

17.55, Introduction to Latin American Studies, Fall 2006  
Prof. Chappell Lawson  
**Session 16: Day of the Dead and Religion in Latin America**

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### Religion and Religious Experience

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What gives life meaning?

- Family matters, but family can cause problems. What then holds it together?
- Community ties are crucial, but what gives community strength?
- All of this is especially important for the poor

### Timeline

- 1891: Pope Leo XIII advocates protecting poor and promoting social justice as part of Church doctrine; still not the primary focus of Church teachings
- Cuba (1959)
- 1962: Vatican II
- 1963: Pope John XXIII dies
- 1965: Vatican II ends
- Rise of Christian Democracy (1960s)
- Camilo Torres (1966)
- Medellín 1968: Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) meets to apply Vatican II; endorses preferential option for the poor
- *En el lago* (1977) by Ernesto Cardenal, later a Minister in the Sandinista regime
- Cardinal Wojtyla becomes Pope John Paul II (1978)
- People's Church in Nicaragua (1979)
- Assassination of Oscar Romero (1980)
- Priests ordered to leave Nicaraguan government (1981)
- Preoccupation with unity

- JP II visits Central America
- Countereformation in 1984; Leonardo Boff (Brazilian leftist theologian) silenced
- Extraordinary Synod of 1985

Discuss changes in the Church and their implications for politics

No single Catholic position

- Competing and contesting positions
- Blending of pre-Hispanic or African practices
- Indians used to this
  - Toltec gods in Mayas
  - Aztec gods imposed on conquered peoples
  - New deities accepted into pantheon
  - Not willing to give up old gods
  - Old deities go underground
- Layering of religious beliefs
  - Juan Diego, Virgin of Guadalupe, and mother goddess Tonanzin in 1531
  - San Cristobal and Zinacantan, Maypole in Bluefields, Day of Dead
  - **[Questions: Does this mean it's any less "pure" a form of religion? Answer: No, look at Christianity in Europe]**
- Same thing with slave communities
  - Orixás (or spirits, West African deities) become identified with saints

**Protestantism making inroads**

- There were always some
  - Miskito Indians, who had not been conquered were converted by mainline denominations
  - German Moravian Missionaries
  - But only 12.5% are now mainline denominations
  - Rest are Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists (7.5%)
  - Pentacostals and evangelicos (80%)
- Some figures
  - 10-14% of total population
  - Guatemala 30%
  - Chile 21-22%
  - Brazil 16-20% (1/2 of all Latin American protestants)
- Jerry Falwell, Assemblies of God
- Pentacostals
  - Direct experience of individuals with Holy Spirit
  - Prophecies
  - Faith healings and exorcism
  - Speaking in tongues
  - No mixing, problems caused by evil spirits (use West African deities' names in exorcism); can't go to Catholic mass occasionally
  - Less discrimination based on race
  - Higher clergy to believer ratio
  - More popular base
  - Why successful? (1) religiously under-served communities, (2) money from abroad, (3) immediate conversion, (4) very clear payoff with self-help and talk of community problems, (5) good message of self-reliance and individualism amidst strong community

### **Afro-Brazilian spiritism**

- Umbanda (1930s); Kardaon is a French movement imported to Brazil
  - Light
  - Spirits don't enter the body of the faithful, but rather than of the medium
  - More mixed race
  - Les voodoo, more incorporation of national folk heroes
  - Nationalization of deities
  - No sacrifices, no blood
- Condomblé
  - Heavy
  - Direct possession of audience
  - More black
  - Sacrifices and blood
- No exclusive adherence of religious faith, flexible
- Santeria (Cuba and Puerto Rico)

### **Questions for class discussion**

- Give overview of Salvadoran civil war, so they can read the stuff
- What happens at Vatican II and Medellin?
- What is the "preferential option for the poor"?
- What is "liberation theology"?
- Describe Sandinista People's Church
- What is a CEB? What happens there?
- What does pre-Vatican II service look like?
- What does a modern Catholic service look like?
- What does a CEB look like?
- What does an Assembly of God service look like?
- Difference between Pentacostals and Evangelicals?
- What does Umbanda look like?
- Difference between Candomble and Umbanda
- Tolerance of mingling among Catholics and Protestants?