

It's the culture, dear César, but not exactly the religion

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By Carlos Alberto Montaner *.-

The big topic being debated in Latin America continues to be why people of Iberian culture -- and I include the Brazilians -- score so poorly when the level and quality of their lives are compared with those of their English-speaking neighbors to the north. My admired friend César Vidal -- wise and prolific like few others -- attributes a substantial part of the development of the world's most prosperous countries to the Protestant Reform ("It's the culture, dear Carlos Alberto.") He affirms, and this must be true, that by the end of the 20th Century 90 percent of all Nobel Prize winners were Protestants or Jews.

I agree with César that the secret of the inequality in the intensity of development lies in the culture, but, although religion is part of it, I suspect that the differences in the economic and social performance of nations go on different tracks, although I admit that the adherence to the truth, the condemnation of theft and certain habits of moderation preached by the Protestants are clearly related to economic success.

Guided by anthropologist Estuardo Zapeta, I verified this in Guatemala with the indigenous Cachikeles. Half of the ethnic group had converted to Protestantism in one of its evangelical variants that called for the rejection of alcohol and better work habits. By a large margin, those who had remained Catholic did a lot better.

In some way, César adheres to Max Weber's theory as published in 1905 in *The Ethics of Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism*. César's ideas can be read in the website of the Inter-American Institute for Democracy. Weber's ideas are based -- fundamentally though not solely -- on an examination of Calvinism and its cult of asceticism, austerity and the search for enrichment as a sign of salvation.

However, as we know, what we call Protestantism has a theological origin: the revolt against Pope Leo X over his sale of indulgences intended to reduce or eliminate the years in purgatory.

The Pope, a refined Medici, wanted to build St. Peter's Basilica and needed a large sum of money, so he started peddling the possibility of speeding up the journey to heaven. He organized a sort of marketing campaign, assigning his finest prelates to handle the business.

Disgusted by the ridiculous swindle (which wasn't new to the Church), Martin Luther, very much within scholastic tradition, published his 95 theses to "dispute" the Papal practice and, above all, to question the control of the not-so-Holy Father over purgatory, that stage (today no longer in Catholicism) where souls were punished for the sins committed in life before they could enter heaven. Thesis 82, for example, asked a logical question: If the Pope has dominion over purgatory, why doesn't he empty it once and for all?

Practically all arguments between Rome and Protestantism are based on theological grounds -- Mary's virginity, predestination vis-à-vis free will, the number of sacraments, the authority of the Bible, relations between the believers and God, the role of the saints, baptism and the Trinity.

Everything goes back to opinions about religious beliefs, including the very important issue of

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clerical celibacy. Almost no one in Protestantism says that Catholicism leads to poverty or backwardness; they see it as a deviation from Jesus' preachings.

It is true that the part of Europe that was dominated by the Spanish Counter-Reformation and remained faithful to the Pope dropped back in relation to the Anglo-German North, but who can deny the drive of southern Germany, tenaciously Catholic, or France, a subject of the Pope and a great power in Europe during the 17th, 18th and almost all of the 19th Century?

It is also true that Spain repudiated manual labor and the instruments of credit until the reign of Charles III in the second half of the 18th Century, but that behavior was based on the vision subscribed by the Greco-Roman pagan world that Christianity inevitably picked up. It can be found in Plato and Aristotle and in the behavior of the Roman ruling class. Manual labor was something for slaves and plebeians.

Perhaps the best proof that Christianity has a lesser weight in development must be sought in the eastern societies, which did not deal with the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation yet managed to situate themselves on the top of the world. I'm thinking of Japan, South Korea or Taiwan.

That's why I found the testimony of Yokoi Kenji, a Colombian-Japanese who knows both worlds, very valuable. It's easy to find him in YouTube. To him, the key to the success of Japan is in discipline and perseverance. From which we can deduce that the relative failure of Colombia (or all of Ibero-America) is caused by the opposite.

There are many more cultural elements, dear César, but you're on the right track.

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