
As the title indicates, this is an ambitious and comprehensive undertaking: to tell the long and complex story of Christianity in Latin America within the covers of a single volume. The authors are uncle and niece thus making the study inter-generational as well as historical. They appear to come from an Evangelical (?) or Protestant background and, in some cases, therefore, the writing is vivid and arresting when they are discussing Protestant or Pentecostal issues. Whilst the coverage of the dominant Roman Catholic tradition is competent, an impression is left that the authors experience this tradition from the outside – perhaps this is necessarily so.

The two faces of Christianity in Latin America are everywhere. There is the ruthless exploitation of land, resources and, above all, people by the Conquistadores. A rule that was so harsh and cruel that Church historians have wondered how any of the indigenous people were converted. On the other hand, there are the Dominicans, like Montesinos and Las Casas, who campaigned tirelessly for the recognition of the natural rights of the Indian peoples.

While Latin America was gradually Christianised, whether by coercion or by patient evangelisation and catechesis, it cannot be denied that much of this was superficial and the authors rightly raise the question of syncretism at a number of points in the study. Mixed with pietistic Catholicism there remains the influence of the Pre-Columbian religions, African spirituality brought by the slaves and occultism which draws on them all.

The cruelty of the newer European conquerors was matched by the dominant indigenous people, such as the Aztecs. There is the horror and evil of Aztec and Inca religion involving human sacrifice but, as the missionaries realised, there was also an anticipation of Christian themes of creation, sacrifice and resurrection on which they were able to draw.

The authors, correctly, devote much attention to the Spanish and Portuguese forms in which Christianity first arrived on the continent but this has the effect, until the very end of the book, of marginalising its universal dimension. As Stephen Neill has remarked, if the missionaries of the earlier centuries had indigenised the faith more thoroughly, the history may well have been very different.
The Council of Trent resulted in local attempts at inculturation which, although partial, were also real. ‘Indians’, and those of mixed heritage could appeal to the Church’s teaching on equality. The Church played a major rôle in the education of indigenous people, if only to make their catechesis easier. Although the writers are very concerned about the Church’s racial policies, they do not set out how some of these changed, for example, on the ordination of ‘Indian’ and mixed-race priests.

For much of the period under discussion the Patronato (or, in Portuguese, the Padroado) was in high tension with the Papacy. The Spanish and Portuguese Crown demanded the right to make senior appointments in the Church and resisted bitterly any attempt to circumvent its privileges. The association of the Church with the imperial powers sometimes aided its mission but also hindered it. When, for instance, Pope Gregory XIII permitted the ordination of those of mixed-blood, he was immediately opposed by the Spanish King who forbade the bishops from carrying out any such ordinations.

With the coming of independence, conservative-inclined governments tended to favour a formal relationship with the Church which gave it influence in society but also alienated those from other political backgrounds. Liberals tended to be anti-clerical and tried to prevent the Church’s involvement in public life and in areas like health and education. Anti-clericalism, and the even greater paucity of priests it brought about, as in Mexico, meant an increased rôle for the laity. The participation of lay people in popular Roman Catholic movements, particularly when the Church was under restriction, may form some of the background to the emergence of lay leaders in the Base Ecclesial Communities and in proposals by Liberation Theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, that, in the absence of a priest, lay leaders could not only lead in non-Eucharistic worship but even help the community in celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Canonically, this was not to be the Mass, but it did have a sacramental character. The authors note also the involvement of lay people in social movements like Catholic Action and the emergence of Christian Democracy. These too may provide for some of the background to Liberation Theology.

The arrival of Protestantism is linked firmly to the work of the Bible Societies and their desire to distribute the Scriptures widely in Latin America. It is noted that liberal regimes encouraged Protestants to come to Latin America partly to counter Roman Catholic dominance