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# Culture and colonialism, church and state in Latin America

Michael Gillgannon | Jun. 17, 2011

U.S. President Barack Obama and his family tour the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, late March 20 (CNS photo)

***PERSPECTIVE***

History is in the making in Latin America. The ferment of change is everywhere but one watches sadly as both the leaders of church and state in Europe and the United States seem badly informed and out of touch.

The secular state of culturally Catholic Mexico is becoming a narco-state (36,000 assassinations from drug wars in the last five years). One cannot understand the current carnage on the border without knowing what the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) did to Mexican agriculture, sending impoverished campesinos and their families looking to immigration, legal or illegal, or to the drug cartels, for their human survival.

And what of the hopes for industrializing Mexico with the maquiladoras, the factories that have now moved to Asia where even lower wages and less concern for workers? rights are the lure? So, both NAFTA and the immigration problems would need study and change to solve Mexico?s and America?s cross-border relations.

Central America is hemorrhaging from emigrants crossing Mexico, despite its dangers, helped by more humane Mexican laws to facilitate the transit of these poor looking for work opportunities in the United States. Meanwhile, Guatemala, El Salvador and even peaceful Costa Rica are struggling with vicious gangs connected to both organized crime and the drug trade in the United States and Europe. Here, too, free trade is an important issue and only a revision of the recent Central American Free Trade agreement (CAFTA) can relieve the resulting problems of immigration and crime.

Honduras is a reproach to American diplomacy as its illegal government-by-coup, approved by the United States, continues to violate human rights, rule by repression, and become an active transit point for international drugs. The recent return of the exiled ex-president, Manuel Zelaya, will only continue the doubts about the United States? confused policies.

Interestingly enough, this peaceful (so far) solution in Honduras was brokered by Venezuela and Colombia so

that Honduras could resume membership in the Organization of the American States and restore normal commercial and political relations with the rest of Latin America. Another sign that in the future the United States will not be asked to resolve, or interfere in, the diplomatic or domestic problems of Latin American states.

Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia have directly challenged the powers of the past to see what real change must mean. Their presidents and congresses have been democratically elected (and re-elected) by strong majorities. They have written new constitutions approved by voters in national referendums. But, amazingly, the United States and many in Europe condemn these governments and the new directions they are taking.

Words like socialism are used to describe the plans of these governments, plans that are no longer sent to Washington or multinational companies for approval. The old arguments about economic and social policies and the real content of words like capitalism and socialism are not debated. Why do Western economic powers assiduously promote trade and aid and investment for avowedly communist China? Yet some Latin American countries like Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador are dismissed as radicals simply because they want to regain control over their own economic and natural resources.

The past 50 years have seen more change and growth in Latin America than the previous 450 years of the history of the Western Hemisphere. The colonial powers of Europe and the United States seem not to know or study their common Western history of colonialism and empire. They wonder why Latin American countries now want to throw off the yokes of 500 years of colonial political and economic control.

Why do these Latin American governments speak of ?de-colonizing? their cultural, political, economic and educational structures and institutions? What did we in the dominant Western civilization do wrong? One point might be for Europe to acknowledge its political and economic control of Latin America from 1492 to 1825.

The Spanish and Portuguese empires stole from Bolivia, Mexico and Peru the natural riches of silver and gold that became the economic base of all modern industrial economies. Billions of dollars were taken from the mines of the southern Americas by millions of Indian slave laborers working under inhuman conditions that can only be termed genocide. Europe, and the world, never had so much money before. And all of it legally stolen and blessed by colonial Catholicism, an arm of the conquering states of those times.

And the United States?

How many know of the practice of empire by the United States of America? We always said we were never a political empire ruling over other nations. But what was the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 if not a colonial line drawn around all of Latin America telling Europe that the Americas were now to be protected and controlled by the United States and its growing naval and military power?
The new republics formed after 1825 and the revolution of Simón Bolívar in Latin America were too weak to defend themselves.

But worse, they were riven by their own internal divisions of class and race engendered by the conquest. The Catholic culture of Latin America has yet to face its complicity in the historic control of republican Latin America by the upper-class criollos, who claimed to be the pureblood heirs of the conquerors and rightful owners of the land and riches that were no longer exported to Europe.

This elite group exploited the mestizos, mixed-race artisans and workers, while both classes looked down upon and excluded the native peoples, the millions who were the majority of inhabitants (but not full citizens with legal rights) in each country south of the Rio Grande.
And economic colonialism?

Before and after the Spanish-American war of 1898 (William Randolph Hearst?s war as America?s media became the propaganda machine for monopoly monetary interests from the so-called progressive era even till today), who came to own commerce and finance south of the Rio Grande? United Fruit, Monsanto, Standard Oil ? ?free enterprise? works best if monopolies are protected by locally upper-class client governments directed by the political control from Washington.

Unfortunately for the client states, that also meant their putative democracies, unstable and insecure, would need the constant intervention of American military forces to maintain ?democracy? and protect the private property of foreign capital exploiting the natural resources of the country.

The United States has sent more than 180 military operations to Latin America since 1890 to protect American business interests. Though the majority of those interventions were to protect private investors and their businesses, the military costs were paid for by American taxpayers whose life, liberty and pursuit of happiness were hardly involved. The U.S. Army, Navy and Marines were effectively like the historic Pinkerton Detective Agency, the private guards of private business.

All of the above links to the present problems of the Americas would be incomplete without references to the 500-year history of colonial Catholic culture. The problems need a serious study of the social structures of class and race going back to the conquest by Spain and Portugal of the southern Americas. The first evangelization in the 16th century was new and unprecedented, with no models for mission activity. Sadly, from the beginning, it joined the cross to the sword.

The democracies of the Enlightenment dream of Simón Bolívar simply continued the social structures of the conquest, though now the criollos became the ruling class. The Catholic church, as so often happens, found its members on all sides. The pleas of church leaders for social and economic justice ? from the 16th-century Dominican friars in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; to Bartolomé de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico, in the same century; to Archbishop Oscar Romero in our own time ? went unheeded. The Catholic culture in various ways blessed serfdom and slavery, as well as classism and racism, in the economic and social structures of every Latin American country.

It is the struggles for the equality of all citizens for human rights and human dignity that must be seen as the core of the social, economic and political conflicts for change today in Latin America. Humanist intellectuals, some few progressive businesspeople with a social conscience, Marxists, Catholics schooled in the social teaching of the church ? all are now involved in the epochal changes taking place in Latin America.

The pending questions are: Why, after 500 years of Catholic culture is the church so weak and dependent? It is still supported by Catholics from Europe and the United States with donations and many missionary personnel when its own riches of resources, human and material, should make it self-sufficient. Why, after 500 years of rich resources, and 186 years of ?democratic republics,? are all Latin American states so weak, unstable and dependent on loans, outside investment, and technical and scientific support?

Those of us who have lived and worked with peoples in Latin America know the problem is not the stereotype of lazy and untalented people without hope or desire to better their nations, waiting for a mañana that never comes. It is the inadequate and unjust social structures of centuries that must be unmasked, faced and radically changed. And that would include the deep changes in a Catholic culture that needs a new mission, as mandated by the Latin American bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007.

Such a mission must bring the profound meaning of sacramental and eucharistic practice, plus the social justice teachings of a contemporary de-colonized church to every area of life in the Latin America that is now in gestation.

Latin America?s Catholic culture was germinated 500 years ago in European classism and racism. It managed to impose many religious practices like the Mass and sacraments with little teaching of their content and values. The Christian faith cannot be imposed by force. It must be accepted by free consent.

What are some immediate tasks to respond to the times?
For the church, as beginning steps:

- Take the ?mission? mandate for all of Latin America seriously with training and formation in the content and values of the Catholic faith. Share the good news so people are free to reject it if it does not convince them. Sadly, millions of Latino Catholics are walking away right now because their local churches do not respond to their spiritual needs. Custom and culture are not enough to make them faithful in these times.
- Take the formation of laypeople (not just children) seriously, with new pastoral planning and strategies, especially in the great megacities of the continent with their millions of rural immigrants.
- Face the problem of priesthood and ministry that cannot now respond to the demographic realities.
- Make Catholic social teaching on economics and politics a new priority. Such values are not known or fully taught even in Catholic universities.
- Begin stewardship programs for all Catholics. Latin America?s poor will support their church. The wealthy have never accepted their responsibilities.

For each nation, as beginning steps:

- New dialogues over the proper role of the state, private ownership, and the common good under a rule of law.
- Question the fairness of social dialogues and debate in an era of international media monopolies of the press, radio, TV and the Internet.
- Make new graduated tax laws with enforcement that would apply both to persons and to national and international businesses.

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