Religion has been one of the driving forces in Latin America from pre-Columbian times to the present. As René de la Pedraja illustrates in Chapter 3, the Europeans who came to the New World with crosses and swords found religion and politics similarly intertwined in the indigenous civilizations. Since then, religious beliefs have been influenced by multifaceted encounters between divergent cultures. And, as Richard S. Hillman introduces in Chapter 1, these interactions shaped enduring legacies that have been modified over time. Since the earliest conquest, European conquistadores (conquerors) established the Catholic Church as an official institution of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies and suppressed indigenous religions—many of which were grounded in highly sophisticated civilizations. The significant role of the church continued after independence in the early 1800s and into the twentieth century. Even today, a substantial majority of the citizens of contemporary Latin American countries continue to nominally identify themselves as Catholics.

Since the European conquest, the Catholic Church has played a central role in the life of Latin Americans—both as a powerful partner in the colonial and postcolonial states and as the arbiter of the dominant religious doctrine. Yet at the same time for many who profess to be Catholic, including the majority of indigenous peoples and descendents of African slaves, daily religious practice has been syncretic—a blend of native beliefs with the dominant Catholic orthodoxy. In Chapter 9, Kevin A. Yelvington shows how some syncretic religions have served as sources of popular identity and of resistance to social and political authorities. So-called popular religion as practiced by the common people varies widely, depending on the region and the mixture of local cultures.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, scholars predicted that the influence of Catholicism and religion in general would decline in Latin America—
in spite of the widespread cultural religiosity of the people—as modernization associated with urban, industrial economic growth transformed the social landscape. Based on the US and European experiences, the so-called modernization school argued that economic growth leads to greater role differentiation and specialization—in the economy and concomitantly in the political and social spheres (Peterson, Vásquez, and Williams 2001). According to this view, greater social differentiation and specialization give rise to new, modern institutions—political parties, trade unions, governmental bureaucracies, and myriad social institutions—necessary for the rational functioning of individuals and societies in an increasingly complex world. With modernization, religious will be relegated over time to the private sphere as other, secular institutions take over many of the functions of the traditional or premodern authority structures in which political, social and religious authority were interrelated.

As Scott G. McKinney shows in Chapter 6, the twentieth century—albeit with significant boom and bust cycles—has been one of significant economic modernization throughout the region. And the Catholic Church’s dominance of the religious landscape appears to have weakened. There is evidence that increased numbers of individuals identify themselves as adhering to no particular religious faith. Yet the religious landscape in Latin America has hardly disappeared or faded into the margins of societies. Rather, the religious monopoly of the Catholic Church has given way to an increasingly vibrant religious marketplace. Religious belief is more volatile and conversions from Catholicism to other forms of Christianity have increased as have rates of return to new forms of Catholicism. In turn, increased competition between religious institutions fuels changes in the role of churches in local, regional, and national politics. Moreover, as Thomas J. D’Agostino shows in Chapter 4, church and state authorities have worked both with and against one another in attempting to inform and control their common subjects.

Although there was never a monolithic “Latin American Catholic Church,” scholars assert that Catholic churches must be understood as national (even regional) institutions through which the ecclesial concerns and priorities of the Vatican intersect with the local hierarchies’ struggles to make Catholicism and the church meaningful in the concrete reality of believers’ lives (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1992). Likewise, alternative forms of Christianity, syncretic religions, and spiritism compete for relevance in the lives of citizens—leading to a wide array of belief structures with a range of political implications.

The Colonial Role of the Catholic Church

The historical image of Latin America—the so-called Catholic continent—was one of conquistadores with a “sword in one hand and a cross in the other.” Indeed, the role of the Catholic Church in the conquest and subsequent colonial experience is best understood within the unique context of the partnership between the church and the Spanish crown. Throughout the fifteenth century leading up to Christopher Columbus’s expedition, the church had partnered with the crown in a bloody campaign to reconquer the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors and to expel Jews who did not convert to Catholicism. Because of the church’s clear political support for the century-long struggle, it became in essence another arm of the Spanish state. This religiopolitical partnership was carried to the New World. Conquistadores and Catholic missionaries traveled together to conquer the indigenous peoples and take their wealth for the Spanish crown while converting their souls for the Catholic Church. In fact, given the shortage of Spanish personnel and the intersection of church and state, many prelates simply assumed government posts in the viceroyalties of the New World.

In the hope of training an Amerindian priesthood, early missionaries taught indigenous people the Spanish and Portuguese languages as well as the Catholic faith. During the early conquest, local customs that were viewed as not inconsistent with Catholicism were tolerated. Over time, however, the indigenous people’s tendency toward syncretism—blending Catholicism with indigenous beliefs and customs—led subsequent missionaries to take an increasingly intolerant view of all Amerindian religiosity, resulting in a new wave of repression to eliminate local religious icons, worship sites, authorities and belief structures.

From the beginning of the conquest, Catholicism and military, political, economic, and social power were combined in the colonial state. Politically, Spanish America was governed by four viceroyalties—New Spain and Peru, which were established in the sixteenth century, and New Granada and La Plata, which were created in the eighteenth century. The Spanish governors compensated the conquistadores with rights to demand tribute and labor from indigenous peoples, creating from the earliest days of the Spanish conquest a highly stratified class system in which the Spanish and their descendents who were born in the New World lived off the labor of the indigenous populations. The resulting oppression of the indigenous populations—particularly in regions in which forced labor in the silver mines was notoriously brutal and inhuman—made hollow the claims that a central purpose of the colonial state was to win souls for Catholicism. Indeed, at least one voice from within the church denounced the treatment of the indigenous peoples. Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas was so angered by the flagrant abuses of indigenous peoples that he wrote to the Spanish crown begging for new regulations to ameliorate their treatment and called for the importation of African slaves. His entreaties resulted in the New Laws (1542) governing the treatment of the indigenous peoples. However, prohibitions against the enslavement of indigenous peoples as well as regulations to prevent other abuses were never successfully enforced.
and eventually were rescinded when Spanish landowners revolted. Moreover, de las Casas regretted his support for the importation of slaves after witnessing their wretched conditions and inhuman treatment. Efforts of clerics like de las Casas notwithstanding, the colonial system with its hierarchical oppression of the indigenous populations cannot be understood simply as the result of inevitable abuses associated with military and political subjugation; the colonial system was built in partnership with the Catholic Church, which gave the social order its justification and moral imperative.

The Role of the Catholic Church in Liberal-Conservative Battles

In spite of the massive wealth transferred from their colonies in the Americas to the Spanish and Portuguese crowns throughout the colonial period, by the early nineteenth century power was shifting on the European continent—notably with the rise of British and French military and commercial power. Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 weakened the ability of the Spanish crown to enforce its rule in the colonies, giving the criollos (Europeans born in the Americas) the opportunity to mount successful independence movements. By the 1820s, Central and South America were home to newly independent states—all of which were ruled by the criollo classes who wanted to be free of the demands of the crown. These new states were not "revolutionary" states; newly independent Latin American countries were built on the colonial foundations of intertwined religious and political hierarchy in which Catholicism was the official, established state religion. The governments of the newly independent Latin American states, however, were relatively weak and faced formidable challenges by powerful criollo elites with competing interests who wanted to use the power of the new states to advance their economic and political agendas. Underlying and enmeshed in the competing interests of the various factions was a fundamental philosophical difference regarding the proper role of the Catholic Church in society.

Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of equality, liberty, and justice and in the shadow of the new United States of America with its separation of church and state, Liberals throughout Latin America revolted against the old order. As noted by Thomas J. D’Agostino in Chapter 4, Liberal political parties in the nineteenth century were anticlerical parties, and their platforms included a central focus on secularization of the state—most notably in areas such as public education and state control of rites of passage such as birth registries, civil recognition of marriage, and rights to burial for all citizens regardless of religious beliefs. Inspired by the democratic developments in Europe and North America, Latin American Liberal parties also believed in abolishing aristocratic political control and promoting greater decentralization of state power. In opposition were the proclerical Conservative parties that were made up of elites who defended the traditional power of the Catholic Church in Latin American society as well as the political, economic, and social power of the descendents of the colonial state. Conservatives believed in consolidating the power of a centralized state, supported by an established Catholic Church, in which the social order was organized around clear class lines.

The fundamental divisions in postcolonial Latin American nations gave rise to political and social conflicts throughout the region, often erupting in violence with winner-take-all political consequences that further deepened the ideological rift between opposing views. These conflicts were between opposing criollos; these were not class wars between the rich and poor, but rather competition for political control of the newly independent states and the social and economic power associated with them. Thus, opposing philosophical views regarding the role of the Catholic Church in the state became intertwined, once again, in the fundamental question of political, economic, and social control of the state. Also at issue were the extensive landholdings and wealth controlled by the church, particularly the Jesuit orders.

By the early twentieth century, many of the powers of the Catholic Church—such as control over education and civil authority over birth registries, marriage, and burial—had been won by the states. In most countries, the church had been disestablished, although the circumstances of the separation varied widely. For example, Chile separated the church and state in its 1921 Constitution relatively peacefully through a negotiation between church and state.
sionales de base (CEBs; ecclesial base communities) and, though their relationship rests in national politics. And in much of the region, the Catholic Church still serve their community's needs. These groups were called light of their own daily lives, and a commitment to living out the gospel to Latin Americans self-identify as Catholics, at least nominally. Right-wing par-

strategy based on small parish groups that combined worship, Bible study in to influence national laws throughout the region. Still today, the majority of Catholic Church's "preferential option for the poor" and adopted a pastoral benefits, and its opposition to divorce, abortion, and homosexuality continued and social oppression.

Yet through the mid-twentieth century, the church remained powerful throughout the region—in part because over 90 percent of the population still considered itself Catholic, and in part because the church continued to enjoy preferential treatment in various forms. The church remained a significant landowner in many countries, it continued to count on special subsidies or tax benefits, and its opposition to divorce, abortion, and homosexuality continued to influence national laws throughout the region. Still today, the majority of Latin Americans self-identify as Catholics, at least nominally. Right-wing parties often have close ties to the church and serve as protectors of church interests in national politics. And in much of the region, the Catholic Church still provides the only viable alternative to underfunded and inadequate public education, giving the church ongoing cultural access to new generations.

II. The Modern Catholic Church

By the late twentieth century, the Latin American Catholic Church was at a new crossroads. In a number of countries such as Peru, Chile, and Brazil, progressive Catholics argued that Catholicism could compete for the souls of the masses only by addressing the concerns of Marxist political movements. Catholic trade unions, self-help organizations, and political parties that ranged from center-right to center-left arose across the region to compete with the radical and atheistic claims of the Marxist left. Progressive clerics argued that massive urbanization spawned by the migration of the rural poor to cities in search of jobs and survival made uprooted families more vulnerable to recruitment from radical political movements or rival religious beliefs.

By the 1960s, the international Catholic Church responded to the challenges of rising global secularization and decline in church adherence with Vatican II (1960–1963), which ushered in a wave of changes designed to make the church more relevant to the lives of believers. In addition to such reforms as translating Mass from Latin to the languages of national churches, Vatican II encouraged more openness to the world, a call to political action and analysis, and greater lay participation in the activities and leadership of parishes and dioceses. Consistent with this preoccupation with substantive political and social engagement in the world, the worker-priest movement based on the image of Jesus, the carpenter, introduced many young priests into their poor communities. These changes created a wave of Latin American Catholic progressives who sought to dissociate the church from its traditional identification with economic, social, and political elites. Particularly in countries like Brazil, Chile, and Peru, progressive priests, bishops, and nuns began to publicly condemn social and economic injustice, using "liberation theology" as a point of departure for denouncing the "structural sins" of dependent capitalism. Liberationists argued that, in Latin America, Christianity required solidarity with the poor and their legitimate aspirations for freedom from economic, political, and social oppression.

These progressive forces in the Catholic Church came to a head in the 1968 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia. For the first time, CELAM pronounced the Latin American Catholic Church's "preferential option for the poor" and adopted a pastoral strategy based on small parish groups that combined worship, Bible study in light of their own daily lives, and a commitment to living out the gospel to serve their community's needs. These groups were called comunidades ecle-

siales de base (CEBs; ecclesial base communities) and, though their relationship
to parish or diocesan authorities differed widely, CEBs flourished—particu-
larly in poor neighborhoods—across the region.

The CEBs became especially important in light of the wave of military
coups in the 1960s and 1970s. The military dictatorships in almost all of Latin
America during this period differed from those that had simply ruled at the be-
half of traditional oligarchic interests in the past. As Paul W. Zagorski dis-
cusses in Chapter 5, grounded in an ideological framework called the National
Security State, military juntas viewed labor unrest and reformist demands as
more than simply Marxist challenges, regardless of the range of political par-
ties and movements throughout the region. Indeed, social mobilization of any
sort—particularly from the left and ultimately the center—became viewed as
an unhealthy symptom of the disease (often characterized as a “cancer”) of
politics. Rather than simply employing the brutally repressive tactics of the
past to destroy political challenges to oligarchic power, these military leaders
were inspired by a vision of neoliberal economic development that they be-
lieved would fundamentally “depoliticize” society causing the destruction of
the political left and center.

The violence and destruction associated with military regimes along with the
imposition of dramatic changes in the structures of national economies
(usually referred to as shock therapy, a term associated with the requirements
of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) resulted in a spike of
human rights abuses and a series of economic crises across the region.

During the wrenching decades of the 1970s and 1980s, liberation theology
and the CEBs took on particular significance in the region. Because many of the
military juntas wrapped themselves in the mantle of religious self-glorification
for saving their countries from “godless Marxism,” traditional and right-wing
elements of the Catholic Church (as well as some Protestant and Pentecostal
churches in countries like Guatemala and Chile) rushed to align themselves
with the brutal dictatorships, lending at least the appearance of moral justifi-
cation to their tactics. In response, progressive Catholics who condemned
human rights violations and the economic injustice borne by the poor and mid-
cle classes found moral refuge in the liberationist wing of the Catholic Church.
For liberationists, sin is not only an individual condition since the fall from
grace in the Garden of Eden, but sin should also be understood structurally
Political, economic, and social structures that systematically oppress the poor
and disenfranchised are sinful; for example, for many Latin American liber-
ationists, the kind of capitalism (often called “dependent capitalism”) that thrives
on the region by the first world and in particular the imperialist United States
created the endemic poverty, vast gap between the very rich and the chronically
poor, and the politically weak and unstable regimes that were easily dominated
by powerful economic elites backed by US-armed military forces. For most
liberationists therefore, Christians are not only called to individual repentance
and acts of charity but also, more importantly, solidarity with the poor and a
commitment to engaged social justice. For “radicals,” a preferential option for
the poor must be understood in light of the Marxist notion that class conflict
is the motor of history; thus, accommodationist or reformist political strategies
that fail to bring fundamental change to existing power arrangements—or sin-
ful structures—accomplish little more than to preserve the status quo. As such,
Christians must join with other political forces to fight (potentially with vio-
ence) for real political and economic transformation. For most progressives of
the era, however, the struggle against oppression was understood as more prop-
perly channeled through outreach to the poor and oppressed. Facilitating change
rather than explicit partisan activity through grassroots, religious self-help and
educational groups was the focus of the vast majority of CEBs throughout the
region.

The CEBs were particularly important in countries in which the normal
channels for political demands were eliminated by state-sponsored repression
and violence. In Chile, for example, between the coup in 1973 and 1983, the
church—and particularly the grassroots CEBs—served as virtually the only
channel through which opposition could be voiced. After initially welcoming
the armed forces for restoring order in 1973 after particularly chaotic months
under the democratically elected Salvador Allende (1970–1973), Chilean church
leaders began issuing stronger and more pointed criticisms of the regime’s
human rights violations and economic policies by the late 1970s. Scores of new
church or church-affiliated neighborhood, academic, and workers’ organizations
were created to facilitate the struggles against the military. To the extent that dis-
sent remained alive between 1973 and 1983, the space was largely provided by
the Catholic Church. In such countries, the role of the church as the “voice of
the voiceless” came to have profound meaning for pro-democracy movements
and those suffering from the economic dislocation of failed neoliberal economic
policies and state-sponsored repression and human rights violations.

Although the progressive and radical wings of the Latin American Catho-
lic Church were never as extensive as many claimed (or feared) during the
1960s to 1980s, the most important result of their role during the most brutal
years of the region’s dictatorships was that the Catholic Church as an institu-
tion became committed to the protection of human rights and the moral superi-
ority of political democracy over authoritarianism in the region. Yet by the
1980s and the return of democratic regimes, the church throughout the region
was eager to withdraw from the political fray and return, again, to a more ex-
plicit distinction between public life and personal salvation. In countries where
the church had been particularly valiant in condemning human rights viola-
tions or supporting pro-democracy forces, ecclesial authorities were keenly
aware that their stances had alienated their traditional allies among elites and
on the political right.
The desire among many Latin American church leaders to withdraw to a more universal appeal to personal salvation, regardless of class or ideological persuasion, found no greater advocate than Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). Prior to becoming the Supreme Pontiff in 1978, then archbishop of Krakow Karol Wojtyła was known as a staunch anticommunist in his native Poland who had been critical of the Vatican II definition of the Catholic Church as “people of God.” He had long argued for a traditionally hierarchical definition of the institutional church; in other words, a church in which the authority of the church is manifest through the Pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests and under whose direction the lay population lives in faithful obedience. Pope John Paul II was enormously energetic and charismatic. But as Penny Lemieux warned in the 1970s, “John Paul, who thinks in terms of peoples—not nation states—is deeply supportive of the populism that enables a people to express political, economic, or spiritual aspirations through religious gestures and symbols” (cited in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1992:4). However, at the same time, “John Paul’s Catholicism has a clear set of rules and it is the responsibility of priests to make sure they are obeyed . . . . The civilization he envisions is essentially integralist—a throwback to a Christendom when the church was both the mediating force in secular society and the only source of spiritual salvation” (4).

Pope John Paul II launched a clear offensive against the elements of the progressive, liberationist Latin American church that he viewed as, at worst, dangerously aligned with the very Marxist elements that he opposed so ardently in the European context or, at best, inappropriately engaged in the worldly sphere of politics in which the laity were granted far too much authority as “people of God.” Many mistakenly attributed John Paul’s consistent rejection of the liberationist wing of the Latin American church as evidence of conservative or right-wing political beliefs; however, John Paul was a charismatic and populist defender of the poor who helped solidify the church’s support for democracy. He is best understood as seeking to impose, through his consistently traditionalist appointments of bishops and cardinals, a return to a strictly hierarchical church that adheres to a mission of personal salvation from sin and calls individuals, particularly the economically privileged, to personal acts of charity on behalf of the poor.

By the 1990s, much of the Latin American church had retreated from the political and social activism of the 1960s–1980s—in part due to the Vatican’s influence and in part out of national prelates’ desire to withdraw the church from the frontlines of the highly charged, often violent, ideological clashes between right and left during the dictatorships and democratic transitions. Even the most progressive national bishops’ conferences in the region sought to reconsolidate a more traditional role for the church in democratic societies in which political institutions such as political parties or trade unions could function as the channels for the population’s temporal demands and aspirations.

The urge to withdraw from the partisan fray in order to reassert a universal mission of salvation for all created a particularly difficult time for many men and women who had forged their religious identities during the previous period of liberationist activism. During the dictatorships, many poor women had been forced to adopt new roles to support their families, in spite of their traditional roles in service to the all-male priesthood and their religious identities forged in light of the Catholic cult of Mary that glorifies the suffering of motherhood. In response to the economic desperation caused by widespread unemployment, progressive grassrootsCEBs began using the Bible to lead women to see their own agency in their communities. Poor women organized neighborhood soup kitchens, self-help organizations of all sorts, and entrepreneurial activities based on crafts such as sewing and cooking. In many countries, help from diocesan or national church organizations provided these women with additional training or even access to national or international aid. As Susan Tiano discusses in Chapter 10, women who emerged as local leaders became involved in regional or national networks of church-sponsored organizations, taking them far from their traditionally subservient roles in the exclusively private sphere. In addition to the economic causes of women’s mobilization across the region, poor men also bore the brunt of the state’s repression of “political” activity. In an environment in which men’s ability to be protagonists in their families’ survival was repressed, poor women turned to the church—their traditional source of personal refuge. Many of the poor women who were transformed by the opportunities they found in grassroots church or church-sponsored organizations did not represent new members, and neither were these organizations necessarily new ones. In many cases, the neighborhood women’s groups in the church were transformed out of necessity with the women who had long participated under the guidance and encouragement of progressive priests and nuns. For these women, in particular, the definition of the Catholic Church as “people of God” was powerful; their stories are inspiring and moving. For them, the retreatment of the institutional church back to its more traditional role, with the repositioning of the strict authority of the all-male priesthood and the rejection of lay—particularly female—leadership in local parishes, was a wrenching experience.

On the other hand, the withdrawal of the church from progressive engagement in political and social issues also resulted in the return to the parishes of many who had been alienated by its new stances during the dictatorships—not only among the traditional elites, but also among the poor. The resurgence of a more spiritual, less political church provided a welcome invitation to many who sought a refuge from the ongoing challenges of Latin American life. In fact, since 1972, most national churches in Latin America have seen an increase, sometimes dramatic, in the number of vocations for the priesthood. (See Table 12.1.)
Table 12.1 Change in Number of Catholic Seminarians, 1972-2008

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
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<td>1,064</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,334</strong></td>
<td><strong>25,108</strong></td>
<td><strong>371</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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Notes: a. Figure is for 1975, not 1972; from Statistical Yearbook of the Church 1994. b. Figure is for 2003, not 2008; from "Catholic Church in Latin America." http://www.providencelcs.edu/las/Statistics.htm.

The Rise of Evangelical Protestantism

Although still predominantly Catholic, Latin America in the past century, and particularly in recent decades, has experienced significant increases in the number of individuals who identify themselves as adherents of some form of Protestantism. By 2005 Guatemala had by far the largest percentage of Protestants while Haiti, Nicaragua, and Paraguay also saw increasing numbers between 2003 and 2005.

Protestants have been in Latin America since the middle of the nineteenth century due to immigration and limited mission activity, particularly after the Spanish-American War. In the early twentieth century, the small number of Protestants came almost entirely from the traditional, mainline traditions (Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians) of the European and US immigrants or economic elites associated with first world economic dominance. Indigenous conversions to these traditions were rare, and the populations professing these faiths remained relatively stable.

The extraordinary growth of adherents to Protestantism began in Latin America in the 1950s-1960s. By the 1990s, it was widely believed that over 50 million Latin Americans, or approximately 11 percent of the continent's population, claimed to be Protestant (Lewis 2004). Indeed, the question Is Latin America Turning Protestant? provided a revealing title for a groundbreaking book by David Stoll (1990). It appeared that if the conversion rates continued, Protestants would constitute a majority in some countries in a relatively short time frame.

Unlike those Protestants who were associated with economic elites from the United States and Europe, recent conversions overwhelmingly occur among the poor and lower middle classes, and the new converts typically join evangelical Protestant (especially Pentecostal) churches and sects. Some of the strength of non-Catholic religious identification can be attributed to renewed mission work funded from the United States. For example, the Mormon Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as some ideologically conservative evangelical wings of mainline US churches, funded "missionary" work to compete with liberationist Catholics who sympathized with reformist or revolutionary movements during the civil wars of the 1970s-1980s. Nevertheless, over 90 percent of the new conversions were and continue to be distinctly Latin American forms of Pentecostalism.

Conversion to evangelical Protestantism can be explained by a variety of factors. Pentecostalism is able to fill a religious need for many in poor neighborhoods whose families fled the economic deprivation of the countryside in search of urban economic opportunities during the latter half of the twentieth century. The rapid urbanization of the entire developing world, including Latin America, has created extraordinary new landscapes of shantytowns filled with dislocated families searching for new forms of community. Latin American Catholic churches, in spite of strong liberationist elements whose "preferential option for the poor" during the 1960s-1980s resulted in unprecedented outreach to poor neighborhoods, never had the resources to develop sufficient religious infrastructure (priests, nuns, parish buildings, religious educational facilities, funding for lay activities) to respond adequately to the enormous religious needs of the poor generally, or the populations dislocated by rapid urbanization in particular. In addition, the brief period of heightened awareness of the needs of the poor represented by the ascendance of liberation theology should be understood in the context of centuries of alignment with economic and political elites; no national Catholic Church ever had a strong, institutional
presence among the poor and lower middle classes who always have comprised the majority of Latin American populations. Even during the height of liberation theology, Catholic dioceses struggled to commit religious resources to the vast, new urban areas. For traditional, mainline religious institutions—both Catholic and Protestant—the training of new priests and ministers is costly and time consuming. For example, the road to ordination for aspiring young Catholic priests is a long one through years of seminary training and a high degree of personal commitment and self-sacrifice. Foreign priests and nuns, in fact, accounted for much of the liberationist work in poor neighborhoods in many countries during this period.

The needs of the urban poor create an open terrain for religious competition that is especially conducive to the growth of indigenous Pentecostalism. Unlike mainline Catholic and Protestant churches, the operational costs of Pentecostal institutions are remarkably low. Pentecostal religious authority, rather than requiring seminary training and certification by institutional bureaucracies, is earned through charismatic preaching—typically on the streets or in small, storefront locations in poor neighborhoods. One is a Pentecostal pastor by virtue of the ability to gain followers rather than by certification by a religious institution after successful educational attainment. Since religious authority is based on charismatic appeal, Pentecostal “churches” can be created anywhere; indeed, the Pentecostal phenomenon in Latin America is characterized by constant schism with aspiring pastors breaking away from established groups and seeking to establish new “churches” around their own leadership. Rather than being bound by the music in hymnals or the religious canon of a particular denomination, aspiring Pentecostal pastors freely incorporate indigenous music or other art forms in their services. The service itself is grounded in biblical text and centers on the ability of the pastor to “bring it alive” with charismatic appeal.

Because Pentecostal authority is conferred by a pastor’s followers rather than a religious organization, there is remarkable flexibility in belief structures across Pentecostal groups. Pentecostal leaders have supported right-wing political leaders, notably in Guatemala and Chile in the 1980s, yet center-left politicians such as Brazil’s former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002–2010) and Chile’s former president Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010) have successfully courted powerful Pentecostal support. Efforts to characterize Pentecostals by traditional political or even religious categories are confounded by the broad range of individual pastors across neighborhoods, regions, and countries.

If a wide array of cultural manifestations of Pentecostalism is possible, what lies at the heart of Pentecostal belief? Pentecostals, like fundamentalists with whom they are often mistaken, root their belief structures in literal interpretations of biblical text, most especially the descriptions of the experiences of the early Christians as told in the New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles. The Pentecost, the moment in which the crucified Christ returns to the apostles resulting in extraordinary “blessings of the Spirit” such as speaking in tongues, is a cornerstone of Pentecostals’ emphasis on the lived experience of the Holy Spirit. Rather than orthodoxy, as interpreted by priests, Pentecostals—like other Protestants—seek individual and direct experience of God through Christ. Pentecostals believe in the individual call to perfection, and the path to perfection is through seizure by the Holy Spirit as manifest by extraordinary gifts. In that sense, Pentecostals believe that the kinds of miraculous events and personal gifts chronicled in the Acts of the Apostles remain possible for all Christians throughout the ages, and evidence of the gifts of the spirit is the measure of one’s faith. Indeed, Pentecostals criticize their non-Pentecostal, mainline Christian brethren for their emphasis on religious orthodoxy rather than the individual and demonstrable personal experience of the Holy Spirit.

Due to the emphasis on the personal experience of the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism, the authority of pastors rests on their leadership of the faithful in their quest for a personal, emotionally intense experience of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis is particularly well suited for poor neighborhoods where financial resources are scarce, access to formal education is limited, and the reach of the Catholic and traditional Protestant churches is constrained. The strength of Pentecostalism is the ability to respond to local needs, traditions, and constraints depending on the charismatic talents and entrepreneurial skills of local pastors who often preach in storefront churches that punctuate the urban landscapes of Latin America.

Another hallmark of Pentecostalism across the region, consistent with the ability to respond to local conditions, is a commitment to grassroots social service. Many Pentecostal churches, particularly those that are more established, either create or collaborate with grassroots social agencies related to such issues as addiction, unwed pregnancy, domestic violence, religious education of the young, and teen delinquency. However, it should be noted that at the center of Pentecostals’ church membership is a shared experience of the Holy Spirit, not a shared vision for society at large. Most Pentecostals view themselves as apolitical in the sense that their lives and social networks are committed to and built around their religious faith, not social or political movements that promise earthly transformation on the basis of man-made ideology. In addition, Pentecostals’ involvement in social service agencies tends to be viewed as part of their commitment to proselytizing potential converts rather than a commitment to a political agenda to change economic or social structures. Indeed, Pentecostals typically are viewed as inherently “conservative” for their emphasis on personal conversion and repentance of individual sin, in contrast to their more liberal religious counterparts in other denominations (particularly liberationist Catholics) whose faith propels them to address the societal causes of social ills.

In addition to the wide array of expressions of Pentecostalism across Latin America—from the small, disconnected groups found in virtually any poor
neighborhood in any Latin American city or countryside to the large churches in countries like Guatemala—the growth of so-called neo-Pentecostalism in the region further complicates the religious landscape. Associated with the rise of multinational megachurches, such as Brazil’s Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, that have access to mass media (e.g., television and radio stations and programs), neo-Pentecostals preach a “health and wealth” message. In this strain of Pentecostalism, religious observance leads to physical and material rewards.

In spite of predictions in the 1990s that Latin America was “turning Protestant,” it appears that growth rates have stabilized in most of the region. Socioeconomic and political changes, however, have challenged traditional belief systems and given rise to the appeal of a variety of alternatives. A vibrant culture of religious change has emerged in many communities throughout the region.

### Secularization

Although it is commonplace to view the Latin American religious landscape in terms of the competition between Catholicism and other (often evangelical) strains of Christianity, secularization—or the rise in numbers who self-identify as having “no religion” and the resulting decline of the relevance of religious belief of any kind—is considered as threatening to institutional religion as any competing religious belief system. Historically, secularism is associated with Enlightenment rationality and positivism according to which the world can be explained by science rather than religion. In European thought, the rapid advances of science, medicine, and technology, along with advancements in the social sciences, gave credence to the view that the decline in religious identification may be attributed to the rise in modern knowledge. Thus, observers have long assumed that economic modernization in Latin America (or other less developed regions) would lead to higher educational attainment and, therefore, secularization as greater numbers of people turn from religious identification to a more “modern” worldview.

Recent data suggesting a rise in the percentage of citizens who self-identify as having “no religion” appears to confirm the secularization thesis (Cleary and Steigenga 2004). But rather than representing the relentless march of modernization, the category of “no religion” appears to arise from the complexity of greater religious pluralism. For individuals who convert (usually to some form of evangelical Protestantism), it is often difficult to maintain the same degree of fervor and religious commitment. As the conversion experience fades, individuals can “backslide” into a kind of space between their previous Catholic identity and an at least temporarily waning enthusiasm for their new identity. Indeed, evangelical churches that stress personal conversion and emotionally charged expression of the presence of the Holy Spirit perennially face the challenge of inspiring second- and third-generation church members and maintaining the fervor of the converted. Equally, “lapsed Catholics” who report occasional church attendance or dalliance with Protestant conversion similarly can identify themselves as having no religion, yet their numbers do not necessarily reflect a rejection of religious identity. Yet whatever explanation of the rise of those who identify themselves as professing no religion, both Catholic and Protestant officials view secularization—or the prospect of religious irrelevance—as one of the greatest threats of the modern age.

The threat of secularization is a double one—the loss of souls who will not know the grace of salvation (Catholic or Protestant) and, perhaps more importantly, the erosion of fundamental values in the public sphere that religious authorities view as preventing the decline of human society. For example, both Catholics and Protestants share a vision of men’s and women’s traditional roles in the family unit that they believe is the cornerstone of civilization. Both Catholics and evangelical Protestants decry what they perceive to be symptoms of the relegation of faith to churches and the private sphere; for example, divorce, abortion, greater sexual freedom, and contraception. Given the historical role of the Catholic Church in Latin America, the fight against secularization and its symptoms is waged in both the political and individual spheres—both for public policies, such as support for Catholic schools, legal bans on divorce and abortion, and subsidies for Catholic agencies, as well as for individual morality as evidenced by attendance at mass, adherence to Catholic morality and social doctrine, and Christian charity. Historically, Pentecostals and evangelical Protestants have not focused their energies on influencing public policies to combat secularization, in large part because their ranks were made up of a mosaic of small, pastor-centric groups that were concerned competitors of the Catholic Church and toward whom most Latin American states were hostile, or at best, neglectful. For these religious entities, the central impulse of evangelization is a primary emphasis on individual rebirth in Christ, not public policy.

Yet their mass appeal certainly has social implications as do the countless local social services offered by these churches on behalf of the poor, particularly in combating substance abuse, domestic violence, teen delinquency, and other social ills that are so commonplace throughout Latin American barrios. Many credit evangelical conversion with profound changes in particularly male behavior—abstinence from alcohol, faithfulness to their wives, taking pride in being an honorable father and head of the family—that tangibly improves the lives of women and children. Such religious values, while often dismissed as “traditional” or “conservative,” are at the heart of the rejection of secularization by both Protestants and Catholics.

If the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by a series of conflicts about the role of the Catholic Church in Latin America, the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed the church’s struggle...
to retain its dominance in the face of rapidly increasing religious pluralism. In fact, the church views the trend in citizens claiming that they have no religion as one result of the dramatic rise in the number of evangelical Protestants and evidence of the weakening of the church’s power. Perhaps the clearest statement of the Vatican’s perspective on the dangers of evangelical Protestantism is Pope John Paul II’s address to Latin American bishops in Santo Domingo in 1992:

“We should not underestimate a particular strategy aimed at weakening the bonds that unite Latin American countries and so to undermine the kinds of strength provided by unity. To that end, significant amounts of money are offered to subsidize proselytizing campaigns that try to stutter such Catholic unity. (cited in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997:10)

Describing non-Catholic religions as “sects” and “rapacious wolves,” John Paul II demonstrates the degree of the perceived threat posed by religious competitors throughout Latin America. Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 trip to Brazil, repeatedly warned of the dangers of rising Protestantism amidst his condemnation of contraception and abortion and the dangerous modern forces of both capitalism and Marxism.

Latin American bishops’ conferences, with Vatican support, have pursued a dual strategy in combating religious pluralism and secularization. National churches use their political muscle to ensure that governments maintain the church’s preferential treatment in public policy in areas such as Catholic dominance in public and private education, direct and indirect subsidies, and exclusive reach into the ranks of the military. In addition, since the 1992 conference of Latin American bishops, Pope John Paul II has called Latin American Catholics to a “new evangelization,” or a renewed vigor at the grassroots to energize the church’s ability to meet the religious aspirations of the many faithful who turn to alternative faiths, including evangelical Protestantism. This strategy is comprised of several tactics including a much greater emphasis on increasing the number of religious personnel (priests, nuns, and lay leaders) and an explicit attempt to adopt some of the most popular aspects of Pentecostalism, most notably an explicitly charismatic approach to mass and Bible study.

### Charismatic Catholics

Although the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) movement originated in the United States and is popular among Filipino, Korean, and Hispanic Americans, the movement has also found resonance in Latin America since it was introduced by Catholic missionaries in the early 1970s. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI both strongly endorsed the movement’s focus on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (hearkening to the same biblical story of the Pentecost that inspired Pentecostalism in all of its forms) and the focus on the power of biblical texts to illuminate contemporary experience. Like their evangelical Protestant counterparts, charismatic Catholics embrace the mass media’s ability to reach out to the faithful. Perhaps the most well-known figure among Latin American charismatics is Father Marcelo Rossi, a Brazilian whose 1999 CD of upbeat religious music sold all other recording artists in the country. Rossi has a daily radio show, two weekly TV shows, and a significant Web presence, and he hosts regular concerts attracting thousands of young fans. Today, the Catholic charismatic movement is the largest and most vibrant lay movement in the region, with between 22 million and 25 million members. According to some observers, Catholic charismatics make up roughly half of all active Catholics in Brazil and El Salvador (Chestnut 2003; Garrard-Burnett 2000).

Latin American prelates have been generally supportive of the rejuvenating potential of the charismatic movement—most particularly its ability to compete head on with evangelical Protestants and Pentecostals who were winning conversions at an alarming rate. Yet at the same time, Chestnut (2003) has characterized the Latin American bishops’ support as a “yellow light” because of the fear that emphasis on individual experience of the Holy Spirit would undermine the authority of the Catholic Church hierarchy. While lamenting the appeal of the “sects”—particularly Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jehovah’s Witness, the Foursquare Gospel Church, and the Mormons—Latin American bishops were quick to insist that the successful and vibrant Catholic charismatics must defer to the authority of the official Catholic Church. According to the bishops and the Vatican, the danger presented by non-Catholic charismatics is that they erroneously believe that the direct experience of the Holy Spirit, particularly as it is experienced as rebirth in the Spirit, is the foundational Christian experience. For the Catholic Church, the ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit is simply one of the experiences of God and is not a necessary precondition to the sanctity or enjoyment of the sacraments. Priests and bishops are quick to position the church as the only authority to which the faithful can turn for interpretation of God’s will; accordingly, salvation can be achieved only through the mediation of priests, not through direct experience of God through the personal experience of the Holy Spirit.

### Major Spiritist Religions

A comprehensive understanding of religion in Latin America requires recognition of the vibrant practices of a variety of religious beliefs that derive from indigenous and African traditions. Although much of the literature on Latin American religions focuses on Catholicism—still the overwhelming majority religion in the region—and the rapid increase in evangelical forms of Protestantism, spiritist and syncretic belief systems are more widespread than ordinarily assumed.
Prior to the sixteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese conquest, the population of Latin America varied immensely from one place to another. The largest societies, such as the Inca of the Andes and the Maya, Olmec, and Aztecs of Central America and Mexico (themselves imperial civilizations whose empires dominated other conquered indigenous cultures), developed highly sophisticated religious institutions with established priesthoods. In other areas, less developed indigenous populations had religious practices that were more tribal. What is common to all indigenous cultures, however, is the forcible imposition of Catholicism after the conquest. Throughout the colonies of the Americas, the European victors prohibited the native religions. Indigenous religious practices were either wiped out or merged with Catholicism or other, newer religious beliefs; for example, those transferred through the African slave trade. The imposition of Catholicism on the indigenous peoples generated various revolts using indigenous religious symbols or figures to build cohesion. More typically, however, most indigenous cultures yielded to the official culture of the victorious conquerors—with elements of the original beliefs morphing into their closest Catholic counterpart. This resulted in a distinct difference between “official Catholicism” and “folk religion” practiced by the majority of the people. These syncretic religions differed across the lines of preexisting, indigenous cultures. The tension between the Vatican and folk religion as practiced by most people has been a dynamic one historically—with the church occasionally tolerating local practices within Catholicism and, more often, reifying the official church’s authority to determine the boundaries of orthodoxy. Thus, in spite of the destruction of preconquest civilizations such as the Incan and Aztec Empires, many of their religious practices continued to survive in some form.

The importation of black slaves in the first half of the sixteenth century brought a second wave of new religious traditions and cults, this time not of the conquerors but of the exploited. Since the introduction of Africans into the Spanish colonies, their religious practices were strictly prohibited. However, as with the indigenous traditions, African religious beliefs and practices did not simply disappear, but rather synthesized with both Catholicism and the region’s indigenous traditions and—later on—with other religions that were transplanted to Latin America. Such is the case with Candomblé de caboclo, which combined African and indigenous practices, and Umbanda which combined African, indigenous, and other traditions.

Candomblé, particularly popular in northeastern Brazil with over 2 million believers, derives from the West African Yoruba traditions brought by slaves in the 18th century. Around the central deity, Oudumara, are orixas (spirits) who control individuals’ destinies and who became paired over time with Catholic saints. Orixas represent deified ancestors who connect believers with the spiritual world, Candomblé literally means “dance in honor of the gods,” and dance and music are central elements of religious practice. Followers of Candomblé typically are poor and racially more “black” than followers of other Afro-Brazilian cults, and its popularity among Afro-Brazilians as a symbol not only of religious belief, but also cultural identity, has risen sharply after the end of active state persecution in the 1970s. Today, many Latin Americans of African descent travel to the Bahía region of Brazil to learn more about their cultural heritage. Significantly, there is a movement to purge contemporary Candomblé of Catholic elements in order to reclaim its African roots.

Umbanda, another Afro-Brazilian religion, also combines Christianity’s belief in one supreme God and African orixas (spirits), who are paired with Christian saints. Umbanda derives from African Bantu religions, and its origins in Brazil were centered in Rio de Janeiro with a Kardecist wing located in São Paulo. Today, followers of Umbanda number over 20 million and can be found throughout Brazil and in neighboring countries. Umbanda appeals more broadly to poor and middle-class blacks, whites, and mulatos who seek advice regarding any number of issues such as health or work-related problems and personal relationships. Worship is organized around a leader called a pai-de-santo or mãe-de-santo, depending on gender, and mediums (psychics who can act as a medium between the physical and the spiritual worlds) who can be possessed by the spirits. Spirits are both Brazilian (deceased native Brazilians called caboclos) and African (deceased slaves who died at the hands of abusive owners called pretos velhos or “old blacks”), among several other subgroups of ancestors. Spirits are known for their particular strengths such as knowledge of indigenous herbal remedies, sympathy for the oppressed, or particular knowledge of indigenous ways. During worship, the spirits communicate their advice to supplicants through mediums who have reached the spirits through trances.

Other descendents of West African religions include Vodou (commonly called voodoo and found primarily in Haiti) and Santería (found in the Caribbean). Vodou and Santería, too, are spiritist religious practices in which African beliefs are associated with Christian saints. In Vodou, houngans (charismatic priests) help individuals make contact with the spirits, typically to solicit health or personal help. Spirits also can be invoked to ward off danger or attack other spirits that are harmful. Vodou has a particularly politicized history; it has been severely persecuted sporadically since Haitian independence—usually at the behest of the white, Catholic bishops. Historically, Vodou temples—which operated clandestinely—became important centers of black identity and resistance. In the 1950s, François Duvalier curtailed the persecution of Vodou and mobilized its organizations into militias (known as the Tonton Macoutes) in order to win the 1957 presidential election. The Tonton Macoutes became a formidable force that intimidated political enemies for the next thirty years.

Santería, based in Cuba, is quite similar in historical origins to Haitian Vodou; Santería beliefs trace back to West Africa and were brought to Cuba by slaves. The word santería was a pejorative term used by the Spanish to describe
the pre-occupation with Christian saints rather than God among African converts to Catholicism. Like their fellow spiritists from West Africa, Cuban slaves shrouded their belief in their own gods, arishas, by identifying them as Christian saints. After Cuban independence in 1898, however, some Santeria leaders realized the possibility for personal gain of peddling their ties to the spiritual world as black magic or sorcery. Santeria, like the darker side of Vodou, became associated with criminal acts, evil intent, and the ability to harm others with magic spells. In the United States, the popular image of Vodou and Santeria as sinister and violent stems from the manipulation of the original spiritist descendants of West African religions.

Venezuela provides another illustration of syncretism. Although the majority of the population is ostensibly Catholic, many people from all sectors of society believe in varying syntheses of African, indigenous, and Christian religions. For example, followers of María Lionza worship a goddess of nature similar to the Arawak water deity, West African mythical figures, and the Virgin Mary. And curanderos (healers) found in indigenous villages are consulted by many Venezuelans from all walks of life.

### Conclusion

The religious landscape of twenty-first-century Latin America will continue to be a competitive marketplace, and both Catholicism and evangelicalism will adapt to compete for followers. Although Catholicism’s cultural legacy is enduring, it is doubtful that the Catholic Church will regain its religious monopoly. In response, national hierarchies backed by the Vatican have redoubled their efforts to meet the religious aspirations of the people. Although disappointing to those inspired by the church’s political agenda during the 1960s-1980s, including its “preferential option for the poor,” the church has strengthened its reach into society through renewed focus on meeting the population’s spiritual needs and embracing the more charismatic styles of worship characteristic of Pentecostalism. Indeed, the number of vocations among young priests has risen—sometimes dramatically—in many countries. This renewed Catholic Church is a traditional one with an emphasis on orthodoxy, hierarchical authority, and redoubled commitment to saving individual souls through the sacraments and Christian charity.

Various forms of evangelical Protestantism will continue to provide an important alternative belief system. However, the sharp evangelical growth during the decades after the 1960s in countries like Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil has leveled off. Scholarly observers no longer predict that Latin American is “becoming Protestant.” Particularly for Pentecostals, the absence of an institutional orthodoxy, the flexible path to becoming a pastor, and the tendency of new groups to form when existing churches become too big all provide opportunities to adjust worship styles and adapt their religious commitments to changing local and national contexts. As already seen in Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil, some evangelical and Pentecostal churches will grow into national forces. Evangelical embrace of the media coupled with a focus on charismatic outreach guarantees national prominence for media-savvy pastors and their followings. As these national churches become institutionalized, however, their missions and religiopolitical identities will provide opportunities for new alternatives under the guidance of new pastors. Over time, evangelical churches will experience the challenge of inspiring belief in subsequent generations. These processes probably will be complicated by scandals similar to those that have plagued more established churches.

It is improbable that continued economic modernization and growth will result in widespread decline in the relevance of religious belief for the majority of Latin Americans. While a competitive religious marketplace has permanently transformed the Catholic Church’s colonial and postcolonial religious monopoly (and perhaps institutional complacency), such competition has inspired volatility in individual religious self-identification. Although conversions continue at a heightened rate, the percentages of adherents of different faith traditions have leveled off. This is not evidence of a substantial decline of religious identity, although the marketplace does include “no religious identity” among other religious identities. Significant changes in the religious landscape over the past fifty years no longer allow us to think of Latin America as singularly Catholic. In fact, the region’s religious landscape remains vibrant, occupied by varied religious forces that remain relevant for the vast majority of citizens.

### Bibliography


Latin American Literature

David H. Bost and Angélica Lozano-Alonso

Literature reveals much about how people interpret their physical and social environments and their place in the world. Their values, beliefs, and aspirations are reflected in tales about past and daily experiences. Hence, literary expression is an important consideration for students of contemporary Latin America.

Previous chapters have explored specific aspects of Latin America, past and present. In this chapter, we look at the perceptions of interpreters and writers who have contributed an artistic and intellectual account that illuminates our understanding of the culture in which they lived.

II The Colonial Heritage

Native American Literature

As René de la Pedraja reports in Chapter 3, the Spanish conquistadores of the early 1500s were astonished to find that the New World had civilizations that, in some ways, rivaled those in Europe. The Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas were accomplished architects, artists, musicians, sculptors, and dancers. Most pre-Columbian literature was oral and was quickly forgotten after the conquest. A few indigenous texts, however, were transcribed in the sixteenth century by Spanish clerics and educated native people. These texts exist today as evidence of a rich literary tradition that flourished in the centuries before Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World.

The Mayas were the only native civilization that had written texts, in hieroglyphic form, almost all of which perished in the chaotic years after the con-