

New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America

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John Lynch, a highly distinguished Latin American scholar and Emeritus Professor of Latin American History at the Institute of Latin American Studies, published *New Worlds, A Religious History of Latin America* in 2012, on the eve of the election of the first pope from Latin America, Francis I; it provides a very timely introduction to the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America. This history is complex, since, from the arrival of the first missionaries, the Church was entangled in colonial and later post-colonial politics. This entanglement of Church and politics has played an important role in Latin American history, and this book uses this as a lens to bring the tumultuous history of Latin America into focus, from the 16th to the 20th century.

Beginning with the Spanish Church around 1492, ending with 20th-century debates over Liberation Theology, and taking examples from across Latin America, *New Worlds* incorporates vast territory. The volume contributes to the pre-existing corpus on the history of religion in Latin America. Lynch notes that 'the works of modern theologians, historians, evangelists and catechists have enriched the subject [of the life of the Church and reception of Christianity in Latin America] in recent years and there is now enough material to make a modern history of religion in Latin America possible, though not enough to make it superfluous' (p. xii). The volume contributes to pre-existing studies such as Enrique Dussel's *The Church in Latin America* which was funded by the Commission for the Study of Church History in Latin America (CEHILA) and drew upon the expertise of a range of historians to produce a study that was self-consciously focused on the Catholic Church.⁽¹⁾

Lynch also focuses on the Catholic Church in Latin America, but seeks a broader approach to religion. The scale of the territory he covers makes it difficult to provide more than summary introductions to complex religious cultures and ideas. Only four of the 366 pages are devoted to summarizing the Amerindian religions of the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas. The brevity of this subject makes it more difficult to trace the processes of syncretism, acculturation and accommodation that contributed to the formation of Christianity in Latin America. Lynch refers briefly to syncretism, but also describes Amerindian religious practices as 'paganism' (p. 22), a term which does not enhance understanding of the identities and practices of non-Christian religions. References to other non-Christian religions in Latin America are also scarce, and the influence of other world religions such as Islam and Judaism is not explored. Islam and Judaism are mentioned fleetingly (pp. 4–6) in the context of 'The Spanish Church on the eve of the conquest', and Jews are only referred to again briefly in the context of 20th-century emigration to Argentina (pp. 324–8). Providing summaries for the beliefs of varied groups is an unenviable task, and the problem is highlighted in sentences such as 'blacks were not notable Catholic, though they were religious after their own fashion' (p. 163). The only other non-Christian religion referred to is Vodou, brought by Africans to Haiti (pp. 334–5). Lynch notes that 'slaves did not arrive in Latin America bereft of religious beliefs, their souls a *tabula rasa* ready for conversion to new religions' (p. 335), but the character and influence of these beliefs does not become a major topic. Further, slaves were not the only migrants to Latin America acting as vectors carrying religious beliefs. Given the scale of migrations to Latin America, the role of other religions brought to the continent could be explored further since this book does not aim to focus exclusively on Christianity. The concessions to non-Christian religions prioritise influence across an East-West axis, yet Latin America is not simply an extension of the Atlantic world, and also experienced migrations from Asia and the Pacific world. Many different beliefs have contributed to the religious make-up of Latin America, which, as Lynch illustrates, varies across time and region. Yet the strength of this work does not lie in its examination of religious identity and ideas, but in its social history approach to Christianity in Latin America and the intersection of the Church with colonial and postcolonial politics. It provides a map of the successes and failures of the Church across Latin America

Lynch also goes some way to illustrate the heterogeneity of Catholic beliefs beyond the institutional Church. Here there were some problems with the depictions of Catholic identities. For example, the Franciscans are included under the category of monastic orders (p. 2), but Franciscans were a mendicant order and, while they established convents, they were never cloistered within a monastery. This is important since understanding the specific identity and beliefs of the different religious orders facilitates an understanding of the character of beliefs transmitted to the New World. Chapter six focuses on 'The religion of the people', predominantly citing statistics of church attendance and examples of popular piety for the modern period. Observing the persistent importance of millenarianism in Latin America, Lynch notes the importance of the 16th-century Franciscans who, influenced by the 12th-century Cistercian monk Joachim of Fiore, established this tradition of thought in Spanish America (p. 175). Observing continuities with the late Middle Ages and the legacy of late medieval European religious ideas and beliefs in Latin America can also contribute to historical perspectives on the makeup of beliefs; the first Franciscans arrived in the Americas as early as the late 15th century (2), and had influenced the thought structure of Columbus.(3)

It is, of course, difficult to provide genealogies of religious beliefs and identities, especially across the time scale in question. Lynch delineates examples of religious beliefs and practices, grouping them by genre (such as millenarian thought), but does not posit models of influence across time; this book does not set out to be an intellectual history of religious ideas.

This *Religious History of Latin America* predominantly focuses on the Catholic Church. When the pluralism of Christianity is discussed, it is in the context of the 19th century. Lynch identifies the 19th century as the time when the Catholic Church 'no longer exercised a religious or cultural monopoly' (p. 185), suggesting that Latin America's independence from Catholic sovereigns in the 19th century led to the arrival of non-Catholic Christians. Chapter seven notes that during the early years of independence 'congregations and churches of Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists appeared' as 'tolerated enclaves that did not represent missionary expansion' (p. 185). From the perspective of community demographics, which the book often

adopts, it is reasonable to focus on the post-independence period for noting the importance of non-Catholic Christians to the religious makeup of Latin America. However, in this context, Lynch continues focusing on the Catholic Church, by exploring its response to the arrival of these groups. From the perspective of Protestantism's impact on the Catholic Church, it would be equally relevant to incorporate examples from the earlier period as well, thinking about how the Reformation influenced the Catholic Church and its behaviour in the Americas in the 16th century. Space is given in chapter three for commenting on the context of the Enlightenment, yet this makes the absence of commentary on the impact of the Reformation more audible.

The book is structured chronologically and covers an expansive time-frame, from the 15th to the 20th century. This *longue durée* approach brings both benefits and problems. Historicising the Church in the context of Latin America facilitates our understanding of the importance of the Church in Latin America today and its entanglement in politics. This scale also leads to the compression of detail as it, at times, necessitates generalisations that obscure complexities. Further, the temporal framework is not neutral or evenly distributed. Lynch claimed he was 'aiming to strike a balance between the long colonial period and the shorter but more eventful modern age' (p. xii). The notion that modernity is 'more eventful' is questionable, and the perspectives of modern history can impact interpretations of the late medieval and early modern periods. How time can be modelled over this large time scale, and the problems and benefits of this framework, could also be explored. Nonetheless the author makes it clear that the study will be weighted towards the modern history of Latin America, which is unsurprising since this is John Lynch's period of specialism.

'Latin America' is a problematic framework (4), and an introduction to how 'Latin America' can be approached as a cohesive subject and how it acts as an analytic unit might have been helpful for readers using this book as an introduction to Latin American history. The term carries many complex assumptions, and these are not politically neutral.(5) Latin America is continuously influenced by its transatlantic and transpacific relations, not to mention its relations with North America. In this sense, many boundaries containing the subject of Latin America are fluid. Further, this religious history of Latin America focuses on how different strains of Christianity impacted upon Latin America, and the development of Latin American religious cultures. Yet influence was multidirectional, and while Latin America may have been a net recipient of migration historically, there have been significant numbers of migrant Latin Americans, and the religious cultures and influence of these groups could be another interesting case study. In addition to discussing the 'Romanisation' of the Church in Latin America (p. 147), the Latin Americanisation of Christianity could also be explored. Placing Latin America within a global context may also contribute to understanding the religious history of Latin America. The Catholic Church, the dominant subject of this book, is a religion of global dimensions, and the globality of Catholicism has influenced how it has acted in the Latin American context. The missionaries documented in this book, such as the Jesuits, were part of global networks. Realising this global dimension is important for understanding the ideas and identities transmitted through missionaries in Latin America. Understanding the global context of the Catholic Church also facilitates deeper understanding of its politics, particularly for complex problems such as the Theology of Liberation movement (6), which is explored in the final chapter of this book.

The scholarship of this work is evident in its strong case-studies approach, and Lynch's expertise in the post-independence and transitional period is unquestionable.(7) He pays great attention to the differences and details of the nations that emerged out of Spanish America, and he takes care not to make generalisations across this highly differentiated context. This meticulous framework facilitates the exploration of the book's central theme, the relationship between Church and state. The examples given demonstrate the complexity of this tumultuous relationship. Lynch describes how the Church had to re-negotiate its position within the newly formed nations of Latin America, and how it had to act delicately within increasingly secular states. The complexity of this 19th-century transformation provides an important historical backdrop to (but by no means an apology for) to the complicated Church-state relationship within the dictatorships and revolutions of the 20th century.

If this book had been published months later it may have included the background of Francis I as a case

study for religion in Argentina in the 20th century. Fortuitously, Lynch provides an exploration of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Argentina during the Peron and post-Peron years, devoting most of chapter nine to this subject. Lynch historicises the problematic coexistence between religion and politics in Argentina, providing insight into the issue that came to media attention with the 2013 election of the first Argentine pope, the Church's involvement in the dirty war in Argentina (1976–83). His section on 'Complicity' in chapter nine, 'The Church and the dictators', will be read with interest by scholars looking to know more about the background of Francis I. Lynch writes that 'the years after 1960 were times of trial for Argentine Catholics, united in their faith, divided in their loyalties' (p. 266). Lynch then describes the disunion of these Catholics who were split between Conservative Catholics, Social Christians, and Progressive Catholics, reminding readers that the views of Catholics were as differentiated as the political context in which they found themselves. While conservative Catholics wished the Church to be allied with the state and the military, progressive Catholics, including worker priests, 'allied themselves with protest actions' (p. 267). Thus he surmises that the Argentinean Church was conflicted internally as well as externally on the eve of the military dictatorship. Lynch suggests that Catholics were confused and divided at the time of the military *golpe* of 1976; nonetheless he asks 'where was the voice of Christian concern?' (p. 269).

While Lynch acknowledges the varieties of Catholic actors in 20th-century Argentina, his comments about the overall role of the Church during the military dictatorship are damning; he writes that 'the Church had the moral authority and the strength of numbers to provide independent opposition, but it failed to do so, failed even to protect its own people' (p. 270). Diligently respecting variations across different national contexts, Lynch notes that in Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, and (less consistently) Bolivia, the Church did defend human rights and the progressive option for the poor. He compares this unfavourably to Argentina where 'there were a few protests against the worst excesses of military repression, but institutionally the Church was silent and stood aside from commitment'. This issue has now entered the global Catholic discourse, since it cast a shadow over the 2013 election of Francis I, even as he selected a name that demonstrated his commitment to the poor. Lynch delineates the specific context which generated the unfortunate muteness of the Catholic Church during the dirty war in Argentina. He explains that 'the Argentine Church had a long tradition of conservatism, public caution, and subordination of the state, whose economic support it accepted for salaries, seminaries, and education, and that this created 'a deep-rooted culture which prevented it from changing its ways or adjusting to a modern Church'. This explanation of the Church's position is remarkably different from the picture painted elsewhere, where the voice of the Church was constrained in the face of persecution. Lynch goes as far as saying that some Argentinean bishops 'can only be described as collaborators'. He explains that one reason for the historic silence of the Church in Argentina in the wake of the sequester, torture, exile, and assassination of bishops, priests, religious, and laypeople, could be the role of the military chaplains, which further complicated the relationship between the Church and the military dictatorship. The strength of *New Worlds* lies in its historicisation of the complex relationship between Church and state, and the variations of this relationship in different times and across different regions of Latin America. The attention paid to the Argentinean context, will doubtless be of increased interest to Church historians today. Ahead of the election of the first Argentinean pope, Lynch asked questions which now have increased significance, such as 'what did the Vatican make of the complicity between Church and state in Argentina during the dirty wars?' There were religious people, clerical and lay, who experienced violence in this context, but did the Church in Rome do much to help these people? Lynch suggests not. One wonders Francis' I experiences of this Argentinean context will influence future global papal policies.

David Armitage recently observed that there is return to *longue durée* history which 'presents challenges and opportunities for all historians, including practitioners of intellectual history'.⁽⁸⁾ This religious history of Latin America spanning over five centuries can be seen as an example of this *longue durée* history, and presents both problems and strengths. The book does not specifically provide an intellectual history of the varieties of beliefs which met and mixed in the Latin American context, and nor does it attempt to construct genealogies of belief across this time frame. Instead it provides a broad contextualisation of the Catholic Church in Latin America, in order to depict the religious cultures it established amongst the Latin American populations, and to consider the challenges it faced historically. Examples of these challenges are provided

across the subject period, including the struggles against Amerindian religious practices in the 16th century, the entanglement of the Church with the colonial state, the expulsion of the Jesuits in the Early Modern period, and the struggle for the Church to negotiate its position during independence and in the context of dictatorships and revolution. Its strength lies in its case-study approach to Church-state relations and its ability to illustrate the differentiation of these relations across the political regions of Latin America within this broad timeframe. The book provides an important introduction to Latin America and its religious history, and provides a framework for future studies.

Notes

1. *The Church in Latin America, 1492–1992*, ed. Enrique Dussel (Tunbridge Wells, 1992).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Livarius Oliger, O.F.M., ‘The earliest record on the Franciscans in America’, *Catholic Historical Review*, 6 (1920/1921), 59–65.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Pauline Moffitt Watts, ‘Prophecy and discovery: on the spiritual origins of Christopher Columbus’ “Enterprise of the Indies”, *The American Historical Review*, 90, 1 (February 1985), pp. 73–102.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Thomas H. Holloway, ‘Latin America: what’s in a name?’, in *A Companion to Latin America* (Waltham, MA, 2008), pp. 1–7.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. This was explored by Walter Mignolo in *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford, 2005).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. The use of this perspective is demonstrated by Ian Linden, *Global Catholicism: Divergence and Change Since Vatican II* (New York, NY, 2009).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Lynch has written extensively on this subject over his multi-decade career; for example, *Between Colony and Nation* (Basingstoke, 2001), and *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808–1826* (London, 1973).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. David Armitage ‘What’s the big idea’, *The Times Literary Supplement* (September 2012) < <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1129685.ece> [2] > [accessed 13 May 2013].[Back to \(8\)](#)

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