Reforma evangélica: Protestant growth in Latin America

by Philip Jenkins in the May 19, 2009 issue

When Americans discuss the great crisis facing the Roman Catholic Church, they usually are thinking of the notorious sex abuse scandals. Vatican authorities, though, worry more about another crisis, one with potentially far graver implications for the church—the explosive growth of Protestant and Pentecostal numbers in what has always been the solidly Catholic stronghold of Latin America.

Since the 1970s *evangélicos* have made enormous gains in populous Latin countries. They probably make up 15 percent of Brazil's people today, 30 percent of Chile's, at least a third of Guatemala's. Worse, from the Catholic point of view, these numbers are continuing to grow, to the point that Brazil by mid-century could conceivably have a Protestant majority.

A religious revolution of this scale could not occur without conflicts that spill over into the political realm. Usually Protestants and Catholics fight with words, contending in the mass media and in elections and parliamentary debates. In some countries, though, the fights have reached the point of armed struggle, night-riding and ethnic cleansing. And the motives driving the combatants look very familiar to anyone who knows the story of France or Germany during the Re formation era.

People in the U.S. might feel strongly about intellectual debates over salvation by works as opposed to by faith alone, but they are not likely to pursue those grievances through armed violence. But in some societies, religion is thoroughly institutionalized in the life of the community. Religious practice defines the cycle of the year, the boundaries of the community, the shape of popular loyalties. Often it becomes very localized, centered on devotion to this particular saint or that church or shrine or even this particular version of the Virgin Mary. The authority of faith is rooted in community and tradition, ritual and place.

Imagine then the impact of a radical new concept of the faith, one that grounds authority in the written word and spurns those local traditions as pagan

excrescences. People who might not understand church doctrines too clearly become very sensitive indeed to attempts to take away their shrine or their Virgin. When passions rise high enough, they try to stamp out the blasphemers who seek to destroy the world they know. In extreme cases, local riots and purges can merge into wider movements. That was the story of grassroots religious violence in 16th-century Europe. Some thing very like it is in progress today in rural areas of Latin America.

In different parts of that region, Protestantism ap peals to various constituencies. The *evangélicos* have made their greatest advances in the megacities. But the new faith has also had a special impact on traditionally marginalized Indian communities in Mayan regions of Central America and in Andean countries like Peru and Bolivia. For centuries, these communities accepted Cath olicism as the official religion, but it contained a strong dose of native tradition. Membership in the community depended on participating in communal rituals focused on the church.

But then the Protestants came, proclaiming their membership in a new universal community, the New Jerusalem. They denounced the old beliefs as superstition, particularly the Indian customs that survived easily within the Catholic framework. Moreover, they condemned the alcohol use that usually marks popular fiestas. In effect, they refused to pay the Catholic cultural tax.

In Guatemala, some extreme evangelicals have tried to enforce popular morality through vigilante campaigns. Catholic village authorities strike back against those who tear the community apart by their refusal to join in processions and devotions. They pressure evangelicals by cutting off water and utilities and by driving their children from the schools. Some battles follow a cycle very familiar from Reformation Europe: Protes tants mock a procession in which faithful Catholics carry a figure of the Virgin; Catholics retaliate by burning a Protestant chapel; and the violence continues with night-time raids and expulsions.

Although such unrest has surfaced in several countries, it has been most marked in Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost state, where interfaith tensions since 1994 have left hundreds dead and thousands more expelled from their homes. Although Western leftists have glorified the Zapatista guerrillas as anticolonialist champions, the Chiapas affair can’t be understood without consideration of social tensions between Protestants and Catholics. Some insurgents are driven by Catholic liberation theology, but much of the violence is a reaction not so much to political and

economic exploitation as to the acceptance of rival forms of Christianity by other Indian communities. At the heart of the war is the struggle within the faith between traditional and textual sources of authority.

Worsening global economic conditions will likely aggravate ethnic and religious tensions in poorer countries, and Protestant-Catholic conflicts will sharpen. However modern the economic environment, the underlying issues would have been quite comprehensible to John Knox or John Calvin.