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Review/Reseña

Joseph M. Palacios, *The Catholic Social Imagination: Activism and the Just Society in Mexico and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Looking into Catholic Activism in Mexico and the United States

Edward L. Cleary

Providence College

This unusual book has been almost thirty years in the making. That alone gives it an historical perspective based on lived experience that is not typical of works in sociology dealing with Mexico and the United States. Further, treating religion in both countries makes it still more special. Joseph Palacios began his experience of Mexico by living in Cuernavaca while a student in the early 1970s at the fabled CIDOC (Centro Intercultural

de Documentación Católico), a think tank and language school founded by Monsignor Ivan Illich, primarily as preparation for North American missionaries for work in Latin America. He maintained interest in Mexicans through a long association with Mexican immigrants in the Oakland area. At the end of the 1990s he spent many months conducting field work in Mexico and as a visiting scholar at the Colegio de México. Fieldwork with Catholic activists and community organizations in Oakland, California and in Guadalajara, Mexico over extended periods serve as a basis for a number of observations in what he calls a cross-national, rather than comparative, study. It is sociological rather than political in its theorizing and methodology.

He investigated how ideas and doctrines have an impact on what he calls a social imagination that can help or hinder persons to address social injustices that they and others experience. He found that for Catholics to be committed to the social teaching of the church, their environment must offer experiences that trigger a social or public awakening and bring forth commitment in the civic and political spheres. Among members of communities in the two countries, the key factor for mobility in the institutional structures of the church was education. The key leadership group in each country are priests, mostly men from working-class and middle-class backgrounds. He notes differences between the two countries in the ways faith-based justice issues enter into the public arena. He is especially struck by the obstacles to church activism in Mexico due to church-state tensions.

When Roderic Camp's master work, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico*, appeared in 1997, we had for the first time a book-length, scholarly examination in English of the role of religion in contemporary Mexico. Camp spent ten years in field research on the volume plus a previous two decades of field research and of prodigious output of books and articles on politics in Mexico. Clearly the enterprise of making a scholarly analysis of religious institutions and processes in the country demanded a heroic effort by Camp. In part, this was due to the

authoritarian and closed nature of Mexican society under the one-party rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from 1929-2000. Further, given the secularist press and the presumption by many Mexican academics that religion did not merit much attention, very little was known systematically about the condition of Mexican Catholicism. That inattention began to change in Mexico with the opening to the Church by President Carlos Salinas in the 1990s. Thereafter key Mexican social scientists, some with strong ties to the PRI, such as Roberto Blancarte, began exploring religious themes and publishing works on the church and society that had been previously lacking.

The large national newspapers also opened up to wider coverage of religion and allowed Catholic commentaries in their pages. *La Jornada* evolved into a home for some members of the Catholic center-left and other papers treated the Catholic Church as no longer invisible but an integral part of society. However, the overall conservative bent of Mexican Catholics meant a degree of self-censorship that, for example, largely left the exposing of the scandal of the founder of the powerful Legionaries of Christ to the *National Catholic Reporter*, based in Kansas City.

For most of the 20th century the Catholic Church's involvement in politics became forbidden terrain in Mexico, given the legal and political handicaps for political involvement by the church, especially Articles 3 and 130 of the 1917 Constitution. There was also the well-remembered repression of church liberties during the 1920s and 30s in the aftermath of the Cristero uprisings. In the end, the Church was on a precarious social position, unable to own property in its own name, and priests were forbidden to vote.

Moreover, as Camp found in his commissioned surveys, most Mexican Catholics had been educated in schools where they learned to favor a high wall between religion and politics and thereby did not favor church leaders making political statements. The bishops were also complacent in the tight control of the Vatican exercised through the papal representative resident in the country. In sum, as Camp found, "The

church's role as an interest group was limited by antichurch rhetoric that was incorporated into the public education of every child in Mexico" (*Politics in Mexico*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 5th ed., 145).

Instead of placing himself within previous scholarship as that of Camp, Palacios goes to Mexico after field work in the United States, and then finds surprise after surprise: 1) "a contextualized Mexican theology is not institutionalized" (142); 2) "there is not like [the U.S.] a public and professional place for the Mexican social justice theologian" (142); 3) "Father Athié is the closest I came to finding a working Mexican Catholic social justice theologian" (143).

In contrast, Camp pointed out that "intense conflict between church and state...impeded and retarded the Catholic Church's cultural role since the mid-19th century. In other words, it has concentrated on family and family issues to avoid deeper involvement in secular moral questions" (*Crossing Swords*, 286). No wonder there was not contextualized Mexican theology and that public theologians, as those connected to the Social Secretariat in the 1960s, found no lasting support for their views. Nor should it have been surprising that Athié Gallo was alone in his condition as a social justice theologian. The social justice theologians were pushed out into other work when the famed Social Secretariat was denied official status after 1970. (*Crossing Swords*, 237)

Camp was not the only scholar to mark out the impediments to a public role that the Catholic Church faced in Mexico. Insight into the constraints of the recent past were also treated by Dennis M. Hanratty in his 1980 Duke dissertation, "Change and Conflict in the Contemporary Mexican Church," (25, 148) and by Patricia Arias et al, *Radiografía de la iglesia católica en México* (46-47). Analyses by Martín de la Rosa and Claude Pomerleau also offered perspectives similar to Camp.

In other words, the Mexican church was so constrained that it could not, before the consolidation of democracy in the country, exercise the kind of public role that Palacios thought any national church should exercise. The choice of Mexico in the 1990s for a comparative study of religion and

politics was questionable. The selection of Mexico for a cross-national study with the United States made the comparison skewed from the beginning. The choice of Mexico is not explained as a Latin Americanist might have done so, in terms of church-state, religious freedom, or degree of democracy but rather it seemed that Palacios chose Mexico because it was close to California, offered Jesuit hospitality, and was congenial to his own ethnicity.

These attributes and resources did bring strength to the book in terms of facilitating closely watched observations of the Mexican church in transition from an authoritarian to a more democratic context. Even without developing well the history of those constraints, he offers a vivid picture of some of the consequences of authoritarian government rule. Readers are then left to ask: what if the context were open to church activism and Mexico had had public and professional social justice theologians to articulate public policy positions for the church to promote?

The special strength of the book, in the reviewer's opinion, is the richness and depth of information and analysis of the presence and role of social justice theologians in the United States. He opens to readers a view of policy-oriented theologians and their ties to the social teaching of the Catholic Church. Here Palacios's former Jesuit connections (Palacios mentions in the Preface that he has left the Society of Jesus) served him extremely well. He was able to move agilely from Berkeley to Washington, Cambridge, and New York and enter into several theological and social justice networks.

His second special strength is his being deeply rooted and reflective upon action for justice. He was fortunate that he experienced for some time the evolution of PICO (Pacific Institute for Community Organizing) at Oakland, California into one of U.S.'s more effective social movements and one tied clearly to what he habitually calls social-justice theologians. He carried this experience in academia, seeing community-service learning as a legitimate academic discipline and especially useful in grounding institutions as colleges and universities in their respective communities.

Part of his valuable work at Georgetown and elsewhere has been in community-service learning. The cross-national insights into community organizing in the U.S. and Mexico expressed in this volume are also valuable and one hopes will be expanded.

The use of social imagination as the principal theoretical framework raises many questions for those unfamiliar with the use of the term, as my respected colleagues in sociology and political science who were questioned and denied ever seeing the notion of social imagination used as a theoretical frame. Or, older social scientists, as the reviewer, who recall the harsh criticisms of C. Wright Mills for lack of theoretical underpinnings after he proposed sociological (not social) imagination. For a political scientist, the weight put on having a social imagination (with Catholic social teaching) by Palacios seems extreme when questions remain about how the vision becomes operational. Having altruistic visions without specifying political instruments and goals appears quixotic. So what if there is a social vision? In a word, the vision seems disengaged when interest group politics are not discussed. Should Palacios not have made interest group politics be a central concern of his study? Even the vaunted PICO had to learn to make its way to city hall and to the state capital to find allies to back its programs. PICO eventually came to Sacramento to lobby for themselves.

Then there is the question of including Latin American perspectives about theoretical frameworks for this kind of study. If Palacios had spread his line of sight more widely through Latin America than Mexico, he might have encountered Brazilians who have worked along the same lines of inquiry and theorizing. In a March 2007 article in *Latin American Perspectives*, Daniela Issa discusses *mística*. In the Brazilian usage, she says the Portuguese word means, “a subjective experience in collectivity,” a “mobilizing element.” Sounds a lot like the concept of “social imagination” that Palacios employs. Issa traces *mística* (that includes social justice) as a long-time major component of the Brazilian landless movement. Other Brazilians have used *mística* in describing to the reviewer what he would

call theology for a movement for environmental care. Again, social justice was an integral part of *mística*.

Palacios is currently an assistant professor at Georgetown where he has helped his fortunate students learn through community-based programs. He has expanded his research to include Chile and Argentina. Readers may thus expect a continuation of his interest in the social teaching of the church and Catholic activism in a future book that would include Chile and Argentina as well as Mexico and the U.S.