Chapter 8

Christianity in Latin America

Struggle and Accommodation

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Introduction

Well into the second decade of the twenty-first century Christianity is still the all-dominating religion in Latin America as it has been since the early days of colonisation. Nevertheless, as will become clear, the religious landscape of the region has seen some dramatic transformations within the last centuries. For one thing, the relationship between institutional Christianity and political authorities has constituted a continuous field of tension and negotiation. Second, the beliefs and practices of lay Christians have followed their own heterogeneous trajectories, sometimes in close proximity to and sometimes conflicting with institutional Church policies and teachings. Third, official theologies have themselves been subjected to considerable revision and debate in the course of history. Finally, from being known as ‘the Catholic Continent’, Latin America has within the last century become a highly pluralistic region, characterised by various ways of being Christian and not least by fierce competition between different Christian denominations. Focusing particular attention on such developments and dynamics this chapter presents a condensed version of a vivid and fascinating history of a rapidly changing religious field.

Christianisation and Colonialism

The European discovery of the Americas was followed by an enormous conquering and colonising mobilisation by the Spanish and the Portuguese crowns in the early sixteenth century. Catholicism arrived but was placed under colonial tutelage. In a series of papal bulls from 1493 to 1518, the Spanish king was given authority over both the conquered lands and the Church in the colonies. The monarch assumed the costs of the mission among the Native Americans, and in return Pope Julius II granted him a Patronato Real, which effectively gave him the power to name and send missionaries, erect dioceses and ecclesiastical jurisdictions, appoint bishops and priests, and collect tithes throughout the colonies (Prien 1978: 125–127).
In a majority of cases Christianisation of Native Americans was forced and came in a \textit{de facto} combination with repression of indigenous religion and the destruction of sacred sites, scriptures and artifacts. Evangelisation took place parallel to the establishment of serfdom in the \textit{encomienda}-system, where the indigenous workforce was collectively ascribed to \textit{hacienda} owners. The sexual exploitation of indigenous women by the Spanish and later Creole males resulted in the emergence of the new, mixed race and caste of the \textit{Mestizo} (Prien 1978: 83).\footnote{Creoles (\textit{Criollos}) are whites of Spanish descent born in the colonies, as opposed to \textit{peninsulares}, who were born in Spain.} Imported European diseases, forced labour and a collective anomic depression resulted in a decline of at least 75 percent of the Native American population during the first 150 years of colonisation. The succumbing of the indigenous and the increasing demand for workforce led to a massive import of African slaves (Prien 1978: 81–82).

Though the institutional Church was a tool in the hand of oppressive colonisers, there was also another face of Catholicism. Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and other male apostolic orders were assigned to missionary tasks in remote areas, and though they often rooted out ‘idolatrous’ figures and scriptures with the same zeal as their diocesan counterparts, they also took pains to acquire knowledge about the language, customs and religion of the indigenous. The result was a more deep-rooted mission with less coercion and force than in other areas. In many cases, the friars acted as defenders of indigenous rights vis-à-vis the colonisers. Most famous is the example of Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), a coloniser on Hispaniola (now Dominican Republic), who eventually became a Dominican priest and later the bishop of Chiapas. Before he became a bishop, de Las Casas and his brethren peacefully evangelised among rebellious tribes in a territory that is now part or Guatemala. As both peace and Christianisation were achieved through dialogue in the local tongue and without military intervention the district was named \textit{Verapaz} (‘true peace’) (Dussel 1992: 96). de La Casas’ indignant defence of the rights of the indigenous in the Spanish court in Valladolid marks a positive highpoint in an otherwise mostly shameful mission history of the Catholic Church in colonial Latin America.

Throughout the colonial era and until the end of the nineteenth century Catholicism was the official and public religion of Latin America. In this period the Church retained its dual face of colonial oppressor and home and voice of the despaiored (Gonzálež and González 2008: 63). Though Christianisation often occurred in oppressive and intolerant ways the conquered and downtrodden peoples of Latin America nevertheless managed to take some measure.