CHAPTER TWO

MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS

The author well remembers Colombia’s independence day of 1969, when together with whole families from the neighborhood, crammed in a tiny living room, everyone watched on a black-and-white television set the first step of a man on the moon. There were several expressions of admiration and awe toward the United States, the country that had brought the moon to our homes. Little did the author know what the situation was. He was not aware of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban revolution, the failure of the Alliance for Progress, and many other historical events. It was not until secondary school that he started to hear that the relationship of the United States and Latin America was difficult, to say the least. Even though the reasons for the constant anti-Yankee sentiments and slogans were not evident, it was clear that there was unfriendliness between the “Eagle” and the Latin American countries.

This chapter explores the mutual perceptions of North Americans and Latin Americans and how these perceptions have shaped the relationship between them. This will accord with Rezeptionsgeschichte looking at how, in general, either side understood, perceived, and received the other. The contention is that the historical and political dealings are the backdrop for the religious exchange, including theological dialogue. The events taking place in Latin America and the policies of the United States were strong influences that, consciously or not, both parties brought to the conversation table. The question to answer here is what were the underlying assumptions that influenced the different perceptions of one side by the other. The answer has two parts: first, what some prominent North American politicians and political analysts say about how North Americans perceived Latin America, and, second, what Latin America thought of the United States. In spite of generalization and isolated cases, these perceptions are representative of the state of the relationship between both sides in the 1960s and 1970s.

Pan-American dealings have been the subject of intense academic work and studies. More than two thousand titles come up when searching library data bases like WorldCat or First Search. There are even
specialized departments in several universities that offer Latin American studies at undergraduate and graduate level. Consequently, the space dedicated to this subject here could not exhaust the complexity and depth of the theme. Therefore, two criteria have directed the choice of authors and works cited. First, they need to deal with our particular time framework—the 1970s. Some of the books were written in later years, yet they analyze and reflect on the decade we are studying here. The second criterion for the works cited is that they reflect a mainstream and not an extremist position. The author recognizes that this is a subjective criterion. However, his choice was based on each writer’s own assessment and on the number of quotations of those specialists by other writers. The works used in this book are those that are considered authorities in their field.

The United States’ Perception of Latin America

Even though the “countries of Latin America (Brazil excepted) share with the United States the experience of being the oldest continuous republics of the contemporary world,”1 the bicentennial relationship between the United States and Latin America has been characterized by “resentment, mistrust, disrespect, and hostility.”2 Others describe it as a “crisis of the inter-American system,”3 a “logjam,”4 a “failure,”5 a “polarization of the Western Hemisphere,”6 and “a chronically unpeaceful and disruptive centrifugal atmosphere in the Western Hemisphere community.”7

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6 Gaspar, United States-Latin America, 4.