Pelton, Robert S.
Reseña de "The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America: The Dominican Case in Comparative Perspective" de Emelio Betances
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
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sance” frame, not only because her periodization expands beyond the “New Negro” movement, but also because she does not devote any significant attention to the relationship of Caribbean radicalism to the cultural production of the era. Harlem scholars have long documented the contribution of West Indian radicals to Harlem’s intellectual, artistic, and political life. Turner asserts that their agitation “contributed to the success of the Harlem Renaissance.” Yet the author never makes clear her own view of their precise contributions and how her interpretation departs from others who also highlighted their role in Harlem’s cultural life.

Ultimately, *Caribbean Radicals and the Harlem Renaissance* is long on details, but short on analysis. While it provides more information on the participation of the Huiswouds and their peers in international left politics, it misses many opportunities to enhance our understanding of their significance in Caribbean and Harlem history.


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**Mexico, Central America, South America, and portions of the Caribbean: Latin America is far too large, populous, and culturally diverse to be painted in a single portrait. The same is true for the Catholic Church in that region, where a wide array of parish plans, liturgical forms, and concepts of church vary greatly from nation to nation as well as from parish to parish. The range of cultures, the great disparity between wealth and poverty, and the rapidly changing realities within Latin America demand multiple responses at the local levels if the Church is to carry out its mission. The bishops discovered long ago that they needed to find effective and often imaginative ways to meet the spiritual and temporal needs of their parishioners while simultaneously maintaining close bonds with the universal Church.

Their deeply committed efforts produced both successes and failures over the centuries, but the Catholic Church truly came into its own...**
in Latin America only after Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. That 1965 effort to transform the Catholic Church into a “world church” that integrates its values within diverse cultures was enthusiastically embraced by most Latin American bishops, especially those who gathered in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 for a watershed convocation at which the bishops mapped appropriate priorities and actions based both upon contemporary Church thinking and the prevailing cultural, social, and economic realities of Latin America.

The bishops’ extensive social analysis produced a much sharper awareness of Latin American life, an awareness that recognized repression, poverty, and other violations of human rights as institutional sin. A new spirit, based upon the work of Vatican II and the Medellín conference, arose from three crucial initiatives that became the cornerstones of the Latin American Church: the preferential option for the poor, small Christian communities (or CEBs), and continuing opposition to those forms of economic development that makes the lives of the poor even more difficult. It is within this context that *The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America* assumes special significance as the Catholic Church moves into the future on that continent.

By comparing and contrasting the Dominican Republic with Bolivia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the author illuminates many of the most important aspects of the relationship between the Church and power politics in Latin America. In so doing, he creates a clear picture of the pressing need for the Church to carry out its mission in the world, the perils it faces in doing so, and the challenges it faces in responding to widely divergent needs while simultaneously remaining a universal Church.

The case study of El Salvador presents my only significant disagreement with Professor Betances’ conclusions. Archbishop Rivera Damas (the successor to Archbishop Oscar Romero) maintained an enlightened and constructively critical relationship with the government but he was succeeded by Archbishop Fernando Saénz Lacalle, a conservative. In explanation, the author states (p. 95) that this appointment occurred because there “were not progressive candidates available.” However, Monsignor Ricardo Urioste, the progressive Vicar General under Archbishop Romero, was in fact available for appointment.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the Catholic Church was called to mediate political and social crises in all five countries examined by Professor Betances, and the Church’s role as a mediator has been institutionalized in the Dominican Republic. And yet, despite being the dominant religion of Latin America for almost five centuries, the Catholic Church is neither a religious monopoly nor the only voice that has religious and ethical influence. As Betances states in his General

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Conclusions chapter: “Dominican evangelicals [often used as a synonym for Pentecostals in Latin America] are successfully accommodating to society and politics. In the past four decades, they moved from political insignificance to full recognition by mainstream political parties and the state. Since the 1990s, they have been participating in political mediations along with the Catholic Church, they have increased their influence in society, and they have begun to successfully pressure the state to obtain legal and social prerogatives. In sum, evangelicals have emerged as another source of legitimacy, which neither the state nor the Catholic Church can ignore” (p. 240).

As history clearly proves, such involvement in socio-political and socio-economic issues poses both enormous opportunities and grave perils for churches of all denominations, as well as for the people of Latin America. The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America presents clear examples of both.

“The mediations of Agripino Núñez Collado, from the 1950s to the turn of the century … helped the government and political parties to resolve crucial impasses that otherwise could have ended in bloodshed” (p. 243). Similarly, Betances writes, “Despite weakness and inertia at various points, the church played a significant role in the transition to democracy in the countries under study. It fostered the ecclesiastical base communities, peasant and labor movements, and human rights organizations. These entities helped to lay a foundation upon which a solid civil society could emerge. The church hierarchy critiques of political opponents, its continuous call for dialogue, and national reconciliation turned into an institution that political actors can count on in times of crisis. These circumstances in turn, transformed the church into a special political actor that does not seek secular power, but exerts considerable influence on those who do” (pp. 243-244).

Conversely, he warns: “Like its counterparts in Bolivia and Central America, the Dominican church claims to be nonpartisan, but its… overlapping interests with the government and the socioeconomic elite turns it into a defender of the status quo rather than a true nonpartisan actor. … The Dominican church receives its ordinary financial allotments through the national budget, extraordinary government allowance for special construction projects, and, on occasion, transfers of public assets to set up training schools and other social services. This complex set of circumstances makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the clergy to be truly nonpartisan when it comes to the defense of the Dominican political establishment.”

These conclusions are very similar to those that Rev. Edward Cleary, O.P., Director of Latin American Studies at Providence College, expresses in Aparecida: Quo Vadis?
In all, *The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America: The Dominican Case in Comparative Perspective* provides a valuable overview of the role of the Catholic Church in social and political change in contemporary Latin America, and I am confident it will make many positive contributions to broadening understanding of the complex dynamics of that vast and vital continent.

**Reference**


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Las geografías isleñas se prestan a ser tomadas como una especie de microcosmos ideales para el estudio de los comportamientos de la vegetación, la fauna, los suelos, los fenómenos naturales; así como también de los seres humanos en los procesos económicos, políticos y sociales. No siempre se analizan en conjunto ambas dimensiones, pero si en algún lugar resulta tentador hacerlo es en estos espacios, que en cierta forma aparentan estar menos sujetos a influencias externas que los territorios continentales. Este es el caso de las islas del Mar Caribe, que desde siempre han despertado la imaginación de los escritores, filósofos, naturalistas y, desde luego, estudiosos de las sociedades, tanto por sus características físico-geográficas como por su atribulada historia de choque y cruce de civilizaciones, razas, culturas, apetitos imperiales y luchas emancipadoras.

Separadas por el mar, las islas del Caribe se caracterizan por un alto endemismo de flora y fauna, con variados ecosistemas en espacios relativamente reducidos, proporcionales a la extensión de los
The Catholic Church in Latin America began with the Spanish colonization of the Americas and continues up to the present day. In the later part of the 20th century, however, the rise of Liberation theology has challenged such close alliances between church and state. Pope Francis has embraced many elements of liberation theology, especially the dedication of the Church to the poor and marginalized. In comparison to Europe and other Western nations, the Catholic Church still has a major influence in Latin America in 1968, the church knew itself as a poor church because most of its members experienced poverty. The poor had to play a central role in the reflection about evangelization and the building of the church on the continent. From this perspective, Medellín has been a natural conversation partner for U.S. Catholic black, Hispanic, Asian and feminist theologies, among others, insofar as it shares common language, concerns and methods with these bodies of theological thought. We should not, however, miss the particularity of Medellín. Millions of Catholic immigrants from Latin America were evangelized in its spirit and bring that formation to enrich the life of the church in the United States. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND POWER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA: THE DOMINICAN CASE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE by Emilio Betances. STACY KEOGH. University of New Mexico Albuquerque, New Mexico. Please review our Terms and Conditions of Use and check box below to share full-text version of article. I have read and accept the Wiley Online Library Terms and Conditions of Use. Shareable Link. Use the link below to share a full-text version of this article with your friends and colleagues. Learn more. Copy URL. In this well-written monograph, Emelio Betances examines the origins and development of this relationship in the Dominican Republic., Hispanic American Historical Review. History has a curious and even dangerous way of showing us things that reality forces us to see day after day. It works like one of the enlargers we used in photography long before a computer sat on top of our desks. History is also the method Emelio Betances has chosen to focus on and illuminate that odd fellowship of the Catholic Church and the state in Latin America. He couldn't have chosen a better method. - - JosÁ© Luis SÁ¡