

Heinrich Wilhelm Schäfer

Protestant 'Sects' and the Spirit of (Anti-)Imperialism

Religious Entanglements in the Americas

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Heinrich Wilhelm Schäfer. –

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In memoriam
Julia Esquivel
and Eugene Stockwell

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For of the last stage of
this cultural development
[sc. of victorious capitalism],
it might well be truly said:
“Specialists without spirit,
sensualists without heart;
this nullity imagines that it has attained
a level of civilization never before achieved.”
(Max Weber 2001, 124)

Preface

The present book is the result of the cooperation at the Center for InterAmerican Studies (CIAS) of Bielefeld University. At the end of an interdisciplinary research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) with the topic “The Americas as Space of Entanglements,” a series of long essays on this subject from different disciplinary perspectives is being published in Spanish and English. This book is the English version of the essay, and it is written from the point of view of the sociology of religion. It is thus about the entanglements of religious praxis between Latin America and the USA. Since these interrelations have been and are primarily generated by Protestantism, the book is primarily concerned with Protestants; and since the relationship between the two subcontinents is characterized by the expansion of the capitalist economy and society, the context for interpreting the entanglements should be specified in social and economic terms.

Where capitalism and Protestantism are concerned, Max Weber is never far away either. I will therefore use his study of the United States as a springboard to delve into a history of religious entanglements that is first shaped by the dynamics of the American mission, and then increasingly by the energy of the Latin American Pentecostal movement and the migration of Latin American Christians to the United States.

Those who now expect a dry historical treatise should be warned. It is not only the concept of the essay series that is designed

to make some polemical points. As author of this book, after almost 40 years of dealing with religious praxis in Latin America and the USA, I also cannot claim to be free of experiences that can hardly be put down on paper *sine ira et studio* – other than with an occasional polemical passage.

At this point, I would like to thank my colleagues from the Inter-American Studies Department for their initiative and incentive, first of all Olaf Kaltmeier and Wilfried Raussert; and also the Rectorate of Bielefeld University for its support in many ways. I am also pleased to thank the translator, Michael “Mike” Pätzold, whose translation perfectly matches the German original, even in its ironical passages.¹ Once again, I would also like to thank my assistant Sebastian Schlerka for his excellent, reliable and humorous support in all technical matters. If there are still any errors or ambiguities, the author is responsible for them.

HWS, Bielefeld, October 2020

1 An exception is this preface, which the author himself presents with the support of the helpful gnomes, the electronic Brownies of DeepL. At this point, I would like to say a few words about the capitalization of church names. We distinguish between names of institutions (Catholic Church, First Baptist Church on main street, No. 23, etc.) and generic terms (Mainline churches, Historical churches, Protestant churches, Black churches, Hispanic churches etc.). Furthermore, in this book I do not document interviews, interlocutors and other sources in a separate appendix, but only in the footnotes. This piece is just a long essay, already overloaded with footnotes and bibliography. As our theoretical approach is praxeological, based on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, we substitute the English word “practice” by the concept of “praxis,” in distinction to “practices.”

1. Introduction

Weber's Journey

On his journey to St. Louis in 1904 Max Weber was able to gain a much clearer idea than in Germany of how his distinction between “church” and “sect” – a difference he had elaborated himself – worked out in reality. On the one hand, there were the firm institutions of the European Roman Catholics and Lutherans: *Heilsanstalten* (institutions of salvation) and *Gnadenanstalten* (institutions of mercy); on the other – besides the sedate German Lutherans of the Missouri Synod in St. Louis – the “sects”² of Baptists, Methodists and others, which were based on voluntary membership and easily played a leading role in the USA. One could also speak of “Free churches” in the sense that they were (and are) free of governmental administration. In his study “Protestantische Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus” (Weber 1946a), Weber made a few observations that are also of interest from an Interamerican perspective. The difference between the “Heilsanstalt” with an almost obligatory membership and the “brotherly community” of like-minded people is also of importance for the reflection on the religious entanglements between the USA and Latin America. If what you are after is the trust of other people, or public recognition as, e.g., politician or businessman, membership of an institution into which you are born is of lesser importance. Membership in a voluntary community, by contrast, which demands your conversion and a certain amount of esprit de corps, is significant: in the circle of brothers and sisters it lays the foundation of creditworthiness, for example. Further, once the community of like-minded people has spread to a substantial part of the population, say 25%, religious creditworthiness can be converted into political capital. Weber reports a Baptist group baptism of a relative, who draws his attention to a young man and predicts his baptism – which the young man then duly under-

2 We use the term “sect” in the strict sociological sense. No theological evaluation is therefore linked to it in the present work.

goes. How does the relative know this...? “Because he wants to open a bank in M.” Now that he is baptized, he will attract “the patronage of the whole region and he will outcompete everybody” (Weber 1946a, 305). The mere fact of his membership in a Baptist church is taken in M. as proof of his ethical qualities, which guarantees him the approval and trust of the local people.

Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro has certainly not read Weber, but is very likely to have received from one of his friends on the religious right – maybe from Silas Malafaia – a reference to the effect just illustrated. About 30% of the Brazilian population are Protestants and politicians of the religious right are hoping for a corporatist “voto evangélico:” “Brother votes for Brother.” In this way, the far-right Catholic Bolsonaro had himself baptized in the river Jordan in 2016 by Pastor Everaldo – a well-known member of the Pentecostal right. This news was distributed in the media of the religious right and has stuck in the public’s mind. As the situation in Brazil is different from that in the USA, and the Catholic hierarchy and the religious right still exert a marked influence in the country, Bolsonaro has assured people time and again that he is still a Catholic – even after his baptism. Of course, this did not show up on the small screens of the Protestant media of the right but appeared more likely on pages two or three of the secular press. This apart, the theological view of Anabaptism behind this act and the partial denial that followed is highly significant, as is the non-appearance of a reaction from the Catholic hierarchy. At the time of the waning Middle Ages, Anabaptists were shoved into sacks and drowned. That would no longer be adequate today, although excommunication would seem to be appropriate. Be that as it may: his action is likely to have gained Bolsonaro some of the votes of members of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. He was assured in any case of the support of the “bancada evangélica,” the cross-party camp of conservative Protestants (and Catholic charismatics) in Congress and Senate.