

Communication, Politics and Religious Fundamentalisms in Latin America

by *Dennis A. Smith*

1. The fluid frontier between politics and religion

Erwin Sperisen, former Director of Guatemala's *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC – National Civilian Police), understands that the line between one's political and religious commitments can be quite fluid. Sperisen's grandmother belongs to *la Iglesia Presbiteriana Central*, the first protestant church established in Guatemala that this year celebrates its 125th anniversary. But Sperisen and his mother chose to become part of *El Shaddai* church, a neopentecostal group founded by Harold Caballeros. This year Caballeros announced he was turning his pastoral responsibilities at El Shaddai over to his wife as he founded *Visión con Valores* (ViVa – Vision with Values), a political vehicle designed to fulfill his presidential aspirations. ViVa failed to be recognized as a political party this year, but promises to be ready for the next elections.

In the world of Guatemalan neopentecostalism, Caballeros' specialty is spiritual warfare. In his book *De Victoria en Victoria: Conceptos, experiencias y técnicas sobre la guerra espiritual* Caballeros shares the roots of his vision: One day, while praying in his study, he found himself in a harrowing face to face encounter with an enormous serpent. After the incident, he researched the pre-Colombian history of his part of Guatemala City and came to the conclusion that the serpent was a manifestation of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, who inhabited a nearby archeological site. Guatemalan history, Caballeros discerned, was so filled with misery and violence because the ancient inhabitants of this valley had worshiped this demonic being. For this reason, Caballeros undertook to create and equip a spiritual army capable of proclaiming and enthroning Jesus as Lord of Guatemala (Caballeros, 1999:17).

Spiritual warriors understand that the worlds we inhabit, both physical and spiritual, are fraught with real danger. Who can deny the demonic character of the social devastation wrought by drug traffickers and youth gangs? Confronted by a culture of violence and impunity, some spiritual warriors have come to the conclusion that extreme measures

are justified.

The press and human rights groups have accused the current Guatemalan government of institutionalizing the extrajudicial executions of gang members and common criminals. This practice is known in local parlance as *limpieza social*. The *Policia Nacional Civil*, formerly directed by Sperisen, is one of the state institutions accused of such crimes.

In April of this year, before President Berger accepted his resignation, Sperisen made two startling revelations in his weekly television show on *Canal 27*, a local Christian television station.

The show, called *Valor y Servicio*, was part of Sperisen's program to provide police officers with the spiritual resources they needed to combat the forces of evil. Sperisen praised Caballeros and his wife as the inspiration for the program:

La estimulación moral y espiritual estuvo a cargo del Profeta y Apóstol de Cristo, el hermano HAROLD CABALLEROS y de su esposa, la profetisa Cecilia de Caballeros, de quienes soy su humilde servidor, instrumento y medio para llevarlos al Poder de Guatemala y tener un Gobierno de Dios.

(The Prophet and Apostle of Christ, Brother HAROLD CABALLEROS and his wife, the prophetess Cecilia de Caballeros, of whom I am a humble servant, instrument and means for taking them to Power in Guatemala and having a Government of God, were charged with the moral and spiritual motivation. . .)

Then Caballeros went on to address reports that were circulating in both the local press and the New York Times:

Esta no es una justificación, es, más bien, un reconocimiento humilde cuando uno está y es un instrumento de la JUSTICIA DIVINA. . . Los escuadrones de la muerte que funcionan aún adentro de la PNC y el Ministerio de Gobernación, son un trabajo santo y está organizado por agentes y personal de las iglesias evangélicas que sabemos nuestras obligaciones con la sociedad. . . Tengo que reconocer que lo que publicó el diario New York Times el 5 de marzo de este año, es cierto, la limpieza social que junto a Carlos Vielman como Ministro de Gobernación llevamos a cabo en la Institución, se tenía que hacer y se tiene que continuar, como tengo entendido que se ordenó a las nuevas autoridades. . .

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(This is not a justification; it is, rather, a humble recognition that when one is an instrument of DIVINE JUSTICE. . .The death squads that still function within the PNC and the Ministry of Government, are a holy enterprise that is organized by agents and personnel from Evangelical churches that know our obligations to society. . .I must recognize that the story published in the New York Times on March 5 of this year is true; the "social cleansing" that, together with Carlos Vielman as Minister of Government we carried out in the institution, had to be done and must continue, as I understand has been ordered to the new authorities. . .)

Sperisen is now history, and Caballeros may or may not be the future of Guatemalan politics. But no one should doubt the fervor of Sperisen's religious and political convictions.

2. Communication, politics and religious fundamentalisms

An extreme example, to be sure. But this anecdote forms part of the religious and political landscape in which, last year, the Latin America region of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC-AL) embarked on a cycle of conferences on "Communication, Politics and Religious Fundamentalisms."

The conferences began at the Catholic University of La Paz, Bolivia in May and ended in September at a Methodist seminary in Santiago, Chile. In between we had sessions in São Paulo, Brazil, Guatemala City and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The conferences combined a rather traditional lecture format with 2 or 3 speakers spread out over 2 or 3 days, with a series of sessions where participants could share experiences and explore common strategies. The conference report can be found at www.wacc-al.net.

3. What do we understand by fundamentalism?

In all of our conferences, speakers made the obligatory references to the U.S roots of religious fundamentalism. But in a broader context, we understood fundamentalisms as social movements that embrace unconditional truths expressed by authoritarian leaders who validate their position through charismatic religious, economic or political discourse.

We understood fundamentalism as a strategy for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, especially for communities that consider themselves disenfranchised or persecuted and that seek to build their identity and a sense of self-affirmation in moments of profound and rapid social change.

We began with the premise, succinctly stated by Chilean sociologist Arturo Chacón, that fundamentalism as we know it is a product of modernity. More specifically, fundamentalism is a product of the deep cultural changes and social dislocation produced by modernization, industrialization and, most recently, neoliberalism.

In our discussion we came to realize that most people demonstrate fundamentalist behaviors at one time or another, reacting with fear, disgust or intolerance to other persons or groups. In Latin America, where the rule of law is precarious, where violence is endemic, and where many people feel alienated from traditional social and political structures, many people embrace fundamentalist religious and political projects as a survival strategy, but a strategy that undercuts one's sense of citizenship, of active participation in the exercise of power for the common good. Fundamentalisms can encourage intolerance, the negation of the other.

But we came to understand that acting like a fundamentalist is not the same as fundamentalism as a social system. To build a fundamentalist movement requires power. If one has access to a platform such as a radio or television program, a political office, a pulpit, then the power of one's discourse is multiplied and can feed on itself.

Brazilian sociologist Saulo Baptista describes fundamentalism as a system of representations whose leaders elaborate a discourse that responds to the fractured sensibilities of the faithful in a post-modern world. Fundamentalist discourse fulfills people's need for order and meaning in a world that offers neither.

Violeta Rocha, a Nicaraguan Pentecostal theologian who is Rector of the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica, notes that fundamentalism flourishes in a consumer culture, a culture of desire in which we want to feel satisfaction. Today's neoliberal consumer economy makes us especially susceptible to the blandishments of prosperity

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theology, the notion that God wants us to be healthy and wealthy, and if we aren't, then it is either because we have a lack of faith, or are living in sin. In today's world divine blessing has become increasingly linked to material prosperity, more than to such intangibles as a sense of personal well-being, consolation or forgiveness.

In their papers, both Rocha and Baptista describe how, in a materialist culture, individuals can become disconnected from their identities and their traditions. Indeed traditional religion, as a path to the numinous, can lose its centrality in a community's life when subjected to fierce competition by the concrete immediacy of consumerist gratification. In the words of the Spanish pastoral theologian Juan José Tamayo, "God has carved out a space in the midst of billions of inhabitants who have been progressively dishabited by a culture that pretends to abolish the mystery of things." (Tamayo: 2004)

We are witnessing the materialization of mystery.

Rocha emphasizes that the fact that people are abandoning their ties to traditional religious institutions in no way means that they have become less religious. At the same time, she points out that the growth of the megachurches has yet to produce general social improvement or an improvement in the lot of women in the region.

Baptista asks whether the academy's protestations against the intolerance of fundamentalism does not implicitly reveal the intolerance of liberal democracy that reserves for itself a monopoly on the right to blaspheme against all that does not fit within liberal ideology.

We also posited that fundamentalism strengthens male attempts to control women's bodies, be it through the prohibition of abortion, the negation of female sexual pleasure, or macho social norms that propose to keep women pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen.

While we found abundant anecdotal evidence to support the link between fundamentalism and patriarchy, we also recalled how many Pentecostal groups, despite their sexist discourse, end up providing unprecedented social spaces for women to find

their voices and exercise control over their individual lives. Where else can women in Latin America stand up in public and pour out their souls in vibrant and eloquent testimony? Where else can women find a community of support to help them challenge their partner's debilitating alcoholism or domestic violence? Indeed, Richard Shaul and Waldo Cesar found in their study of neopentecostal groups in the slums of Rio de Janeiro that women leaders in some local congregations, despite their formal affiliation with megachurches whose leaders own media empires and control voting blocks in Congress, were creatively engaged in battling gang violence, creating jobs, and building self-esteem (Shaul, Cesar: 2001). However, such examples of women's protagonism were individual or local in nature, and tend not to threaten patriarchal institutions.

4. A bit of history

In 19th Century Latin America, modernity cloaked itself in the promise of progress offered by science and technology. Through the wonders of rational endeavor, the modern state would control the environment, eliminate poverty, and employ education to calm unchecked human passions with the balm of reason. When Brazil, for example, embarked on the long march toward modernity in the 19th century they took as their motto, emblazoned even today on their national flag, "Order and Progress."

Religion, too, would beat the drum for modernity. 19th century Liberal dictators from Mexico to Brazil found in the Protestant missionary enterprise a key ideological ally in their battle against Latin America's richest and most powerful institution: the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant-built schools and hospitals, together with the practical, entrepreneurial spirit of the missionaries who came from the United States, hopefully would encourage important sectors of Latin American society (intellectuals, merchants, trades people, entrepreneurs) to embrace the proto-capitalist ideologies developing at that time in Europe and the U.S.

Furthermore, a Protestant liturgy rooted in reasoned theological discourse and the thoughtful analysis of a written text (no more incense or smoky candles, no more Latin, no more images of the Virgin and the saints) would undercut the cultural power of the Roman Catholic Church.

However, the cold light of reason did little to domesticate Latin America's profound religious impulse. The secular pursuit of science and progress, and even the reasoned religious discourse of Presbyterians and Methodists, have never made more than a superficial impact on Latin America's symbolic universe.

Chacón argues that Protestantism has served as a vehicle for modernization. Thus, if traditional Protestants have sold their soul to reason, then Spirit-filled religious leaders, to sustain their authority, must reclaim their founding myths, and must either usurp existing religious institutions or create new ones.

Chacón also argues that such myths are always cloaked in violence. Deeply rooted in the Latin American psyche is the understanding that God cannot be domesticated, and that our profound longing to experience a personal encounter with transcendence is fraught both with mystery and with danger.

5. Spirit-filled religion and fundamentalism

In recent decades we have witnessed the irruption of charismatic religion in Latin America as TV preachers and neopentecostal megachurches have become major players on the regional religious stage. Simultaneously, we have seen deeply-rooted traditional movements such as Afro-Brazilian religions, Mayan spirituality and Kardecist Spiritism come out from the shadows to compete for the public allegiance of the faithful.

In our conferences Violeta Rocha argued forcefully that all Pentecostals are not fundamentalists and that not all fundamentalists are Pentecostals. Here Rocha rightly reacts against the popular characterization of Pentecostals as intolerant bumpkins. Many adherents of Spirit-filled religion, as churches of the poor energized by the Spirit, have, for the last century, demonstrated their commitment to pluralism and the common good in Latin America. If Pentecostals don't identify themselves publicly with progressive political causes it may be because of the secular and explicitly anti-religious discourse of the political left.

We recognized that fundamentalisms come in many shapes and sizes: the charismatic religious leader that spews bile against all other religious groups; the Mayan religious

leader that calls the faithful to turn their backs on the West and join him in recovering pure pre-Colombian spiritual traditions untainted by Western religion; the populist political posturing of George Bush or Hugo Chávez; the aggressive religious sectarianism of Opus Dei or the Neo-Cactechuminate; the recent decision by Brazilian Methodists to withdraw from all ecumenical bodies.

Why the explosion of fundamentalist religious practice? In part, perhaps, because of modernity's unkept promises.

In the last two centuries Latin America has suffered unending political and economic conflict, but today Latin Americans find themselves in the same situation in which they began their pilgrimage toward modernity: as the source of cheap labor and natural resources for the industrialized North. Neither science, nor technology, nor the economic schemes of liberal politicians were able to build states capable of providing the rule of law, security, health and education for the masses.

Arturo Chacón insists that Latin America never has and never will be accepted as part of the Western world. Latin America has always been an appendage, living in a parallel universe. We all know, Chacón reminds us, what happens to an inflamed appendix.

Today in Latin America the gap between rich and poor, women and men, Europeans and those of African or Indigenous descent, urban and rural dwellers, landed and landless is among the deepest on the planet. For the majority, to be Latin American is to be the other, the conquered, the violated, with a precarious hold on democracy, a precarious hold on Christianity, and a fleeting dream of prosperity.

In these circumstances, many people find in Spirit-filled religion a space where one can have a personal encounter with the Sacred, where one can seek consolation and prosperity, a community where people are affirmed and have a voice.

6. A case study from Brazil

Baptista looks specifically at Brazil, a country of 186 million people of whom 15 per cent are Protestants of one form or another. **Paul Freston notes** that Brazil has the second

largest population of practicing Protestants in the world, second only to the United States (Freston: 2001). About 7 million are traditional Protestants or evangelicals, while at least 20 million are Pentecostals or Neo-pentecostals. Brazil is experiencing an explosion of Spirit-based religion.

Baptista emphasizes that fundamentalisms in Latin America are neither reactionary nor nostalgic. Fundamentalists, even if they employ the rhetoric of nostalgia, propose a return to the future, a utopia that has never existed. Religious and political fundamentalisms have been able to build upon modernity's unfulfilled promises by offering their own visions of a brave new world.

Baptista notes that fundamentalist leaders enthusiastically embrace cutting edge technology. They employ strategic planning, modern organizational theories, new information technologies and the full range of the electronic media – all in service to their utopian vision.

Historically, Latin American religious fundamentalism has celebrated the sensationalist eschatology of dispensationalism as imported from the United States. Back in the 1980s the fundamentalist media agenda was set by U.S. televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard.

As prosperity theology began to take hold in the 1990s, Latin America's religious entrepreneurs began to validate their ministries by proclaiming themselves prophets or apostles, claiming privileged access to divine revelation. We have more than 30 self-proclaimed apostles in Guatemala, most of whom promote "Name it and Claim it" theology. End-time prophecies become somewhat passé when so many apostles are promising material success here and now.

Unlike other Latin American countries, Brazilian Neopentecostal religious leaders have successfully negotiated a transition into the world of electoral politics. Edir Macedo, the head of Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and owner of the *TV Record* television network, has demonstrated his ability to deliver the vote. As a result, Macedo was able to cut a deal with President Lula that allowed Macedo to designate Lula's vice-

presidential candidate. In addition, the evangelical caucus in the legislature, most of whom sported close ties to Macedo or rival religious leaders, swelled to 60 members.

Baptista described to me how big landowners positioned themselves as regional leaders in Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. From this platform they came to establish a presence in regional media and to exercise influence in regional and national politics.

When fundamentalist religious leaders come to define their vision as prosperity now, and to craft shifting political alliances of convenience, they may seem to have lost sight of the big picture. Such worldly tactics might seem to undermine their long-term credibility and effectiveness, especially as both politicians and preachers begin to suffer the loss of prestige and credibility normally associated with the exercise of public office. In Brazil, this was complicated as the press and civil society watchdogs began to document tawdry and corrupt behavior by these highly public figures. Indeed, the most recent election results from Brazil would seem to support this hypothesis: More than half the 513 congressional representatives were re-elected in last October's elections, but only 15 of the 60 members of the evangelical caucus were re-elected. Adelor Vieira, the head of the caucus, was re-elected despite being implicated in a financial scandal.

7. Building citizens?

How does one relate to fundamentalists? The participants in this cycle of conferences did not feel comfortable about sitting down with TV preachers and trying to carve out with them a common liturgy or a common political agenda.

We agreed, however, that as media professionals, as political activists and as people of faith, we need to create safe spaces where we can build relationships of trust with folks that attend the megachurches.

My own experience is useful in this regard. I work at Cedepca, a small ecumenical training center in Guatemala City whose largest constituency is Pentecostals. Most of us on staff come from conservative evangelical backgrounds; we speak the language of faith and participate actively in local churches. Language is key. If one wants to unpack how and where God is present in today's world, and what are one's responsibilities as a

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person of faith when confronted with human need, one won't get very far with a group of Pentecostals employing partisan leftist discourse. In addition, we've been able to create a safe space, founded on trust, that is truly ecumenical.

This cycle of conferences left us with the impression that many Latin Americans feel themselves to be adrift in an ethical void and that religion, instead of providing a touchstone, a moral community, has become, for some, just another consumer product.

As people of faith, can we propose a common ethical agenda? In our discussions I turned to that classic Christian apologist C.S. Lewis who, in *The Abolition of Man*, suggests that the core teachings of remarkably diverse religious traditions can be summarized as the *Tao*. Key elements would include:

- The law of general beneficence: all people should work generally for the good of all humankind and for all of creation. Then, the law of special beneficence: all people should work especially for the well-being of their family and their community.
- Each person should respect their mother, their father and their ancestors.
- Each person should respect their children and their posterity.
- The practice of justice applies to all human behavior, from our sexuality to the rule of law: No to deceit, no to imposition by force, no to falsehood, no to theft, yes to structures of justice that are effective, just and transparent.
- We should practice good faith and veracity.
- We should practice mercy.
- We should practice generosity.

Participants agreed that such values must be lived out in a context of transparency, tolerance and mutual accountability. The challenge is whether we can learn how to be both citizens and believers.

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