Since the European discovery of the New World in 1492, Latin America has emerged as a predominantly Roman Catholic region. Indeed, both the discovery itself and the subsequent exploration and development of the region were undertaken as a joint effort of church and state. At face value, the aims of these parties were starkly different. For the state, the goal was territorial and material acquisition. For the Church, Latin America represented virgin territory for the conquest of souls. Yet, from the early days of Spanish and Portuguese conquest through the early to mid-19th century (when many countries of the region gained their independence) to well into the 1900s, both parties worked hand in glove to ensure that their respective objectives could be met. For their part, the colonial and later national governments counted on the moral support of the Church to maintain a status quo favouring the political and economic elite. The Church freely offered this support in return for state assistance in maintaining Catholic religious hegemony.

As efficient as it was, this mutually beneficial arrangement began to change, however, by 1950 when, in many countries, clerics, religious and laypersons began to question the Church’s political role as the defender of privilege. Some even became active in support of change-orientated social movements and programmes designed to improve the lot of the poor, whose welfare had not largely improved in the post-World War II period, despite record rates of economic growth in the region.

During the 1960s, these forms of Church-based activism took on a particular urgency, as a wave of military-backed bureaucratic–authoritarian governments assumed power in country after country. Most of these regimes claimed to be acting on behalf of the rational interest, as part of an effort to develop a more stable political system and ensure future economic progress. These objectives were sought, however, with little regard for the economic well-being of the poorest sectors of society, and in an atmosphere of severe repression. Those who opposed government policies—including many within the Church—were jailed, deported or killed.

Such practices strained the relationship between the institutional Church and the state to the breaking point in many countries. Indeed, sanctioned by the increasingly progressive stance of the region’s bishops—as shown in documents released in the wake of their 1968 meeting in Medellin—some national churches went so far as to commit themselves institutionally to an oppositional role in favour of those most disadvantaged by military rule.
As part of this new stance, known officially as the ‘preferential option for the poor’, members of the hierarchy in a number of countries criticised government social and economic policy. Church bodies produced research revealing the errors and harm caused by government action (and/or inaction), while Church-sponsored mass movements, such as the base Christian communities or CEBS (comunidades eclesiales/eclesiáis de base) gave strong voice to those excluded from the new restricted political arena.

Where it occurred, such activity endured for well over a decade in the region. By the early 1980s, however, with the gradual return to civilian rule in most countries, the Church’s activist stance began to fade. Where it still exists, the political rhetoric of the Church is generally less strident than in the past, and many Church-based movements—especially the CEBS—seem to be either disappearing or pursuing a more moderate political path. In place of a more radical political agenda, moreover, has appeared a new emphasis on the devotional side of Catholicism.

This shift back to the political status quo within the Latin American Church appears to have caught many observers unaware, and has to date been the subject of scant inquiry. In response, this paper represents a preliminary attempt to remedy this deficiency, by offering a general analysis of the scope and causes of recent Church change in the region.

Our basic argument is that recent Church actions represent a strategic orientational shift conditioned by a new set of realities both within the institution, and within the wider religio-political realm. This thesis is explored with reference to the region as a whole, with particular emphasis, however, on those venues where key directing elements within the institutional Church moved furthest to the left, and are now in the process of moving back—Brazil, Chile and Central America (especially Nicaragua). We begin the analysis with an overview of the rise and fall of the progressive Church in the region, as it has been interpreted within the existing literature. This is followed by a discussion of those specific factors which we believe have figured most prominently in conditioning this turn of events.

Context and interpretations of the rise and fall of the activist Church

In the dozen or so years following 1960, military leaders assumed control of national governments in a large number of Latin American countries. In and of itself, this was not such a novel development. Historically, the militaries of the region have seen themselves as the frontline defenders of constitutionalism, and have from time to time, in one place or another, intervened to restore social and political order. In the past, however, such interventions were relatively short-lived. What makes the post 1960 wave of military takeovers unique is that the regimes which emerged became well entrenched—many, in fact, endured for well over 20 years.

The factors precipitating the latest wave of military interventions were many. Basically, however, they may be traced to growing military unease with attempts by civilian governments in the 1950s to move away from capitalist economic models and planning, and towards innovations associated with Soviet-style
communism—eg the creation of state industries, social welfare schemes or programmes designed to redistribute income. Military leaders were also preoccupied by the more liberal political agenda of the civilian governments of the time, in particular their tendency to allow—even encourage—popular organisation and dissent. To military leaders in many countries these types of experiments constituted a clear and present threat to the security of the nation.

One by one, military establishments moved to remove this threat—Brazil in 1964; Argentina in 1966 (and then again in 1976); Peru in 1968; Ecuador in 1972; Chile in 1973; and Uruguay in 1973. With the exception of Peru and Ecuador (where the military took a more populist line), most of the regimes installed were decidedly right-wing in orientation. In the literature, they have been described more precisely as ‘bureaucratic–authoritarian’, as their primary goal was to combat the forces threatening national security by a) restoring integrity to the political process (principally by purging ‘communists’ from the political arena); and b) encouraging rapid economic development through careful state planning and enhanced integration within the world market (through increased trade). Such measures were undertaken, it should be emphasised, at considerable cost to the general population. Political parties were either shut down or subjected to severe limitations, and dissident elements and organisations, such as labour unions and other advocacy groups, were banned or severely restricted. Those actively opposing military rule were dealt with harshly. Many voluntarily went in to exile, while those who stayed behind to fight risked imprisonment, torture, or even death.

Rising economic fortunes in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Latin America helped to legitimise the military and its bureaucratic–authoritarian agenda in most countries. Indeed throughout this period, the region as a whole posted economic growth rates far above the developing world average, fuelled primarily by the expansion of domestic industry. Consequently, military regimes were able to press on with their conservative economic programmes, cultivating outside financing of mega-projects, developing stronger international trade linkages and building up the national infrastructure. All these measures paid off handsomely, but managed to benefit the few at the expense of the mass in the region. In sum, the military’s plans called for a ‘fattening up’ of the region’s economic pie, before any significant redistribution of the spoils of advanced industrialism could be considered. This entailed considerable hardship for lower-class workers who continued to earn meagre wages, while their bosses earned some of the highest salaries in the world.

With the advent of worldwide recession and the oil crisis of the early to mid-1970s, the economic boom began to fade, however. Markets for Latin American exports began to shrink, while rising fuel costs cut deeply into profits, workers’ wages, and ultimately, government revenues. Many national governments found themselves unable to cover debt repayments from earlier borrowing on international markets; most continued to borrow to help cover their increasing shortfall in revenues. Before long, most countries of the region had built up a massive debt load, while at the same time possessing few resources to help them repay anxious creditors.

The inability of many a military government to respond to this crisis, coupled
with the growing misery of the poorest segments of the population, eventually served to delegitimise their regimes. After the mid-1970s, military leaders slowly dismantled the authoritarian structures they had mounted and handed power back to civilians. Indeed, by 1985, democratic elections had been held in virtually all the former dictatorships of the region. Today, almost all the countries of Latin America possess democratic constitutions, although in practice, political elites have continued to rely on authoritarian measures to ensure social control.

The political developments since the early 1960s form the backdrop for Church change in recent years. As mentioned earlier, the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America had for much of its long history sought to defend its institutional interests and integrity through collaboration with economic and state elites. Only after 1950 did social activism emerge as a significant force, when elements within the Church began to encourage the larger institution to adopt the concerns of the socially disadvantaged and abandon its historic ties to elites. This tendency intensified following the wave of military dictatorships which shook the region after 1960. In response to the repression orchestrated by the new regimes, a number of national churches moved towards direct advocacy of the lower-class cause as standard operational policy. In direct confrontation with both the military and other elites, these churches embarked upon a systematic campaign to encourage change in the political, economic and social status quo, utilising both the rhetoric of widely distributed statements and position papers, and concrete action strategies and programmes designed to promote and protect the interests of the poor. In Brazil, for example, the Church supported various national and regional agencies and ‘commissions’ designed to support the rights of specific interest groups in society—including peasants (the Pastoral Land Commission), and native peoples (Indigenous Missionary Council)—as well as human rights generally (Peace and Justice Commission).

Throughout the region, the base Christian communities or CEBs became a particularly important force for institutional activism. Some accounts suggest that in the heyday of the phenomenon (during the late 1970s and early 1980s), there may have been as many as 3 to 4 million people active in many tens of thousands of these groups located in rural areas or on the outskirts of the region’s larger urban centres. While some were directed towards more devotional ends (prayer, baptism, etc), many were reported to have been involved in explicitly political activities such as petitioning campaigns to improve the local quality of life, workers’ strikes, and organising mass rallies.

A number of explanations have emerged to account for the origins and eventual scope of the Church-based activism which emerged in the postwar period. Based upon a conflict-orientated understanding of society (and as often as not referring explicitly to the work of Marx and/or Gramsci) liberation theologians—among them Gutiérrez, Betto and Leonardo Boff—have tended to see Church innovations in the political sphere as prompted by base level activism rooted in popular dissatisfaction with the politico-socioeconomic status quo. From within the social scientific realm, other researchers have adopted a different tack, drawing upon a Weberian conception of organisational structure, power and interest, and focusing more upon the Church as ‘institution’. According to this view, the political activism of the Church has followed a dynamic and
agenda set by institutional leaders, partially in response to socioeconomic or political circumstances, but in the end designed to enhance institutional power.\textsuperscript{5} A limited number of ‘synthetic’ approaches, finally, have also appeared. These attempt to improve upon the base level and institutional perspectives by pointing to a more dynamic—even dialectical—relationship between grassroots demands and institutional interests in the emergence of progressive Church politics.\textsuperscript{6}

Despite their many differences, the adherents of these various positions do agree on one thing; they have largely accepted the intensity and the scope of Church activity during the 1970s and early 1980s as a ‘given’, with some maintaining an unabashedly optimistic tone regarding the Church’s potential in this regard.\textsuperscript{7} Yet it is increasingly dawning on many specialists that the previous assessments of the effective mobilisation capacity and the influence of the popular Church are problematic, and that a fundamental reorientation in political direction is now taking place within the Church generally.\textsuperscript{8}

This turnaround is most evident in those countries where the institutional Church had been most active in the cause of social justice. In the case of Chile, for example, Stewart Gambino has noted the growing rift in political orientation between bishops, and between bishops and the clergy, resulting in a move away from involvement in more controversial matters.\textsuperscript{9} Klaiber notes a similar process occurring in Peru.\textsuperscript{10} While, under the left-leaning military regime (1968–1980), the institutional Church rather comfortably pursued the social justice cause, moderates and conservatives have since assumed prominence, forcing the left wing of the Church into retreat. Commenting on Brazil, Drogus also points to a new conservatism within the institutional Church,\textsuperscript{11} one which may in the end alienate those activists remaining among the clergy, laity and religious adherents. Progressivism is similarly in peril in the churches of Central America. Crahan’s religious survey of the region points to splits between progressives and others in the Church in most countries.\textsuperscript{12} Even in Nicaragua, claims Williams,\textsuperscript{13} the influence of progressives within the national Church has declined significantly in recent years. All the while, in many areas, there has been a turn towards greater promotion of devotional practices and groups—such as Charismatic Renewal or Opus Dei.\textsuperscript{14}

Those researchers who have to date considered the origins of these developments have tended to focus on Vatican policy as the principal causal variable.\textsuperscript{15} There is certainly much to commend this interpretation. While resistance to a progressive orientation in Church organisation and sociopolitical involvement was present even during Vatican II, the election of John Paul II and his choice of Archbishop Ratzinger to head the Secretariat for the Doctrine of the Faith has certainly inaugurated a new era at the centre of the Catholic Church. Many authors have seen John Paul II’s papacy leading the Church back to an anti-modern attitude, profoundly alien even to the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{16}

Practical indications to this effect are numerous: the Vatican’s discussions and progressive rapprochement with fundamentalist Msgr Lefebvre, the harsh sanctions imposed on liberal European theologians and the refusal to consider any democratisation of the Church’s structure or even to discuss the ordination of women. Most important, however, from the Latin American standpoint, have been 1) the Vatican’s strong criticism of liberation theology which, among other
things, has long advocated that the Church adopt a more open governance structure, and take a more aggressive stance against social injustice; 2) the disciplinary measures it has taken against liberation theologians themselves, in part because of their open flirtation with secular Marxism; and 3) the Vatican’s unequivocal condemnation of attempts by progressives to set up a justice-oriented ‘parallel’ Church structure in Nicaragua and other countries. In other words, the nice words about the poor and loud calls for social justice which the Pope uttered in his many trips to the region appear to have been increasingly divorced from a Vatican policy which, for all practical purposes, has been directed at weakening the very sectors of the Church which could have given these words a substance.

The nomination of bishops, a Papal prerogative, has provided the most effective tool for the implementation of the new conservative agenda. With Catholic dioceses still organised in a most centralised and, in effect, authoritarian fashion, a change of bishop can, and has proved to have a tremendous effect on the orientation of pastoral work. One of the best known examples is the Archdiocese of Recife (Brazil). Here, in one of the poorest ecclesiastical territories in the region, the progressive bishop Helder Câmara was replaced upon retirement by a conservative, who quickly dismantled the social action infrastructure painstakingly built up by his predecessor.17 Conservatives were also nominated as bishops or auxiliary bishops in Santiago, Lima, Managua and Salvador (Brazil), while ‘moderate’ clerics were chosen for various new dioceses created in 1989 in the São Paulo area.18 Indeed, over the 15 years of his papacy, John Paul II has put new men—for the most part moderates and conservatives—at the head of close to 50% of Latin America’s dioceses.

At the same time, many factors suggest that a ‘Vatican conspiracy’ explanation for declining Church activism in Latin America is inadequate. To begin with, it ignores the Church’s specific institutional goals and objectives, as well as the resources at its disposal to implement them. Moreover, it leaves aside careful consideration of the recent—and dramatic—modifications in both the religious and sociopolitical milieu in Latin America.

This latter set of environmental factors has been examined in recent studies of the subject,19 leading to a reconsideration of the mainstream views of the progressive experiment. We feel, however, that the first set of factors, relating to the fundamental strategies of the Church has not been given enough weight in these analyses.

In response, we argue here that 1) recent Church change must be considered as a strategic undertaking, one in keeping with previous goals and objectives of the Church in Latin America; and 2) this strategic undertaking has resulted from both the chronic inability of the progressives to redirect the institutional agenda within those national churches where they were most active and the need on the part of institutional leaders to respond to threats to continued religious hegemony posed by the growing Protestant movement as well as the need to avoid influence-threatening controversy in an increasingly pluralistic political environment. The component elements of this thesis are developed in turn in the sections which follow.
Strategic continuity and the quest for influence

Since the 1960s, much discussion has taken place within the Catholic Church worldwide regarding its fundamental purpose in society. Within the Latin American region, this discussion has resulted, to some extent, in diverse practice at the national and local (diocesan) level. Nevertheless, institutional behaviour has remained remarkably consistent, and a fundamental continuity in the basic objectives of the regional Church may be discerned.

As Bruneau points out, the Catholic Church’s basic orientation in Latin America has been and continues to be the maintenance of societal influence. Such influence, claims Bruneau, is essential if the Church is to carry out its primary this-world mission of ‘salvation’. While such objectives are nowhere stated explicitly, they are nevertheless implicit in the huge scope of the questions and problems that Latin American Churches consider in their meetings and seek to act upon. This quest for societal relevance still appears to give its coherence to the institution’s attitudes and practice, as well as to the thrust of the bishops’ interventions.

The Church’s goal of influence, furthermore, has traditionally been pursued using a mass appeal strategy. To the Church, Latin America has ‘always’ been the religion of the vast majority of the region’s people, and it has done all in its power to ensure that this remains the case. This can be seen clearly in its sacramental policy, which continues to be pursued with particular zeal. For example, since the 1970s the number of baptisms per priest has consistently varied from 150 to 200 each year. The annual total of baptisms over the same period has risen from 7.2 to 8.5 million. Such numbers suggest that a mass appeal approach to religion is still adhered to.

Recently adopted proselytising methods also attest to the continued use of the mass appeal strategy, with growing interest throughout the region in the use of ‘television marketing’. In Brazil, by far the largest country of the region, the Church is proceeding rapidly with a plan for a network of Catholic stations to deliver the Church’s message to all parts of the country.

The mass appeal strategy, it must be added, has since its inception been directed by a relatively small institutional elite. Indeed, there has been little attempt to ‘democratise’ the institution, despite the mandate of Vatican II to open the Church’s doors to the full participation of its members. Certainly, progressive policies calling for greater lay participation in Church governance were implemented in a number of dioceses, and in some, advisory assemblies were convened. The extent to which this change has meant an effective democratisation, however, is in doubt. Nowhere have such assemblies been given any real power. We have yet to hear about a diocesan policy with which the bishop, however progressive, disagrees; nor has any bishop been overruled by an assembly. At best, then, the workings of these progressive dioceses fit José Comblin’s description of the progressive priests’ relationship to their flock: from the authoritarianism of fear to the authoritarianism of love. Where the priest’s power was formerly rooted in his presumed connection to God, in other words, it has found a new basis in paternalistic concern.

What this basic continuity of objectives and means suggests is that the recent
shifts in the Church’s political orientation are less reflective of broadly-based and deep seated ideological commitments, and more likely to represent institutionally guided operational strategies designed to achieve the Church’s primary objective of influence. Just as in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, the base Christian communities and other progressive movements were encouraged as a ‘mass appeal’ tool to achieve influence, today much official interest has arisen in pursuing a more traditional course to influence by emphasising more traditional forms of religious involvement among the laity. The question which remains to be answered is why this shift in operational strategy has occurred at this particular time.

Intra-institutional struggles

One set of factors driving the retreat to the devotional sphere stems from inside the institution. Simply stated, the Church’s conservative turn to some degree may be interpreted as the result of a long-term inability on the part of the region’s progressive wing firmly to set the agenda within their national churches.

The fact is that the changes that took place in many churches in the 1960s and 1970s were not the result of a radicalisation of the whole Catholic hierarchy and clergy. The ‘Church of the Poor’ or the ‘Progressive’ or ‘Popular Church’ never meant the whole Catholic Church. In fact, even in the most ‘progressive’ national churches of the region (Brazil, Nicaragua, Chile), only a minority of bishops and priests would have defined themselves in this way, and only a fraction of the Catholic flock identified with them. It is consequently as a social movement active within the bounds of the Church that the progressive push should be understood.

The relative prominence of the progressive Church under the military regimes, the CELAM Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano documents from Medellín and Puebla, the many instances of Catholic bishops and priests taking public stands against human rights abuses and in favour of social justice, as well as the fact that most studies of the Church focused on its progressive sector, produced the impression of a hegemony of the progressives over Latin American Catholicism as a whole. The quality, timeliness and sheer size of the intellectual production of the liberation theologians also played an important role in conveying this impression. In fact, however, the political hegemony of the progressives was often wrongly inferred from their remarkable dominance of the theological discourse in the region.

The inability of the progressives to carve out a significant space within their churches is, however, painfully evident. Even the CEBs—the most important innovation associated with the progressives and the fundamental element of its social base—never achieved an importance commensurate with the progressives’ own claims. Many factors were at play here, the most important being their small number, limited politicisation and continued dependence on the hierarchy, as well as the limited scope of effective empowerment they made possible for their members.

Nor were the ‘mainstream’ moderates and conservatives who were frequently the majority within the Church particularly impressed with the progressives’ effectiveness in securing the Church’s position in society. When all was said and
done, the progressives delivered no more faithful, no more seminarians, no more priests than their more traditionalist counterparts. In fact, they did not even deliver the ‘natural communities’ of the poor, constituencies to which they were supposedly best adapted. In a recent interview, the well-known progressive archbishop of São Paulo, Cardinal Paulo Arns, admits that the progressives’ rhetoric turned people away.

In the end, it is fair to say that to some degree the progressives’ apparent hegemony in Latin American Churches lasted only as long as the conservatives and the moderates permitted. In Nicaragua, as early as 1980, progressives were already becoming marginalised within the hierarchy. In Brazil, Ralph Della Cava similarly noted serious signs of weakness in the progressive camp by the mid 1980s. In El Salvador, the progressives and their base communities have always been barely tolerated by the hierarchy and were never a force with which the latter had to reckon. When pressure was exerted by the Vatican and when the moderates in the hierarchy showed a willingness to reconsider political involvement, the progressives were simply unable to muster enough leverage to resist the change.

Threats from within the religious arena

Alongside these internal factors, the Church’s return to the devotional has been strongly conditioned by the changing religious arena in Latin America. Increasingly, Catholicism is being confronted by an aggressively proselytist religious enterprise in the form of evangelical Protestantism—especially Pentecostalism, a particularly expressive brand of the faith which emphasises active celebration of the Holy Spirit through song, prayer, and sometimes faith healing and speaking in tongues.

What immediately strikes the eye when examining this new religious force is the large and growing army of cadres it possesses. In a typical Latin American parish, where there is at most one priest, several Protestant pastors are active. According to O’Shaughnessy, there are now at least 54 000 Protestant missionaries working in Latin America from North America alone.

On the Catholic side, the opposite trend is occurring; the number of priests in relation to the population has fallen steadily between 1973 and 1990, from 1.6 to 1.2 per 10 000 inhabitants. It is true that the number of vocations (priests in training) has been growing since 1973, from 0.27 per 10 000 inhabitants to 0.54 in South America and from 0.52 to 0.67 per 10 000 in Central America. But even if all these students were to become and stay priests, which is doubtful, they would still replace only one half of the current—and fast aging—staff. The number of men and women adherents has also not kept up with population growth. In fact, the only positive statistic is the increase in ‘catechists’ (according to the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, a non-ordained and at least part-time Church worker), especially in Central America and Mexico. Many work in the parish as lay auxiliaries to the local priest, are often involved in stimulating and directing base Christian communities. Their numbers, however, are still low, reaching barely 10 000 for Mexico and Central America and 14 000 for the whole of South America.
For the Protestants, steady growth in missionary strength in the region has paid off handsomely. In Central America, estimates of Protestant strength vary from country to country. Crahan estimates that Honduras is now roughly 8% Protestant, with Guatemala at 25%–35%. Daudelin claims that the figure for Nicaragua is about 20%, while Stein states that El Salvador is now 15%–20% Protestant. In South America, there are also a number of major venues for Protestant growth, according to observers. Stoll relates that Protestants account for about 20% of the overall population in Chile. The figure offered for Peru is 5%, and for Brazil, around 17%–20%. Accounting for the bulk of the figures, all observers agree, are the various Pentecostal groups operating from networks of chapels distributed throughout Latin America.

Analysts point as well to the large growth rates within these groups. O’Shaughnessy states, that during the last half of last decade, the number of Latin American adherents to Protestantism grew from 25 to 50 million. Stoll claims that, in most countries, the Protestant movement has grown exponentially, with Protestants set to claim the majority of the population by the year 2000 in a number of areas, including Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala.

It must be pointed out, however, that such numerical claims are tenuous. To begin with, they are typically based on Protestant Church estimates, which may be exaggerated. As Stoll himself suggests, ‘… it bears repeating that church growth estimates have to be approached with great caution’. Indeed, in the case of Brazil for example, there is a considerable gap between Protestant Church estimates of Protestant strength and those related by that country’s world-respected statistical agency, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). While Church figures count up to 20% of the population as Protestant, the IBGE has consistently counted under 10%—and a large proportion of these are members of Brazil’s long established mainline Lutheran church. In addition, predictions about growth rates tend to be statistically exaggerated thanks to ignorance, error, or both. Typically, these predictions are based on percentage increases derived from rather low starting numbers. For example, while it may be said that a church which has seen its membership increase from 50,000 to 100,000 has grown 100%, after eight years the same increase of 50,000 added to the new base of 500,000 reveals a much lower growth rate of 10%. In other words, constant growth will ultimately yield a smaller and smaller actual growth rate. One cannot, then, make predictions about growth based simply on previous percentage increases—as many authors appear to have done. Thus, as Cleary suggests, it may be somewhat wrongheaded to talk about a Protestant explosion in Latin America. Rather, what we are seeing is a movement that has grown steadily over the course of the century.

A second observation which must be made is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the Protestant movement is not monolithic in religious terms. For example, while Pentecostalists are certainly the fastest growing segment, and are quickly making up a large proportion of the collectivity, a large number of diverse groups are also represented, from Baptists to Mormons to Methodists to Jehovah’s Witnesses. Even Pentecostalism, Cleary suggests, is not a unitary phenomenon, with various strains espousing a variety of religious viewpoints.

Politically as well, there are important differentiations. Much evi-
dence does of course suggest that evangelical Protestantism is allied with conservative interests. In Central America, Stein’s research has pointed to a general tendency towards the right wing among Protestant adherents in most countries, while Stoll suggests a similar pattern exists for Latin America as a whole. Interestingly, however, most observers also point to the existence of fundamental political splits within the movement. In Central America, within both Protestant and Catholic religious realms, Crahan states ‘the role of churches and church people … today is highly complex, and does not lend itself to easy categorization’. In Guatemala, for example, Protestant political involvement has not always been welcomed with open arms by the right, while some Pentecostal churches have moved to concern themselves more with socioeconomic issues. Daudelin also points out political divisions within Protestant groups in Nicaragua, as does Klaiber in the case of Peru, where at least some groups have moved towards social action. For the region as a whole, such splits have resulted in the formation of two distinct church conferences, one for those more socially involved churches (CLAI—the Latin American Council of Churches), and one for the more conservative churches (CONELA—the Latin American Confraternity).

But whatever the empirical or ideological dimensions of the threat, the Protestant advance appears to have had a chilling effect on the institutional Church. As sociologist W I Thomas has said: ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. For the Catholic Church, the consequence has been alarm about the threat to continued influence that the presumed Protestant invasion represents.

This preoccupation appears to have gripped both moderates/conservatives and progressives, albeit for different reasons. On the one hand, traditionalists see the Protestant advance as threatening because of its assault on culture—Catholic culture. On the other hand, progressives see Protestants more as a political threat to the Church’s social agenda, because of their presumed support for the political right. According to D’Antonio, some progressives have openly decried Protestantism as a right-wing force linked to US imperialism through the Central Intelligence Agency. Some, moreover, are using the fear of being relegated to a secondary position in the Latin American religious arena to their advantage, as a mechanism to resist the conservative policies of the Vatican. For example, liberation theologians José Comblin and Enrique Dussell have stated that conservative Church policies will push the poor into the arms of the Pentecostalists, and have thus attempted to convince the larger institution to change its course.

In the rush to respond to the Protestant threat, however, the moderates and conservatives appear to have prevailed, resulting in a gradual move away from left-wing mass appeal strategies of the past (such as the CEB), and more towards strategies emphasising the devotional—in effect mimicking Protestant tactics. Some within the hierarchy have been content to concentrate their efforts on this front on political and economic elites. The penetration of new groups such as Opus Dei is seen by these sectors as an efficient way to regain influence.

Yet this is a minority position which has not been endorsed by the majority.

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of bishops. While they too invest heavily in a pastoral of the elites and of the middle class, conservatives like Eugénio Sales (archbishop of Rio de Janeiro) feel that an effort also has to be made to resist the progression of the Pentecostalists in the poorest segments of society. Hence their encouragement of Charismatic Renewal, with its emphasis on spiritual values, open celebration and direct communion with God.

Throughout the region, this would appear in fact to be the strategy of choice. While Martin has flatly stated that Catholic Charismatic groups are only a tiny minority in Latin America, the evidence suggests otherwise. Cleary asserts that ‘Catholic pentecostalism spread in Latin America like fire in a dry field’, with estimates of practitioners ranging into the millions. Indeed, Cleary notes, Catholic pentecostal groups exist in many countries as a form of base Christian community. In Brazil, reports from as early as 1983 indicate that the movement is growing extremely quickly, especially among the lower-middle class, while Hewitt’s research in São Paulo suggests that many of the formerly politically progressive CEBs are increasingly turning to the Charismatic fold.

**Political pluralism as a minefield**

The currently liberalised political milieu of Latin America has also conditioned the course of many a national church in recent years, and will likely continue to do so. Within the political minefield which pluralism represents, the Catholic Church—if it is to have any chance of attaining its overarching goal of renewed influence—has to follow a carefully charted course. Controversy and divisive questions must be avoided; cohesion and clear direction maintained at all costs.

During the previous authoritarian era, the situation was much clearer. At the same time, for those more activist churches, it was a period of artificial visibility. Military dictatorships in countries such as Chile and Brazil offered national churches such prominence by barring most—if not all—other organisations from taking public stands. Thus, in many places, the Church effectively emerged as the ‘voice of the voiceless’.

This is not to deny that tremendous courage had to be shown in these circumstances by those most actively involved in oppositional movements. As mentioned previously, in most countries, the progressives made up only a small minority of clerics, religious men and women, and lay people, and were more often than not barely tolerated by institutional leaders. The determination and courage shown by activist bishops, clerics and lay Catholics, however, does not diminish the artificiality of the situation created for the Church by the partial closing of the social and political field. Such artificiality was amply revealed when, as political liberalisation finally occurred in the 1980s, the Church’s more activist voice was suddenly drowned by formerly ‘voiceless’ people organised into a myriad of political parties and social movements. From this point on, the more activist Churches became merely one political voice among many.

To this expanded competition was soon added the increased complexity of the issues involved. Most of the questions to which a simple, yes or no, moral answer could be given suddenly disappeared. Gone were the stances which could command the immediate agreement of the majority of the people. Gone as well
was the time when a moderate opposition was the only possible stand to take towards the government. In these complex times and circumstances, a clear identification of the Church with a given party, with a given cause, could be extremely costly in terms of popular appeal.

The Church appears to have quickly learned the lessons of this new reality. In the last Brazilian election, while some local priests and activist laypersons became involved with left-wing parties, the highest and most respected authorities of the Church decided to keep their choice unknown, while encouraging everyone to use their right to vote. In addition, the leadership of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) has increasingly taken a vague stance on social issues. The statement regarding the propriety of agrarian reform or the information describing the political systems alternatives for the 1993 referendum in Brazil on constitutional reform clearly show that the Church here is trying to stay far above ‘petty’ political debates.

These attempts at ‘playing a role’ in the crucial political and social debates of the time by putting the discussion on a higher level, suggest that the Church, while still groping for influence, fears a real test of its capacity to influence the public debate. As it attempts to move through the political minefield created by pluralism, it will probably remain on a ‘safe’ neutral course.

**Conclusion**

The Catholic Church in Latin America has always been involved in regional politics. From the middle of this century, however, an important qualitative shift occurred in the type of involvement favoured. During the 1960s and 1970s especially, the traditionally conservative Catholic Church became involved in an effort to effect widespread social and political transformations in many countries. At a time when the vast majority of regimes were conservative and in many cases repressive military governments, the Church increasingly sided with the secular left on many social issues. By the 1980s, though, those more activist national churches began to slip back to a more conservative position on social change.

The political involvement of the Church throughout its long history in Latin America has been directed primarily at maintaining influence in society. This imperative, we would argue, led both to the activist turn of the 1960s and 1970s, and to the more recent political turnaround in the 1980s and 1990s. The timing of this move was conditioned by forces at work both inside and outside the institution. Certainly, an increasingly conservative Vatican played some role in the process, but this is only part of the story. The political retreat may be seen as primarily attributable to a combination of factors, including the general failure of the Catholic left firmly to set the social agenda of the larger institution, the need to respond to the Protestant invasion currently underway in the region, and a desire to set a more neutral political course and thereby avoid controversy, dissent and defection in an increasingly open political milieu.

Where will the Churches of Latin America move from this point? Certainly, the regional institution will not disappear from the political field altogether. What appears to be developing looks somewhat like a throwback to more
traditional church–state relations, in which social issues certainly have a place, but where institutional preoccupations are prominent. Furthermore, the typical attitude towards social issues is changing from an in-depth involvement towards an overarching intervention that stays above debates about specifics. For its part, the ‘preferential option for the poor’ as an orientation increasingly appears secondary to the Church’s need to maintain influence, and it may well lose what little meaning it has, if it is felt to threaten this.

Overall, events on this front bear continued watching—especially since few scholars appear to have acknowledged the current trend in the first place. Certainly, further explanation is required of some of the forces we have identified here: the inertia of the institution and its blind pursuit of influence; the intractable position of the hierarchy on internal ‘democratic’ reform; and, perhaps most importantly, the failure of the progressives to carve out a space within the larger Church. With the political shift of the Church to the right, another chapter in the history of the regional Church has been opened, providing opportunities for continued study and research on the relationship between religion and politics.

Notes

1 As much as this is possible. In most respects, the Latin American region is extremely diverse, and this is no less true in terms of religious or specifically Catholic temperament. The ‘shift to the left’ cited above occurred to a far greater extent in some countries than in others. By the same token, some Churches are moving back to the right and centre at a slower pace, while one—that of Mexico—appears at the moment to be flirting with a more ‘progressive’ stance. Nonetheless, we believe a regional trend may be identified, and it is to this phenomenon that we turn our attention. For an in-depth examination of individual cases, the reader is directed to the appropriate literature on the particular country in question.

2 The following discussion is based on an analysis developed by Pollock. See D Pollock, ‘Debt, development and democracy: recent trends in Latin America’, in P Blanchard & P Landstreet (eds), Human Rights in Latin America and the Caribbean, Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1989.

3 See E Cleary, Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985, p 104. Even with 3 to 4 million members, only a tiny fraction of the Latin American population would be involved in the CEBs—perhaps somewhere between 1% and 2%.


5 See especially T C Bruneau, The Political Transformation of the Brazilian Catholic Church, London: Cambridge University Press, 1974; and The Church in Brazil, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982.


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11 C Drogus, ‘Popular movements and the limits of political mobilization at the grassroots in Brazil’, in Cleary & Stewart-Gambino, Conflict and Competition, pp 64, 82.


14 Sometimes known as Catholic Pentecostals, Charismatics meet in small groups for song, prayer and to give personal testimony of their faith. Some claim the ability to heal, and speaking in tongues is common. Members of Opus Dei also tend to emphasise the devotional, primarily by advocating the need to apply Christian principles to all aspects of one’s day-to-day life and work. Members of the institution, including laypersons, priests, and seminarians are especially active as teachers in universities and training institutions.


18 For numerous other examples, see the case studies in Cleary & Stewart-Gambino, Conflict and Competition.

23 W E Hewitt, Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Perani, ‘A Igreja no Nordeste’.


26 This applies even to the case of progressive bastions like the theological institute in Recife and the seminary of João Pessoa in Northeast Brazil. See C Sartori, interview with Jean Daudelin, 23 August 1991, Bayeu, Paraiba, Brazil.


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To some observers, this represents a recent North American invasion of sorts, perhaps designed to ensure US hegemony in the region. The fact is, however, that many variants of Protestantism—especially Pentecostalism—have roots in Latin America dating back decades. A large number of Protestant missionaries, consequently, are indigenous to the countries in which they operate.

Data on Church personnel in this section are derived from the Vatican’s *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* for the years 1973 to 1990. The last available issue was published in 1992.


Ibid.

E Cleary, ‘Evangelicals and competition in Guatemala’, p 179.


Stein, ‘Religion and mass politics in Central America’.


Ibid.