

Religion as a Political Factor in the Andean Countries: An Approximation from Political Culture

In the last few decades interest for religion and the religious has grown considerably within different academic communities. In this sense, contemporary political science is not an exception; this has signified an important change in a discipline which traditionally has not had much interest in this theme (Wald et al. 2005). In large part, this change is related to the discrepancy, notable in the last few decades, between what the theory of secularization held (that is, a gradual lessening of religion as an individual and social experience as societies became more developed) and the persistence and increase of religiosity and religious practices both in developed countries as well as in countries on the way to development. It is no less significant for understanding this change the observation that churches, religious organizations and movements have been capable of initiating and sustaining social, economic, and political change in different countries.

Specifically, regarding the relationship between religion and politics, in last few decades history has been a witness to a number of cases in which the religious phenomenon has operated as an influential and sometimes decisive political force. For example, in some cases religious movements and organizations have opposed some political decisions made by secular authorities, and in other cases churches and believers have taken an active role in pressuring for political change. In this sense, it is worth while noting the influence of the religious factor on politics in different contexts and in different ways and with different political orientations (both progressive and conservative).

This "rediscovery" of religion as a relevant political factor should not surprise one if this is viewed from a sociological perspective and if we consider that it is multidimensional experience. From this perspective, religion may be seen as a system of beliefs and practices oriented toward the sacred and the supernatural through which the daily experiences of groups and individuals find meaning and guidance (Smith 1996). In the same way, humans possess a capacity to think and reflect in very sophisticated ways on their place in the universe and to find meaning in their lives: there is no doubt that religion, as a system of beliefs, plays an important role in helping men and women to find this

deeper meaning (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007). Also, it is the case that any religious experience includes believing, acting and belonging (Layman 2001). It is therefore important to recognize that religion is an important source for finding meaning and direction in life which influences the conduct of both persons and entire groups. Furthermore, it should be evident that the beliefs, practices and religious experiences of individuals and groups play an important role in their attitudes and political conduct.

It has become evident that there is a need to distinguish between three different basic processes which involve the different ways in which religion influences, directly or indirectly, politics. First, there is no doubt that the churches, like any other organization or institution, have particular objectives and interests, at different moments and in different circumstances, may act as political agents (Gill 2001). Secondly, the churches, beyond that which is strictly religious, offer their members the opportunity to experience collectively the vital inspiration to develop what many call "social capital" (Freston 2004). Although there is no consensus on how important this social capital is for the functioning of political systems, it is very probable that one's political orientation may vary according to the level and type of social capital one possesses. Finally, beliefs and religious practices, as well as the social and collective experience of belonging to a church or a religious movement may influence the way the believers observe and react to the political situation which surrounds them. It is important to note here that this research proposal will be mainly aim to address the way religion is a political factor for individual church members considering both the role of religious creeds and beliefs, and the experience of being part of a collective or social organization.

In that past few years, and specifically in the context of Latin America, a few studies have been done on how religious beliefs influence the political perceptions and attitudes of individuals. Some of these studies have analyzed the information provided by studies of public opinion (Patterson 2004, Gill 2004). Unfortunately, up until now, the results of these studies do not allow us to have a clear idea on how and to what extent the beliefs and experiences of ordinary citizens who belong to a religious organization affect their political conduct. We believe that to great extent these limitations are due to some of the

characteristics of the methodological strategies used by the authors and some limitations in the majority of the opinion surveys used (The Latin Barometer and the World Survey of Values).

Given this situation, the project which I propose aims to continue this line of research by making use of a study of public opinion which is being carried out in several countries of South, Central, and North America: the Barometer of the Americas, produced by *Latin American Public Opinion Project*. In the past few years this study has shown to possess a number of advantages and strengths in relation to other studies which also have been conducted in this region (for example, Latinobarometer). Specifically, we aim to analyze the most recent results (2008) for three Andean countries: Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru.

As far as the methodological strategy we will employ, and given the important changes which have occurred in the religious panorama in Latin America, we will use for our main explanatory variables a series of categories based on what religion is professed (Catholic, Protestant, etc.) and the degree of involvement of the believers in their respective churches (frequency of mass attendance and participation or not in religious organizations connected to a church). As far as the independent variables, the Barometer of the Americas contains a great number of variables which reveal different political perceptions, attitudes evaluations. By way of example, this study includes not just typical questions on general or abstract preferences regarding a democratic regime, but also a series of questions on the way elected authorities should use their power.

The combination of the research questions and the research methodology will help us to improve our understanding of how the different dimensions of any religious experience are able to shape the political orientations of individuals and social groups within Andean countries. In terms of the anticipated results, I expect that some of the most important findings regarding religion as a political factor will be related to the discovery of some interaction effects (e.g., the combination of being Catholic or Protestant and the degree of involvement of the believers in their respective churches or the combination of being Catholic and Protestant and being a member of a religious organizations connected to a

church). Finally, the comparison between the political orientations of both Catholic and Protestants will provide evidence regarding to what extent these two religious traditions and communities play a different role as a political force in this region of the world.

Regarding the publications outlets to be consider when this research is complete, it is worth noting that there are journals specialized in the study of the relationship between religion and politics (i.e., Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion) as well as journals specialized in Latin American Politics (i.e., Latin America Politics and Society and Latin American Research Review). All these journals have been known for being particularly interested in this type of research.

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