

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

## Introduction to the Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

VIRGINIA GARRARD-BURNETT, PAUL FRESTON,  
AND STEPHEN C. DOVE

The *Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America* is a timely publication, for at least three reasons. The first is the historical and contemporary centrality of religion in the life of Latin America, a region that has itself been growing in global importance. A second is that the Latin American religious field is undergoing an extremely rapid process of change. Third, Latin America is important because of its religious distinctiveness in global comparative terms. In this Introduction, we expand briefly on each of these factors.

### Historical Centrality of Religion in Latin America

We suggest that it is possible, even useful, to view the entire history of Latin America as religious history. The Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the New World was, both legally and ideologically, a “religious” endeavor, the conversion of its native peoples being the *sine qua non* of conquest and colonization. As we shall see, despite pockets of resistance, the “spiritual conquest” of northern Latin America was more or less complete by the end of the sixteenth century.

Much of South America, at least those areas touched by European conquest and colonization, however, had been evangelized by the end of the seventeenth. Robert Ricard’s notion of a “spiritual conquest” (a phrase he coined in the early 1930s that refers to both the spiritual and institutional expansion of Roman Catholicism in the New World) does not begin to convey the complexity and ambiguities of faith and practice among native people in the conquest zones. It does, however, provide a sense of the pervasive Catholic hegemony – social and ideological, as well as spiritual – that would define Latin America for most of its history. Indeed, during the colonial period, the region was not even known as “Latin America,” but simply as part of the realm of Christendom located in the overseas colonies of the Iberian Catholic kings. So dominant

I

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GARRARD-BURNETT ET AL.

was the hegemony of the colonial Church, not only in terms of its institutions but also in its sway over hearts, minds, and fealty, that the reduction and marginalization of the Church became a chief preoccupation of nation-building statesmen in the nineteenth century.

The colonial religious history of Latin America, marked by conquest, colonization, resistance, accommodation, and adaptation, closely parallels the region's secular history and shares many of the same themes. Although we find it important to sketch out the institutional history of the Iberian Catholic Church in the New World – this being the “bones” that give structure to our historical understanding – this work also engages the more recent historiographical studies that examine the intersection of religion with race, ethnicity, gender, and secular culture. We also recognize that Christianity posed, and to some extent, continues to offer, important epistemological problems for non-Western peoples and their established belief systems. Thus, this volume explores the spiritual dimensions of what Hans Sieber called the “creolized religions” that emerge from the collision and conjunction of European, indigenous, and African cosmovisions.

That said, there is no question that Catholicism was at the center of Spain and Portugal's conquests of the Americas. The stereotype of conquest in the name of “God, Gold, and Glory” is based in fact, but the role played by Catholicism and Catholic identity (as opposed to an individual Iberian's personal beliefs and pious practice) is much more complex than this basic equation suggests. Certainly, the Roman Catholic Church was as powerful a political player as existed anywhere in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and this accounts in part for why the rationale for conquest and the rules for its conduct were cast in terms that melded religious and imperial motives quite seamlessly.

To cynical modern eyes, it is difficult to reconcile the zealous Christian rhetoric of the conquistadors with the more peaceable sensibilities that we now associate with an ideal ethic of “Christian behavior.” But for many Iberians in the sixteenth century, Christianity and, specifically, Catholicism was a militant faith, and Catholicism was so fully interwoven with what we now consider to be secular issues such as identity and citizenship that it was impossible to untangle the different strands. Columbus left Spain on his first voyage in 1492 just five months after the North African Moors abandoned their last Iberian outpost in the southern city of Granada. The Spanish liberation of Granada signaled the end of the 700-year occupation of the peninsula by Muslim North Africans. The struggle to evict the Moors, known as the *Reconquista*, lasted several centuries, during which time the Spaniards identified themselves first

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

as Christians fighting the infidels, and only secondarily as allegiants of the various Iberian kingdoms.

As many of the first Spaniards in the New World were themselves veterans of the *Reconquista*, it is not surprising that they would bring with them the crusaders' mentality and methods. The *Reconquista* gave Spaniards a perspective on civil hierarchy in which religion was a deciding factor. Like all Europeans at the time, Iberian people in the early sixteenth century identified the known world of the West not so much by secular geopolitical definitions, but rather in terms of "Christendom." For Iberians, the world was divided into the dichotomy that the Argentinean scholar and statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento would much later designate as "civilization and barbarism." The definition of who comprised the category of "civilized," the "*gente decente*" (decent people), invoked a much wider range of criteria than we might suspect from our vantage: it measured the "civility" of a people by the color of their skin, their class, general conduct, material achievements, art, eating habits, mode of dress, and, above all, religion. Loyalty to the holy Catholic faith might have little to do in a practical sense with personal morality and ethics, but it clearly defined political fealty and social identity. Thus, although the Aztec cities might be quite "civilized" in Spanish eyes, the Aztec people's religious beliefs and bloody rituals relegated them to the category of barbarians, deserving of conquest and in need of redemption. In turn, the religion of the Europeans seemed equally confounding to the indigenous people.

The process of the conversion of the Americas was both ambitious and ultimately ambivalent. Through some coercion and a significant amount of innovation on the part of the friars – methods to attract natives to the faith sometimes included plays and dances, ballads and songs, translated into the language of the listeners – indigenous people under Spanish control, with some notable exceptions, converted readily, if only nominally, to Christianity. Although Catholic orthodoxy deeply permeated the spiritual lives of many converts as time went on, for others the "conversion" was entirely superficial. Some clung tenaciously to their own beliefs, occulting them behind a Catholic veneer. Others superimposed Christian doctrine onto a traditional context, producing a body of belief that they considered to be Catholic but that bore little resemblance to orthodox European faith or ritual. This meant that, from the beginning, Catholicism was molded by local preferences and conditions into a wide variety of forms and mutations that belied the ideal of a single, dogmatic, orthodox, and unitary universal Church.

The fusion of religious ideas and imagery also became common in Latin America among slaves, whom Europeans brought to the New World from

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GARRARD-BURNETT ET AL.

Africa in ever increasing numbers from the second half of the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century. For Africans, the process of conversion, mirroring their circumstances, was even less voluntary than it was for the New World natives. All the same, Portuguese slave holders in Brazil and Spaniards in the Caribbean and coastal zones where slavery was practiced on a large scale generally did not feel an obligation to go much beyond a perfunctory conversion of their charges. Under these circumstances, slaves managed to covertly maintain much of their own religions, hiding them from their masters by lending the Catholic saints the qualities of their own spiritual entities, and obscuring the meaning of certain religious practices, such as drumming, into what appeared to be harmless entertainment. With the passage of time, African beliefs began to coexist more comfortably with Christian ones, producing systems of religious bricolage such as Brazil's Candomblé or Cuba's Santería that are neither fully African nor fully Christian and are unique to the regions and peoples from which they originated.

However, the reach of the Church in colonial Spanish America and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Portuguese America (where the Church was neither as rich nor as powerful) stretched beyond the conquest of hearts and spirits. As an institution, the Catholic Church was the single most influential political and economic player in the colonial world, with a presence and authority that often exceeded that of the Crown. At one level, Church and Crown shared a power in both practice and parity, as evidenced by the arrangement known as the *patronato real* (in Portuguese, *padroado*), that allowed the Crown (rather than Rome) to maintain the Church and propagate the faith, including the establishment and construction of all churches and monasteries and to administer collection of the tithe. By a more ordinary measure, however, the Church was more of an actual presence in the remote regions of the New World than the colonial government, located in the distant regional capitals of Mexico City, Lima, Buenos Aires, or Quito (or Salvador and later Rio de Janeiro in the Portuguese possessions), could ever hope to be. Even in areas so isolated that a priest might pass through only once every few years to perform basic sacramental services such as marriages, baptisms, and masses for the dead, a community would typically maintain a chapel and organize itself according to the spatial schema imposed by the colonial Church, the *parroquia*. Local inhabitants would also observe the major celebrations, obligations, and rhythms of the liturgical calendar, thus investing community members with a sense of belonging in their view toward the Church (if not always toward the clergy, whom they often thought to be rapacious) that they did not necessarily feel toward the Crown or, later, the state.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

The Church was also the most pervasive economic institution in colonial Spanish America and Brazil, at a time when few other international financial organizations existed to serve the region. The Church acquired vast funds through bequests; tithes; fees paid for sacraments; dowries of young women who entered convents; rentals on Church-owned properties; and ownership of real estate outright, which it possessed, theoretically at least, in perpetuity. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Church was the largest landowner in all of Latin America and also the primary financial institution from which most *criollos* (New World-born Spaniards) borrowed money to buy land or to invest in other ventures. The Catholic Church was also a key benefactor of honor and status, the coveted social currency of Iberian life. A vocation in the Church was avidly sought out by pious, wealthy families who might have second sons who could not inherit their fathers' lands, or daughters who wanted to become nuns out of a real sense of religious vocation or to avoid the only alternative open to them, that of wife and mother.

The Church put much of its money into education and the intellectual life of the colonies, over which it had virtually sole control until the late eighteenth century. With the exception of a few Crown colleges, the Church (most often the Jesuits) founded and operated all the schools in Spanish and Portuguese America; as a result, every educated person during the colonial period was the product of an ecclesiastical education. The Church, moreover, was the keeper of public morals and intellectual hegemony. The Spanish Inquisition, established by Queen Isabella in 1478, monitored the influx of dangerous or subversive thought into Spanish America (such as Lutheran tracts or books written by the Enlightenment philosophers) and guarded religious and political conformity.

By the end of the colonial period in Latin America, the Christendom model (that is to say, the hegemony of Christian symbols, iconography, calendrical methods, social mores, hierarchical values – in short, the vast epistemology of Christianity, far beyond the basic issues of belief and practice) had left a deep imprint on Spanish America, if somewhat less so in the Portuguese colony. It is hardly surprising, then, that when independence came to Latin America in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church found itself caught between the two elite polarities of the state-formation project. These were the Liberals (modernists who viewed the Church as backward and also as the state's only real competitor for new citizens' hearts and minds) and the Conservatives (who saw the Church as the holy bastion of the status quo). The Church was also the source of a ready-made catalog of potent symbols and images, already heavy with valence for the general population, which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GARRARD-BURNETT ET AL.

new political actors could either combat or incorporate into the trappings of nationhood. Such was the case, most famously, with the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, who was co-opted from strictly Catholic significance into the symbol of Mexican nationalism; or the less well-known Sacred Heart of Jesus in Ecuador, which became the focus of Ecuadorian national identity under Conservatives in the nineteenth century.

When modernizing Liberals gained control of most areas of Latin America in the second half of the nineteenth century, their agendas carried a powerful anti-Catholic subtext. Under Liberal rule, Protestant missionaries, mostly from the United States, undertook work in much of Latin America, offering a new variety of Christianity that Liberals valued as much – or more – for its emphasis on literacy, education, and opposition to Catholic hegemony as for its religious teachings. As Liberal anticlerical measures brought more and more stress to the institutional Roman Catholic Church, it slowly began to recede in the social and religious landscape of the region. The official Church's decline was particularly evident in two zones located far from state and ecclesiastical authorities, where its institutional resources had always been stretched thin even in more favorable times. These were the densely populated but nearly inaccessible indigenous areas and the frontier regions far from the metropolises of the emerging nation-states.

While the institutional Church began to vanish from the nineteenth-century countryside, Catholicism as a lived religion emphatically did not. To the contrary, a type of popular Catholicism as practiced and interpreted by an enthusiastic local laity quickly emerged to supplement and eventually replace orthodox Catholicism in many indigenous regions and on the far geographic frontier, where it blossomed without benefit of clergy. The manifestations of popular religion in these areas were not merely reactions to the reduced presence of the Church, but also represented local adaptations of vital elements of the faith. In many areas, this unlicensed “folk Catholicism” typically grafted elements of local spirituality, legend, and shamanism onto orthodox Catholic dogma, resulting in a fusion of indigenous and Catholic beliefs that were specific and resonant to a given locality and community. In many indigenous regions of northern Latin America, Mesoamerica in particular, it would be the *cofradías* – the religious sodalities introduced by the Spaniards during the colonial period – that assumed religious authority over local practices and beliefs, building up a body of *costumbre*, or local custom and practice, that became the unique religious marker of identity in indigenous communities. Elsewhere, traditional beliefs that centuries of Christian contact had never effectively snuffed out reemerged into the public forum.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the now more autonomous and therefore “Romanized” Catholic Church sent missionaries to Latin America to weed out syncretic practices and reintroduce Catholic orthodoxy into communities where “folk Catholicism” (i.e., Catholicism filtered through the lens of local beliefs, imagery, and parochial tastes) prevailed. But the weeding-out was far from successful. Rural folk Catholicism survived, alongside the multitude of sanctioned and unsanctioned popular devotions found across the continent – the candles, novenas, prayers to uncanonized saints, images, holy powders, charms, and pilgrimages – around which everyday people built their religious lives, whether the official Church approved of them or not. People’s religious imaginations, then as now, were rich and voracious, and they eagerly embraced spiritual innovations – Spiritism, or African practices, for example – without feeling any particular sense of disloyalty or contradiction with the teaching of the Holy Mother Church. This devout but often ad hoc religious life both inside and outside the official Church continued to define the lives of many “ordinary” Catholics across the Americas.

The formal institutional Church did not, of course, disappear with the Liberal reforms of the late nineteenth century. During the decades prior to World War II, despite some new initiatives to address the increasingly injurious effects on Catholicism of modern capitalism, secularism, and totalitarian political movements, the institutional Roman Church continued to take for granted that Latin America was an unassailable Catholic bastion, despite the hostility of its many secular and anticlerical governments. This was true inasmuch as people almost universally considered themselves to be Catholic, if only nominally so. In the Brazilian census of 1940, for example, Catholics still comprised more than 95 percent of the population. But by mid-century, new kinds of ideologies – mostly political – had, for many, begun to flame the passions that active Catholic religiosity had once kindled.

The global Church had begun much earlier to address the threat to its spiritual hegemony in a papal encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII, popularly known as the “working man’s pope.” In 1891, the pivotal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* advanced the position that social morality and the principles of justice and charity should regulate the relationship between capital and labor. Although this encyclical resulted in important new currents in Catholic social thought and praxis, *Rerum Novarum* had a much greater effect in Europe than in Latin America, at least in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1931, Pope Pius XI furthered this thinking with his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, which spoke to the ethical implications of these issues; but the Church nonetheless failed to regain the political and economic viability that it had lost in Latin



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GARRARD-BURNETT ET AL.

America over the course of the long nineteenth century, even as the people themselves remained staunchly Catholic throughout most of the region.

This changed dramatically, however, in the postwar period, when the spread of communism through Eastern Europe and then to Cuba served notice that no land could be considered inexorably Catholic, not even in Latin America. It was in the immediate wake of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 that the Church began to take stock of the fact that it needed to establish a broad new paradigm to combat a variety of forces that threatened its ancient base of influence over the faithful across the Catholic world. First among these were the “isms,” such as communism, Protestantism, and secularism that combined with urbanization and other demographic changes to pull people away from traditional lifestyles and worldviews. But at its root, the most serious danger was modernity itself; by the mid-twentieth century its emphasis on extreme individuality, materialism, and reification of capitalism offered a grave challenge not just to the Church, but also to religion in general. And the Catholic Church knew it.

With this in mind, in October 1962 Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council. The objective was to “open the Church to the world” and, essentially, to reclaim Catholicism’s moral and temporal authority by reasserting its relevance to people living in modern times. In particular, Vatican II offered a renewed emphasis on the Church’s role in the problems of the secular world. It is this last element that caught the interest and enthusiasm of many clergy in Latin America, who believed that Vatican II signaled a new commitment in the Church’s obligation to the poor. In 1968, the Bishops’ Conference of Latin America (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano – CELAM) convened its second General Conference in Medellín, Colombia, at which the bishops called for a specific application of Vatican II to the region. The conference articulated the Church’s “preferential option for the poor” and called for biblically based consciousness raising (“*conscientização*” in Portuguese or “*concientización*” in Spanish) to help the poor take control of their lives in the secular world. This action-based faith became known as Liberation Theology, and it had a galvanizing effect throughout Latin America, bringing thousands of the faithful to an informed understanding of their beliefs and to social action for the very first time.

Within a decade, however, the official Church had begun to move in a different direction. In 1979, the Latin American bishops met again, this time in Puebla, Mexico, where they issued documents that suggested a subtle but definitive official distancing from Liberation Theology. One factor behind this retreat was the Church’s sense of responsibility for the literally thousands of clergy and lay Catholics who had become politicized



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

through consciousness raising, and who had died or “disappeared” because of their work for social justice through the Church. (The assassination of El Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980 would only underscore this preoccupation.) Second, a year earlier, in 1978, Karol Józef Wojtyła had been elected pope and taken the name of John Paul II. He turned out to be a charismatic but conservative pope whose experience in communist Poland had made him wary of Church association with revolutionary popular movements. Undergirding these concerns was the bishops’ not altogether incorrect perception that Liberation Theology had become a divisive issue within the Catholic Church structure, pitting radical against conservative and rich against poor, and threatening to wrench apart the *corpus christi*, the very body of the Church itself.

As time went on, the Vatican continued to encourage the Latin American bishops to distance themselves from Liberation Theology, as many of them in fact always had. It bears noting that in Argentina – home to then-Jesuit provincial Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis – the official Church and the military enjoyed a close symbiotic relationship during the Dirty War against the political left, which unfolded during the heyday of Liberation Theology. The Argentine case points to the fact that Liberation Theology, even at its apex in the late 1970s, and despite its fame and high moral purpose, was actually a minority movement in worldwide Catholicism, even within Latin America. In 1992, CELAM convened once again, this time in Santo Domingo, where it issued yet another series of pastoral letters that further distanced the formal Church from the precepts of Liberation Theology. The fifth CELAM, which met at Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, seemed to indicate clearly that the Church’s focus in the new century would be on ecclesial and family-focused social matters, such as prioritizing opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage over other types of pastoral concerns.

Yet history is not without its surprises. The election in 2013 of Pope Francis, the first Latin American pope, did not mark a return to Liberation Theology by any means. But it did signal a turn toward what might be called a Latin American ecclesial sensibility for the poor and disenfranchised, and a movement away from the emphasis on sexual strictures for the faithful and on institutional protection that had preoccupied his predecessors and provoked the alienation of many Catholics worldwide. It is too early to tell if Pope Francis’ pastoral directives will refocus and invigorate global Catholicism in the twenty-first century, and whether his papacy will help to staunch the flow of Catholics out of the Church, especially in Latin America. But at this writing, the winds of change appear to be gently shifting once again in the Catholic Church’s direction.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76733-0 - The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America

Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston and Stephen C. Dove

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GARRARD-BURNETT ET AL.

## Looking Forward

We conclude this section with a word on the contemporary importance of religion in Latin America. If the historical importance of religion in the region is generally recognized, its contemporary role is often overlooked. In part, this is due to the fact that in global comparative terms, the region can be characterized as *tranquilly religious*,<sup>1</sup> rather than either *secularized* or *defensively religious*. That is, it is at the same time among the most highly religious regions of the world, but its religiousness is not as socially and politically contentious (much less, violent) as in some other parts of the world.

The religious tranquility of Latin America comes out in Inglehart's analysis of the World Values Survey. The region is characterized by strong emphasis on traditional values such as religion, but also on the free choice and self-expression that are more common in wealthy countries. Thus, says Inglehart, Latin America rivals the Islamic world in the importance given to religion (even if the level of practice is only moderate in global terms). But in subjective well-being and sense of being in control of one's life, the region rivals the Nordic countries.

Similarly, the Pew Forum's 2014 survey of religion in Latin America shows that belief in God characterizes more than 99 percent of the population of Guatemala and Nicaragua, and more than 90 percent everywhere in the region with the exception of Latin America's persistent outlier in questions of religion, Uruguay (and even there belief in God is as high as 81 percent). Those who say religion is very important in their lives range from 90 percent in Honduras down to 41 percent in Chile and only 28 percent in Uruguay; but answers in fourteen of the nineteen Latin American countries surveyed are (often far) higher than the 56 percent response in the supposedly very religious United States.<sup>2</sup>

### *Rapid Change in the Latin American Religious Field*

Latin America was born under the sign of Christendom, the territorial and monopolistic conception of a Christian world. It was an export of a particular incarnation of the European Christendom model, characterized by the

1 Paul Freston, "As duas transições futuras: Católicos, Protestantes e sociedade na América Latina," *Ciencias Sociales y Religión/Ciências Sociais e Religião*, 12, no. 12 (October 2010): 13–30.

2 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region* (Washington, DC: 2014). [pewforum.org/files/2014/11/Religion-in-Latin-America-11-12-PM-full-PDF.pdf](http://pewforum.org/files/2014/11/Religion-in-Latin-America-11-12-PM-full-PDF.pdf).