

Review of *The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala* by Timothy J. Steigenga

In the United States it is a common practice in political discourse to include a person's religious affiliation as an indicator of political behavior. However, these relationships are less clear in Latin America especially Central America where relations between religion and politics are a central issue. Theories abound on the connection between Pentecostalism and political behavior in this region. In his book, *The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala*, Timothy Steigenga seeks to understand the relationship between religious affiliation and political orientation more fully. Steigenga sets out to disprove the "conventional wisdom about Protestantism" in Latin America using a case-study approach with the two most politically opposite countries in Central America: Guatemala and Costa Rica.

Steigenga does an excellent job of answering his major questions by indirectly asking about behaviors and attitudes. In order to do this, he defines very explicit categories for religions, religious behaviors, and evangelism strategies in Central America. An example is the author's rationale for not using the term fundamentalism, instead using the phrase religious conservatism. This is broken down by the survey instrument into specific questions to get at underlying belief structures. The analysis of the results, determining which factors of religious experience were the best predictors of political attitudes and behavior, resulted in few independent causal variables. Even so, there were some surprising results, which must be interpreted through the lens of historical religious contexts of both Catholicism and Protestantism in Central America.

Chapter one offers a brief review of the divisive history of the Catholic Church in Central America, with a focus on modern reforms such as Vatican II (1960), Medellin, Columbia (1968), and Puebla, Mexico (1979). This charts the shift in attitudes between the global Catholic Church and the local Catholic community, particularly on issues such as liberation of the poor. As the Catholic Church suffered this tension, higher rates of defection to various forms of Protestantism occurred. Steigenga succinctly describes the three most popular perspectives on this conversion from Catholicism to

Protestantism in Central America: (1) religion as externally imposed (focus on conversion); (2) religion as an adaptation to a changing society; and (3) religion as autonomous (focus on intensity).

In the second chapter, Steigenga offers empirical evidence from his research to explain the exploding Protestant growth in Central America. With data revealing that 60 percent of Protestants were raised in the religion they now practice, Steigenga challenges the commonly held belief that the majority of Protestant pews are filled with new converts. Steigenga's research effectively debunks the external imposition perspective. Steigenga was unable to confirm nor deny a relationship between variations of Max Weber's Protestant "work ethic" and upward social mobility. Although he found that there was no significant difference between Protestants and Catholics in terms of socioeconomic status, there does exist a widely held perception among Protestants that conversion leads to upward social mobility.

Interestingly, Steigenga's research led him to confirm the "religious as autonomous" perspective which held that religious experiences within Protestant churches is significantly more intense than in Catholic churches, in both church attendance and familiarity with their pastor or priest. Despite these differences, Steigenga discovered that the entire religious landscape in Central America had been thoroughly "Pentecostalized" with large percentages of Protestants and even Catholics demonstrating charismatic and religious conservative characteristics. Known as the most characteristic trait of the Pentecostal charismatic experience, glossolalia or "speaking in tongues" was experienced by respondents across denominational affiliations, including the non-religious.

The third chapter explores the implications of religious affiliation for political activities, attitudes and beliefs. Challenging the common belief that Central American Protestants are more conservative and politically quiescent than other groups, Steigenga found that Pentecostals reported voting as frequently as Catholics and Mainstream Protestants reported voting more often than Catholics. However, all Protestants are less likely to challenge the status quo by publicly criticizing elected officials. Steigenga concludes that religious beliefs and not religious affiliations have a major influence

on political variables. Consequently, “pentecostalized” beliefs such as millennialism and glossolalia are useful in predicting political conservatism.

Chapter four provides a helpful survey of the political history of Guatemala focusing on the interactions between religion, politics, church and state. Guatemala has a history of brutal political repression, often supported by either the Catholic Church or Protestants depending on the regime in control. Steigenga's research demonstrates the notion that Protestants represent a conservative and coherent political movement in Guatemala is simply wrong. Popular images that pit an activist Catholic left against an apolitical conservative Protestant right are too simplistic and not useful. Steigenga also concludes that Protestants as a whole should not be categorized as "politically quiescent," particularly because his survey shows that religious affiliation has little to no effect on political behavior, while religious beliefs do. The Pentecostalization of denominations have a much more pronounced effect on quiescence. This is an important finding for Steigenga because it at least mildly contradicts the enthusiastic conclusions which Amy Sherman draws from her research in Guatemala, indicating that more research in this particular area is needed.

Costa Rica is in fact a polar opposite to Guatemala in practically every respect, which is why Steigenga chose it as a case-study. Costa Rica is characterized by openness in politics, a history of minimal political conflicts and lack of colonialism, homogeneity of ethnicities, the absence of a military, and a fair amount of economic success. This makes Costa Rica the exception in Central America which Steigenga points out. This raises the question of the applicability of any results from Costa Rica to the rest of Central America. In fact, living in Costa Rica is an independent variable in several of the regression analyses that the author provides, thus severely limiting the results as they apply to all of Central America.

However, Costa Rica is not the exception in that “Pentecostalization” is as widespread in Costa Rica as it is in Guatemala. This is more noticeable due to the fact that only 11 percent of Costa Rica is Protestant. The conclusions in Costa Rica emphasize that religious conservatism in the form of

millennialism, as well as charismatic experiences, have the most significant effect on attitudes toward women and the poor. In terms of political behavior, Costa Rica demonstrates that the political system has more influence on those with higher levels of religious intensity.

Some of Steigenga's most surprising results (and perhaps the most significant in many ways) came in the area of how Pentecostalism and religious beliefs impacted beliefs on gender equality. His expectation reflected attitudes of many others- that the patriarchal tone prevalent in Pentecostalism would mean that Pentecostalism would negatively correlate with favorable attitudes toward women. There was no significant difference between Pentecostals and Catholics, leaving more questions than answers. However, millennialist views again were an important factor, negatively affecting attitudes on women's rights. Amazingly, the most significant predictor of positive attitudes towards women was doctrinal orthodoxy (the more doctrinally orthodox, the more positive the response). These attitudes were reflected much less at a macro-level, in part because doctrinal orthodoxy also correlated with an unwillingness to challenge authority (pre-supposed by Steigenga to come from Romans 13).

Throughout the book, Steigenga proves that there is a tendency among Protestants in Central America to respect and obey political authorities. He also concludes there is no evidence that the participatory and egalitarian aspects of Protestantism lead to more political activity (Costa Rica) or less (Guatemala). Steigenga's results support neither complete pessimism nor optimism on a macro-level in the way in which Pentecostalism affects political behavior but may in fact be born out on a community-level. Additionally, blanket classifications of political scales (left, right, center) prove to be completely useless in the Central American context. This indicates the need for a more complex analysis. *The Politics of the Spirit* provides an additional framework for investigating the nature of the relationship between Pentecostalism and political behavior in Central America. Steigenga raises important questions about the implications of widespread generalizations about Pentecostals in Latin America and relevant areas for further research.

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