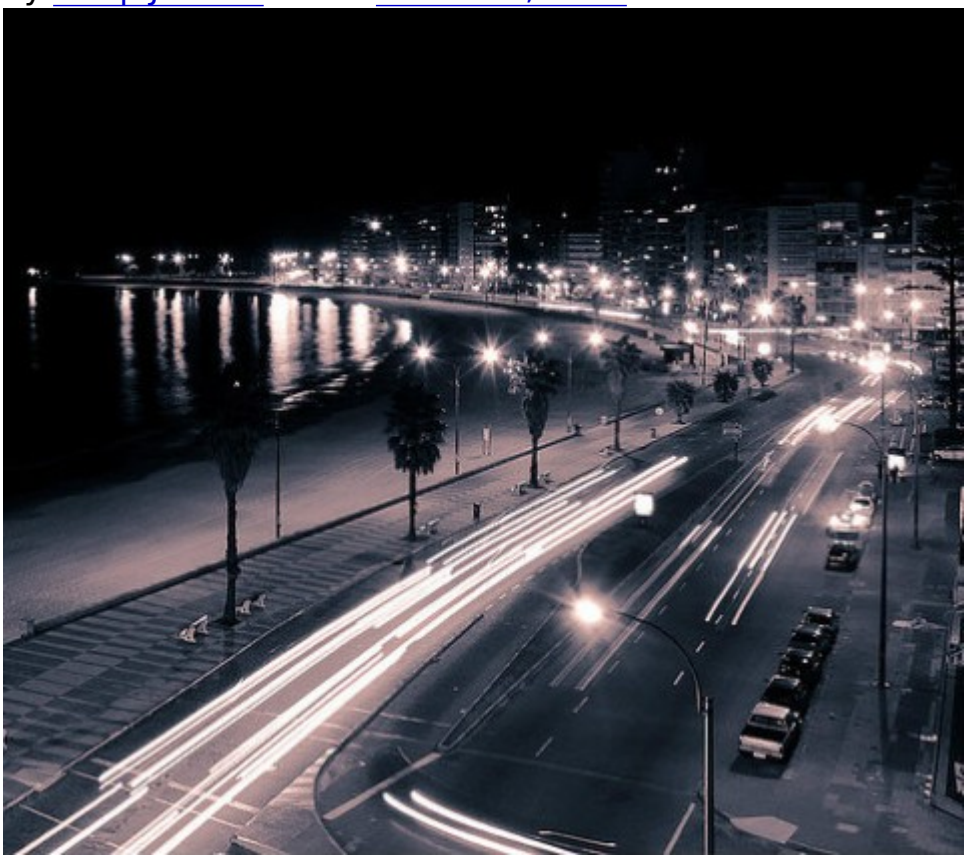
A secular Latin America?

by Philip Jenkins in the March 20, 2013 issue



Playa de Pocitos, Montevideo, Uruguay. Some rights reserved by Berenice Decados.

In recent months, observers have remarked on the growing number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation (the “nones”), whose numbers are highest among the young. We can argue about just what these numbers mean, but possibly they do mark the beginning of a secularizing trend, a drift toward European conditions. Surprisingly perhaps, given our customary assumptions about Latin America, conditions in several Latin American nations mirror those in the U.S. Increasingly these countries are developing a European coloring.

Several factors shape a country’s religious outlook, and prosperity and the welfare net certainly play a role. A country’s fertility rate also tells us a lot about attitudes toward religion. When a country develops economically, women are needed to enter the workforce rather than remain in the home. Meanwhile, shifting religious values place less pressure on women to have large families. In turn, smaller families mean

diminished links with religious structures—fewer children go through religious education or first communion classes. And couples who have decided to limit families tend to run up against church policies on issues of contraception and abortion. When sexuality is separated from conception and child-rearing, people are more open to nontraditional family structures, including gay unions. Whatever the causes, the European experience indicates that countries where the fertility rate falls well below replacement (2.1 children per woman) might be facing rapid secularization.

With that figure in mind, let’s look at the countries of Latin America, and especially the most economically developed ones. A few decades ago, all had classic Third World population profiles and very large families. In the 1960s, for instance, Brazil’s fertility rate hovered around 6 children per woman, alarming those who warned of a global population explosion. By 2012, though, Brazil’s figure was 1.82, far below replacement level. Chile and Uruguay both record similar rates of 1.87. Argentina is still above replacement, but the rate is falling fast. That’s a social revolution in progress—as well as a gender revolution.

In religious terms, these countries present a complex picture, with strong evidence of a continuing passion for religion. Brazil is home to some spectacularly successful Pentecostal megachurches, which Catholic clergy seek to imitate in order to hold on to believers. New evangelical churches are also booming in the other Latin nations, to the point that Protestants claim to be living through a new Reformation.

At the same time, though, signs of secularization appear that would have been unthinkable not long ago. Nine percent of Brazilians now say they follow no religion, and the proportion of nones is much higher among those under 20. Uruguay emerges as the region’s most secular country, with 40 percent having no religious affiliation.

Gay marriage offers a useful gauge of transformation. Uruguay passed a national civil union law in 2009 and seems on course to establish full marriage rights for gays. Brazil approved same-sex unions in 2004, with gay marriages following, subject to some local discretion. Argentina legalized same-sex marriage in 2010.

Abortion laws offer a more mixed picture. Uruguay permits abortions through the first trimester, while Brazil grants terminations to safeguard the life of the mother or in cases of rape. On both these test issues, Chile stands out as a conservative

bastion, with a strict abortion law and no prospect of gay marriage rights. Otherwise, however, the region shows a major trend toward liberalizing morality on issues that both Protestant and Catholic churches hold dear. Over the coming decade, we will probably see liberal reforms triumphing in several more countries, with the churches doing little more than fighting rearguard actions.

Obviously, Latin America is a vast and complex region with many widely differing societies, and no single model works across the whole continent. Uruguay is a radically secular outlier, while countries like Colombia remain staunchly conservative. Most significant, though, is the clear set of trends that we see in several of the most influential countries, especially Brazil. Although Brazil is a long way from European secularization, we can foresee the emergence of a triangular political setup involving Pentecostals, Catholics and secularists and a constantly shifting balance of coalitions and alliances.

Of the three groups, the Catholics are undoubtedly the weakest, because the acute shortage of priests has so reduced the church’s strength on the ground. Also, most of the new nones are former Catholics who abandon the church without making the transition to Pentecostal congregations. This is very bad news for a church that officially lists Brazil as one of the world’s largest Catholic nations. In practice, many of those notional Catholics have already defected to other faiths—or to none.

We should certainly not start writing the obituary for Latino faith. But that faith will be taking quite surprising forms in the near future.