



Article

Churches and Cosmologies: Religion, Environment and Social Conflict in Latin America

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A conference exploring social justice and the church

Environmental issues—immediate issues such as land use, mining, and access to water, and long term issues such as climate change—have been major sources of conflict in Latin America in recent years. What role has religion played in these conflicts? Have religious beliefs inspired or supported environmental efforts? Have church institutions played mobilizing or mediating roles? What can we expect in the future about the role of religion as environmental conflicts continue to play out in the region?

—Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

[“Religion, Environment and Social Conflict in Latin](#)

America

From 2014 to 2016, the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University in Washington, DC, formulated an ambitious initiative in response to what it considered two of the most widespread sources of conflict characteristic of the region's democracies. On the one hand, conflicts over extractive resources, and environmental and climate justice were on the rise, presenting questions about the diversity of religion-based responses to rights, justice, and the law. Conversely, rights-based social justice mobilization in Latin American countries rooted in gender and sexuality were also emerging. The Religion and Democratic Contestation project sought to improve the understanding of religious responses to both of these types of mobilizations, and rights and justice more broadly:

The environment and gender were chosen as topics to organize the current project, given the evident public debate and social contestation these two questions generate in Latin America today, and our assessment that public perceptions of these issues are changing. This project gave particular attention to interactions between religion and governments, religious and civil society actors, and between local and transnational advocacy networks, including the role of religious actors in the creation and application of the law. A primary

project goal was to identify and explain the range of variation of religious orientations to rights, justice and to the law. A second goal was to identify the sources of specific conceptions of rights and justice for religious advocacy, as articulated by theological concepts and positions as well as local and national engagements, but also by religious participation in transnational advocacy networks dedicated to these issues.

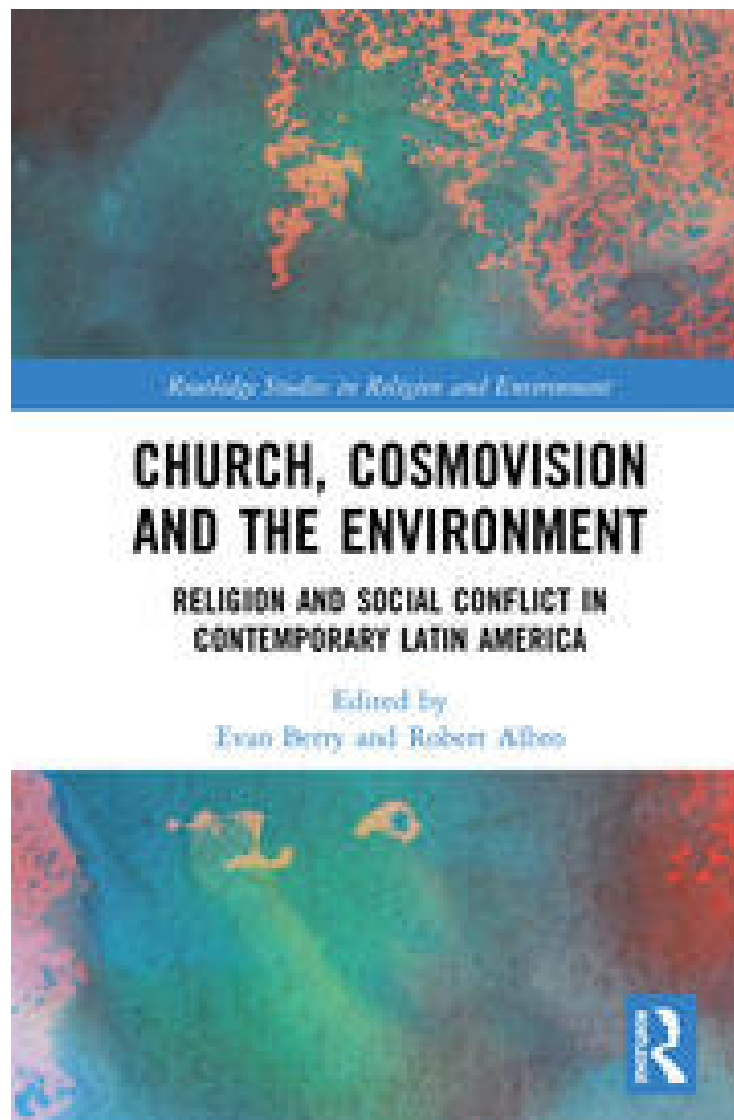
—CLALS, [*“Religion and Democratic Contestation”*](#)

Public Panels

Two final public panels were held January 20-21, 2016 to disseminate project findings among practitioners and policy decision-makers by presenting case studies. The first (see below) occurred at the Washington Office on Latin America in Washington, DC, and the second at the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice in New York City. The panels touched on how religious leaders and grassroots movements have integrated environmental issues into the faith-based call for justice and human rights; the role of transnational religious advocacy networks in international climate change negotiations, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; and Indigenous cosmologies in Bolivia and their impact on Bolivia’s approach to the international politics of climate change.

Related Publications

One of the key publications that came out of this two-year research project was the book entitled *Church, Cosmovision and the Environment: Religion and Social Conflict in Contemporary Latin America*, edited by Evan Berry and Robert Albro. This volume provides a comparative analysis of religious actors and transnational, national, and local advocacy in places such as Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico. It also considers the diversity of often plural religious engagement with advocacy, including Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal perspectives alongside the effects of Indigenous cosmological ideas. Finally, the book explores the specific religious sources of unlikely new alliances and novel articulations of rights, social justice, and ethics for the environmental concerns of Latin America.



Published in December 2015 as part of the CLALS Working Paper Series, Rachel Nadelman's article, "'Let Us Care for Everyone's Home': The Catholic Church's Role in Keeping Gold Mining Out of El Salvador" showcases the involvement of the Catholic Church in the grassroots anti-mining movement in El Salvador. She argues that the Church played a decisive role in shaping the public debate, and swaying the electorate toward the suspension of all industrial metals mining in the country:

El Salvador's refusal to allow industrial gold mining within its borders sets it apart from most other Latin American countries. Since 2007, three successive presidents from opposing parties have maintained a de facto moratorium that prevents all mining firms - international and Salvadoran, public and private - from accessing El Salvador's estimated 1.4 million ounces of gold deposits. A majority of Salvadoran citizens and political leaders alike are opposed to mining, citing the country's environmental degradation, population density, and limited water resources. Yet opposition to industrial gold mining has not always been the majority position in El Salvador. As recently as the early 2000s, the Salvadoran government, with support from international donors and creditors, pursued metals mining as an opportunity for economic growth. The story of how El Salvador diverged from this extractivist path is multifaceted. A key element has been the strategic involvement of the Salvadoran Catholic Church. This working paper explores the Church's influence on the Salvadoran government's decision to suspend all metals mining. The analysis examines the theological and practical motivations for the Church's stance on mining. It also describes the strategic actions taken by the Church to promote its position.

—Rachel Nadelman, *“‘Let Us Care for Everyone’s Home’: The Catholic Church’s Role in Keeping Gold mining Out of El Salvador”*

Read the full article below:

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Another CLALS Working Paper, Daniel Levine’s “What Pope Francis Brings to Latin America” was published in March 2016.

Read the full paper below:

[SSRN-id2761467Download](#)