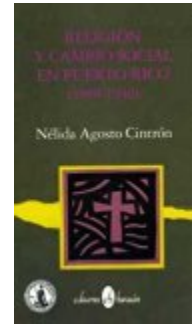


Nelida Agosto Cintron. *Religion y cambio social en Puerto Rico (1898-1940)*. Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracan, 1996. 168 pp. \$8.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-929157-39-9.

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On Jibaro Pentecostals and Popular Religion in Puerto Rico

In a country where sanctuaries and pilgrimage sites are found on nearly every corner of the map; where talk of apparitions, miracles and the supernatural figures almost daily in shows, newspapers, and casual conversation; where preachers mobilize followers by the tens of thousands to gather them yearly before the capitol; and where bishops are dismissed amid intrigue, the paucity of scholarship on matters of popular religion seems remarkable. Indeed, Agosto Cintron's *Religion y cambio social en Puerto Rico* is a pioneering work, one among a handful.[1] It is also the first scholarly account of the development of grassroots religious movements among the island's displaced campesinado in the first half of this century.[2]

The study is framed by two moments of grave crisis: the inauguration of a new colonial order after the U.S. invasion of the island in 1898 and the disorienting economic collapse of the 1930s. Amid this disarray, the author argues, popular religious movements and devotions offered peasants the means and language for protest and mobilization and the symbolic framework in which to regain a sense of coherence and stability. The utopian orders these *jibaros* imagined, she adds, served as critiques of the status quo.

Nationalist histories and mythologies have often portrayed the success of Protestantism among sectors of Puerto Rico's *campesinos* only as an instance of deculturating Americanization. Their conversion, it has been argued, served only to support the modernizing colonial project. Perhaps the greatest virtue of *Religion y cambio social* is that it complicates this facile analysis.[3] The

study, which in spite of its title, remains mostly an account of the rise of the 'fundamentalist' strand of Protestantism on the island, shows that Pentecostalism prospered only after the Hermanos Cheos version of Catholicism had lost its impetus. The itinerant preachers of the mountainous coffee-country had disappeared (with little sense of loss among the new American Catholic hierarchy), when native-born organizers and preachers began to experience the dramatic growth of their self-supporting congregations. The volume suggests that foreign-born Pentecostalism emerged as an heir of sorts to the vital legacy of the popular cult of the saints even when it did serve to facilitate a sector's adaptation to the new order.[4]

In its broadest formulation, Agosto Cintron argues that there is continuity along with rupture between Pentecostalism and folk Catholicism. Among other commonalities, the author finds in these traditions: (1) a religious practice and notion of salvation that are individualized in conception and divorced from a priestly class and its sacramental regulation; (2) a belief in supernatural forces –whether the Holy Spirit or a particular saint–capable of intervening materially in a person's life, of healing and saving; and (3) millennial expectation (pp. 110-124).

According to Agosto Cintron, it was "the syncretic character of popular religion and the preeminence of magical and superstitious thinking in the campesinado's mentality" that made the transition from the old practice to the new one possible (p. 116).[5] Popular Catholicism,

after all was eminently practical and it “welcomed easily new beliefs and elements that augmented the forces and resources that the campesinos could count on when facing their problems (pp. 116-117).” Rather than weakening popular traditions, Pentecostalism served to strengthen a long-held attitude of absolute dependence upon the supernatural for the management of misfortune (p. 117).

Although there is room for debate amid these assertions, and some might object that the first-hand research offered here is insufficient to lend full support to all of the claims, *Religion y cambio social* performs an important service: it offers a cogent synthesis of broadly dispersed materials and it puts forth an interpretation of popular religiosity. It brings into a conversation much of the secondary literature in Puerto Rico, incorporating or making use of accounts that are generally referred to without much imagination.

The book, however, is hardly a polemic. Indeed, one might fault Agosto Cintron for an apparent reticence to engage in ‘theoretical’ argumentation or to point out the lines where her interpretation deviates from others. Her use of Angel Lopez Canto’s *La religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico* is a case in point.

Agosto Cintron argues throughout that the official Church and popular Catholicism were distant from early on and at times even hostile to one another, forming in effect, two related but separate religious traditions. And she cites the lack of institutional structure as one of the reasons for the collapse of the Hermanos Cheos movement and also for some campesinos’ easy acceptance of Pentecostalism.

In support of her assertion, Agosto Cintron cites, among others, J. Sued Badillo and Lopez Canto’s *Puerto Rico negro* and a chapter in Fernando Pico’s *Libertad y servidumbre*.^[6] She does not mention, however, that one can read Lopez Canto’s other works as resisting the orthodox versus popular dichotomy on which she relies and that most scholars accept. Even while showing that the religious instruction and sacramental participation of most rural dwellers in Puerto Rico was minimal at best, Lopez Canto remains convinced that “the religious profile of the Puerto Rican [at least during the eighteenth century] was based exclusively on the doctrine of the Catholic Church. And that the totality of his peculiar exterior manifestations were nothing more than interpretive modifications of liturgical acts or of the sacred cult, and in them he did not deviate one whit from the purest orthodoxy.”^[7] Lopez Canto, incidentally, bases this argument on the observation that the Inquisition in Carta-

gena reviewed only one case for blasphemy or heresy involving a personage in Puerto Rico.

The thesis behind Agosto Cintron’s work reiterates, at least partly, Michael Barkun’s well-known assertions from *Disaster and the Millennium*.^[8] Like that work, *Religion y cambio social* argues that millenarianism and certain related forms of popular devotion are symbolic responses (though also actual instances of resistance) and adaptations to crisis, whether the catastrophe be a natural disaster such as the two devastating hurricanes that swept the island during this period, or dramatic changes in the social order.

The formulation, of course, fits the evidence well; the period under study is one of undisputed crisis. But one could submit that the crisis model for understanding popular religion might be in need of qualification. For, as Agosto Cintron herself notes, apparitions and millennial expectations of some sort seem to be near constants of the religious life in the island. The movements under study are if anything, unusually powerful manifestations of phenomena with a long history and tradition. The relationship between the crisis and popular religious movements cannot be understood solely as one of circumstance and response, however much one might want to camouflage what remains in essence a cause-and-effect connection. Indeed, one might argue that it is the marginal, unremarkable and frequent local movements that sustain and keep alive the traditions from which the broader movements constitute themselves. The crisis movement also requires quieter times.

The fact that the Hermanos Cheos movement had its foci at a number of chapels in the mountains, also attests to the need to qualify the crisis and response model. Agosto Cintron herself notes without much elaboration that the impact of the American presence was not felt as rapidly nor as intensely in this region as in the coastal areas where agro-industry and a new labor regime emerged. Indeed, the coast does not seem to have supported a religious movement of the sort the book is concerned with until the development of Pentecostalism, which had its strongest growth there. (pp. 92-93) The response to the new order, then, first emerged in the area that appears most insulated from change; this would seem to require some rethinking of the interpretive model.

Agosto Cintron’s arguments are also an invitation for a conversation on the much-debated relationship between religious institutions, orthodoxy and popular religious movements. At times, I would submit, *Religion*

y cambio social overestimates the importance of institutions even without intending to do so. Agosto Cintron proposes in the introduction that “the Church’s campaign against the Cheo movement and what it represented did not eradicate popular religion; it weakened it, muted it, but it did not destroy it (p. 14).” And yet, on the same page she cites the opposition of the Church hierarchy among the most powerful reasons for the movement’s decline.

Indeed, Agosto Cintron approaches institutional condemnation mostly at the discursive level, often referring to the American bishop’s attitude to non-modern, unorthodox practices which embarrassed Catholic officials before a government that openly favored Protestantism. But one wishes for a more detailed analysis, one that considers the consequences of discursive practices at the grassroots level, if it were possible, and for an account that considers alternative or coadjutant explanations for the exhaustion of Cheos in contrast to the vitality of Pentecostalism.[9]

Like all efforts, and particularly ground-breaking ones, *Religion y cambio social* is not without lacunae. It excludes, for instance, a reference to parallel developments in the rest of the Caribbean and in Latin America, thus lending Puerto Rico a presumptive exceptionalism. And at times one also wishes for some of the original discourse of the preachers and the movement leaders. But these gaps are comprehensible if one considers that the author is forced to write history *sobre la marcha* in a field where there has been little in the way of synthesis or interpretation. *Religion y cambio social* provides a starting block for any serious deliberation on Puerto Rican popular religion.

Notes:

[1]. This volume is preceded only by two monographs on the subject:

Luis Zayas Micheli. *Catolicismo popular en Puerto Rico*. (San Juan: Editorial Ra’ces, 1990) and Angel Lopez Cantos. *La religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico: Siglo XVIII*. (San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1993). The first lacks the rigor and interpretive breadth of Agosto Cintron’s work, offering instead an overview of apparitions and popular devotions and arguing that the growth of Protestantism and decline of Catholicism on the island in the twentieth century was caused by the Church’s failure to canonize a Puerto Rican saint or virgin that could be embraced as a national patron. Lopez Cantos’s work, for its part, deals mostly

with the eighteenth century.

In addition to the works mentioned above, see also Angel Quintero, ed. *Virgenes, magos y escapularios* (forthcoming), a scholarly anthology on popular religion in the island.

[2]. *Religion y cambio social* relies closely on Samuel Silva Gotay’s writings on the history of Protestantism on the island and on R. P. Esteban Santaella. *Historia de los hermanos Cheos*. (Ponce, Puerto Rico: Editorial Alfa y Omega, 1979), the best known of the two accounts dealing with jibaro religiosity at the turn of the century written by priests. The other work is difficult to find because it was withdrawn from shops following a controversy between the author and the Church hierarchy. See, R.P. Jaime M.F. Reyes. *La Santa Montana de San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico y el misterio de Elenita de Jesus (1898-1909)*. Mexico: XX, 1992).

[3]. Samuel Silva Gotay has led scholars toward the reassessment of the impact of Protestantism on the island. He has organized a large working group known as the Equipo Inter Universitario de Historia y Sociología del Protestantismo y el Catolicismo en Puerto Rico. For the most recent re-evaluation of the impact of historical Protestant churches, see Samuel Silva Gotay, *Protestantismo y politica en Puerto Rico, 1898-1930: Hacia una historia del protestantismo evangelico en Puerto Rico*. (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997).

[4]. The devotional tradition of the Hermanos Cheos did not disappear wholly from Catholicism. The apparition of the Virgin in Barrio Rincon in Sabana Grande in 1953 can be understood in the manner proposed by Arcadio Diaz-Quionones, as confirmation that ‘another memory’ lives on in the interstices of Puerto Rican culture. See, Arcadio Diaz-Quionones. *La memoria rota*. (San Juan: Ediciones Huracan, 1993). See also, *Religion y cambio social*, p. 16, where Agosto Cintron makes a similar argument.

[5]. All translations are my own.

[6]. Jalil Sued Badillo and Angel Lopez Cantos. *Puerto Rico negro*. (Rio Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1986) and Fernando Pico. *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX*. (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracan, 1979).

[7]. Lopez Cantos, *La religiosidad popular*, p.10.

[8]. Michael Barkun. *Disaster and the Millennium*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[9]. For a description of other factors that contributed

to the decline of the Hermanos Cheos, see for instance, Santaella, op. cit., p. 93. Santaella argues there that the aging of the preachers, their move from the rural areas to the towns and cities and their involvement in party politics have all been regarded by participants as elements in

the stagnation of the movement

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