect their understanding of what is “political”? These questions lead toward another theme for project research, namely how much contemporary religious responses to violence differ from – or on the contrary, resemble – responses in the earlier period.

II. Continuities and Ruptures

Earlier questions about the roles of religious institutions in defending victims during the dictatorships have not carried over into enquiry about how they are responding to the different forms of violence plaguing Latin America’s electoral democracies today. One of our analytical goals in this project is a chronologically comparative approach to the study of the role of churches in mobilizing meaningful moral resistance and political participation. What are the continuities and ruptures in the relationship of religious institutions to the different types of violence? How have transnational networks reinforced (or not) their responses? Have religious values and practices infused in “human rights” been carried over – or altered and shifted – since regime transitions to Latin America’s contemporary democracies?

Answers to such questions are to be found not only concrete interventions of church leaders and their flocks but also the doctrinal and conceptual evolutions that guide how they respond. Under what conditions do different churches (Catholic, Evangelical, and variations within each category) approach this question differently? If the Catholic “preferential option for the poor” associated violence with exclusion, and defending the victims of authoritarian regimes associated violence with state terror, how does the Church grapple with and

respond to violence perpetrated by non-state and “non-political” actors in the context of democracy today? What are the conceptual frames and social practices used by church leaders to frame action? Are there carryovers from the past in how they conceive the proper role of their church in society? Are there discernible processes of adaptation or “learning” on the basis of religious doctrines and the churches’ experience in this new context?

III. Theologies

These questions point us toward careful consideration of what might be broadly called different “theologies” within the Christian tradition. Because this project seeks to understand better the religious reasons for responses to violence, religious practitioners are integral participants in our research. Their perspectives are vital to understanding the present as well as the past: the doctrines, beliefs, practices, and experiences that have moved them to live their faith and conceive their ministries as moral witness or humanitarian social action. Addressing whether and how different theologies engage these matters involves both print sources and interviews with religious officials and believers. Do religious institutions and believers interpret their relationship to current victims of violence in terms of “human rights”? Or do they regard “human rights” as a cause of the past, perhaps appropriate in a very different context? Or do they consider them a political cause, not a religious one? Have they adopted different narratives for today’s victims of violence from those that characterized the violent past? Does this vary by denomination, and if so, why and in what ways? What are the doctrinal rationales that churches draw upon in order to explain what they choose to do, and have these shifted along with the currents of political change?

IV. Levels of Analysis

These questions lead us to a fourth theme alluded to in the concept paper but which has emerged more visibly during the course of commissioning research. The studies prepared for our workshop range from local to national and transnational levels of analysis. We believe that the eventual volume needs to encompass all these levels, although individual chapters will have specific foci. Each level makes a valuable contribution to understanding Christian responses to violence. Studies of particular local realities provide the greatest opportunity to illuminate how groups and individuals understand what their faith demands of them in their communities and contexts. Studies at the national level can throw fresh light on the larger institutional and structural factors – including religious as well as political leadership – that hinder some responses and strengthen others. Research on transnational actors and networks allows us to understand better the ways that these large forces shape religious responses at different levels; it is of particular value to policy makers and policy advocates addressing violence. Can we usefully distinguish these different levels – and the relationships between them – in our workshop discussions? What are the contributions different levels of analysis make to understanding our larger subject? Are the contrasts between past and present or balance between continuities and ruptures different depending on the level of analysis?