intersections

Article

Faith Against Violence in Latin America

April 6, 2024

Exploring the Church’s response to crime and political unrest

Latin America is often referred to as one of the most violent regions of the world. But what is the broader history behind the headlines about drugs, gangs, and political corruption that are so often emphasized in mainstream analysis of this region? And how are people in countries like Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, and Chile attempting to chart a different course? What role does religion have to play?

Violence and Religion in the Colonial Era

What we now know as Latin America was home to many Indigenous groups before the era of European colonization. This included vast civilizations like the Olmecs, Mayans, Incas, Aztecs, and Muisca as well as numerous smaller Indigenous societies. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spain, Portugal, Britain, and France were engaged in fierce competition to exert control over the diverse people and abundant natural resources of Central and South America, killing millions in the process. The survivors made up the captive labor forces on Spanish-controlled *encomiendas* and forcibly converted to Christianity. The Europeans condemned their native spiritual traditions as “satanic.” Furthermore, the colonizing forces destroyed many of their original historical accounts.

By the early 1800s, most Latin American countries were able to wrest political control from the Europeans in a series of hard-fought revolutionary struggles. Meanwhile, another power was emerging at that same time. With the Monroe Doctrine issued in 1823, the United States declared its intention to launch new imperialist ventures in Latin America and become the new geopolitical force in the region. As the United States grew militarily and economically, its expansionist interventions threw Latin America into a new era of instability. The American imperialist strategy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often mirrored the stratagems of the European colonial era and involved the toppling of existing governments and replacing them with client rulers beholden to American business interests.

Power vacuums are the inevitable result of colonial era aftershocks and the chaos resulting from the US government’s economic and political infiltrations. The political and criminal violence observed in Latin America today have largely filled those power vacuums.



A Mayan musician. Source: Amar Preciado.



A Peruvian elder in traditional Inca attire. Source: Alejandro Janonovoa via Pexels



Colombian women at a festival. Source: Hernan Pernett.

Today, the descendants of South and Central America's Indigenous Peoples (as well as the descendants of enslaved African people transplanted to the region) are trying to reestablish peace in their societies. It is no easy task, given the centuries of upheaval the European colonial and American imperialist eras caused. And yet, according to Alexander Wilde, editor of *Religious Responses to Violence* and his fellow researchers, there are ongoing efforts to quell persistent violence. People and organizations of faith lead many such efforts.

The Contemporary Struggle for Peace

> ***Modern Latin America is both notably violent and notably religious. During the past half century, it has evolved from a region of political instability and frequent dictatorships into one of elected governments while its societies and economies have undergone sweeping changes and high levels of violence have remained a persistent problem. During this same period, religion has shown remarkable dynamism as a force in society.***
>
> ***—Alexander Wilde, "Introduction,"* Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America, Past and Present.**

Contributing factors to violence in Latin America. Source: Yarmhmd2 via Wikimedia Commons.

Religion and Violence in Latin America was an initiative of American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS). It was led by Alexander Wilde (who organized many of the findings of the project in the book *Religious Responses to Violence*) and CLALS director Eric Hershberg. Along with these principal investigators, CLALS also partnered with a dynamic team of investigative journalists, scholars, religious practitioners, and policymakers. The purpose of this initiative was to explore the relationship between violence and religion in different regional contexts throughout Latin America. Branching from this core idea, the three primary research objectives of the project were as follows:

1. To evaluate the role of the church and religion in political change, including dictatorial and democratic political contexts.
2. To determine the role of the church and religion in the defense of human rights and

ministry toward victims of violence.

3. To answer the question, “How are religious ideas and practices shaped by political context and different forms of violence?”



Churchgoers in Mexico. Source: Israel Torres via Pexels.

Workshops

The Planning Session

> ***Church-linked actors, often in ecumenical efforts, continue to educate people—particularly rural populations, women, and indigenous communities—about the rights due them by law.***
>
> *—Alexander Wilde*

CLALS organized two workshops as part of this initiative. The first was a planning session in Washington, DC, held from March 26-27 in 2012. The participants discussed how Christian churches and communities responded to violence in dictatorial contexts, during transitions towards democratic governance, and in contexts of increased criminal activity. This meeting culminated in a public panel discussion by Alex Wilde, John Burdick of Syracuse University, Virginia Garrard-Burnett of the University of Texas at Austin, Daniel Levine of University of Michigan, Kimberly Theidon of Harvard University, and American University chaplain Joe Eldridge.

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A New Generation of Scholarship

The second workshop, held in January 2013, focused on fourteen original pieces of research that were born out of the previous year's planning session. The January meeting culminated in a public discussion, "Religion, Violence and Human Rights in Latin America: A New Generation of Scholarship." This discussion featured Robert Brenneman of Saint Michael's College; Amelia Frank-Vitale of the Institute of Current World Affairs; Patrick Kelly, then doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago; and Winifred Tate of Colby College. CLALS's codirector Alexander Wilde served as the discussion moderator.

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The Book: *Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America Past and Present*

> ***At the most immediate level, priests must weigh their pastoral obligations to minister to all—the powerful and the oppressed, the perpetrator and the victim—against their understanding of their particular obligations to the disenfranchised.***
>
> ***—Winnifred Tate, "Violence and Pastoral Care in Putumayo, Colombia."***

Alex Wilde's book *Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America Past and*

Present was published in 2015. It compiles the key observations and research findings from CLALS's multiyear initiative. This edited volume includes ten case studies of countries throughout Latin America to explore how Catholic and Evangelical churches respond to violence in their areas through ministry or aiding in community activism.



Blog Posts

In addition to the book, this project also produced a series of blog posts. These posts related key findings and reflections from the project's research and conversations.

- "Religious Responses to Violence in Latin America" by Alexander Wilde: This post introduced the major themes of the "Religious Responses to Violence" project.
- "Pope Francis I – The First Latin American Pope": This post considered how Francis I's papacy might impact the Church's response to the needs of the poor in violence-stricken regions of Latin America.
- "Moving Toward Religious Liberty in Response to Violence?": This post reflects on an event co-organized by CLALS titled, "The Role of the Church in the Face of Violence in Mesoamerica: Models and Experiences of Peace in Contexts of Conflict and Violence."
- "The Catholic Church as a Field Hospital After Battle" by Alexander Wilde: In this post, Wilde continues his analysis of Francis I's papacy. He observes Francis I as "presenting a fresh and personal vision of the Catholic church and Christian faith that seems likely to breathe new life into the church in Latin America."