Serbin’s book is a major contribution to the heated debate among students of Latin American religion on the nature of church-state relations during the region’s latest experiment with military dictatorship from the 1960s to 1980s. Political scientist Tony Gill initiated the debate a few years ago with his controversial book, Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America. Raising the hackles of more than a few scholars of Latin American Catholicism, Gill argues that religious competition, particularly with Protestants, is the primary explanatory factor of differing episcopal stances toward authoritarian regimes. In nations such as Brazil and Chile where Protestant (specifically Pentecostal) growth rates were high, the bishops adopted a preferential option for the poor as a member-retention strategy aimed at sectors of the population that had the highest rates of conversion to Pentecostalism. Conversely, in countries such as Argentina where Pentecostalism was not booming, the bishops generally continued their age-old preferential option for the privileged and even gave benediction to martial rule. Gill’s argument stands in stark contrast to the predominant view, which is shared by Serbin, that the monumental reforms of Vatican II and the Medellin Bishops’ Conference of 1968, along with an increasing awareness of the social, economic, and political roots of poverty led several episcopacies and individual clerics to become the "voice of the voiceless."

Secret Dialogues should lay to rest the myth of radical rupture in Brazilian church-state relations during the twenty-one year military dictatorship. Based on rich archival sources and interviews with church and military protagonists, the book focuses on the role of secret talks between Roman Catholic bishops and generals from 1970 to 1974, the period of greatest military repression. Given its historical hegemony, it is not surprising that the Church sought to preserve its influence with the Brazilian state through the clandestine meetings of the so-called Bipartite Commission. What is very surprising to many is that the secret dialogues with representatives of the Medici regime included prominent progressive bishops, such as Jose Ivo Lorscheiter. One can only imagine what the reaction would have been at the time if progressive priests and laity had known that leading liberationist bishops were "dialoguing with the devil." For this reason the meetings were held in secret. Serbin explains the ideological mix of the Grupo Religioso (the religious group) in terms of episcopal solidarity in face of the military threat. However, it is equally apparent that episcopal interest in retaining ecclesiastical influence and privileges from the state bridged the ideological divide and united the bishops who participated in the Bipartite Commission.

Although the author makes only passing reference to it, by the beginning of the military regime the world’s largest Catholic church was facing its first serious religious competition in its three and half centuries of operation. By the mid-1960s millions of poor Brazilian Catholics had converted to Pentecostalism. At the grassroots, the Brazilian church first sought to utilize Base Christian Communities and then more recently the Charismatic Renewal to stanch the flow of impoverished nominal Catholics into such Pentecostal churches as the Assembly of God. At the upper echelons, bishops of all ideological stripes were united in their effort to retain their religious hegemony in the face of unprecedented competition through a continuing moral concordat with the state. Serbin’s explanation of the ideological heterogeneity of the Grupo Religioso could have been fortified
with greater consideration of the influence of religious competition on the bishops.

Despite the exclusion of Pentecostal competition as an explanatory factor, the book makes a strong contribution to our understanding of the history of church-state relations in Brazil. Serbin’s emphasis on the continuity of relations during the dictatorship challenges the predominant view of radical rupture between church and state during most of the dictatorship. Secret Dialogues will compel scholars who saw only prophetic opposition in the words and actions of the Brazilian church to rethink their work. Likewise, the book will become a major reference point for future histories of the period and will advance the lively debate on the nature of church-state relations in Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s.

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