



**PUERTO RICO: SHOWCASE OF OPPRESSION**

**A CHURCH  
PERSPECTIVE**

BOOK IV

RELIGION IN THE 70's . . . . . 3  
THE SILENCE OF THE SPIRITUALISTS. 5  
THE CHURCHES' MORAL DILEMMA  
AND RESPONSIBILITY. .6  
A CHURCH SPLIT DOWN THE MIDDLE. .8

## RELIGION IN THE 70's

Raul L. Cotto

In the decade of the 70's I think we shall see the following trends in religion in Puerto Rico:

1. An increase in the distance between the more institutionalized churches and the majority of the population.

2. A growing number of people from the poor classes seeking refuge in religious movements like Pentecostalism and Spiritualism.

3. A reaffirmation of the institutional churches in their tendency to support assimilation of Puerto Rican culture by the United States.

4. Continued reluctance on the part of institutional religion to take positions or get involved in any way that could condemn or reject the great social injustices occurring in Puerto Rico.

5. The development of a new type of church in response to the irrelevant, archaic and non-committed Christian churches that now exist.

These projections are based on the current conditions of religion in Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican society in general.

In Puerto Rico one fourth of all families have a yearly income of less than \$500; that is, they "live" on \$1.37 daily for an average of five people. There are 320,000 families that also "live" in the 421 slums of the island. There are 109,000 dwellings classified as "uninhabitable" and 51,350 as partially inadequate. That means that 40.7% of Puerto Rico's housing is grossly deficient. Yet while a very large portion of the population lives in extreme poverty there exists no planned or coordinated effort on the part of the churches to attack the problems in any way.

Not one of the church denominations in Puerto Rico has conceived or elaborated an educational plan based on the great need for vocational training of the poor. The education systems of the churches cater, on the contrary, more and more to the children of the well-to-do, who can afford and who demand private schools.

The more recent studies point toward a continuation of the shift of the institutional church toward the middle and upper classes. In this they may partially or totally abandon any systematic effort to aid the needy. These

churches show a clear pattern of leaving the slum areas and relocating in the areas of the middle class, which is steadily becoming their constituency. In Samuel Silva Gotay's study of the church and the poor, it was found that:

*(Of) the 36 new churches established by these denominations, 33 were established in middle class housing projects. Of these 36, only three were established in rural areas and none in slum areas. Not only this, but three that were formerly in the central areas of urban decay moved toward middle class housing areas. (One [church] that was two blocks from "La Perla" moved to Levittown). One denomination has spent \$20,000 in a feasibility study of establishing a church in the Condado tourist district.*

There exist few, if any, churches with programs directed toward solving the grave social ills that affect us. There are practically no programs dealing with the urgent problem of unemployment or which offer effective help to a working class that is on the whole unorganized. Apart from drug abuse programs, "Headstart" and the other government initiated programs and a few efforts to give food and clothing to some needy people, there are only a few isolated churchmen and organizations that show any real preoccupation with the poor. Unfortunately, they constitute a minority.

I expect no significant change in this panorama during the decade that has just begun.

### PENTECOSTALS EFFECTIVE

On the other hand, the Pentecostals who have always had a preoccupation with the poor, have been much more effective than the other Protestants in alleviating the human tensions that result from poverty. Their worship is organized informally and with spontaneity, permitting the poor to channel and express their tensions.

The emphasis in Pentecostal preaching is on doctrines of the "afterlife" and the "second coming of Christ", providing the poor with a sense of moral support and security. The Puritan ethic that Pentecostals practice permits them to see the rich as being perverted and astray from God while at the same time seeing themselves in a position of divine advantage.

The extraordinary growth of the Pentecostals has not ceased while they have continued working among the poor who have been left behind in the economic

"development" of the country. Pentecostals doubled their numbers in the decade from 1940-50 and today have more than 500 churches in slums and rural areas. This figure does not count approximately 311 churches of other Pentecostal sects resulting from divisions within them or congregations established by Puerto Rican Pentecostals in other countries.

#### INCREASE IN SPIRITUALISTS

The most diverse studies of Puerto Rican society show that there has also been a marked increase in the Spiritualist movement in Puerto Rico. There are diverse forms of spiritualism, varying with one's social class and education. Among the educated, spiritualism is practiced as a "philosophy" or "science;" among the humble it is a religion.

Spiritualism attempts to provide its members with answers to the problems of life and death and with a sense of security. It also provides the means for an understandable religious practice, social contact, entertainment, emotional escape, and status and group recognition of the "mediums." One can observe a heavy influence of Christianity, especially Catholicism, in their prayers, such as the "Ave Maria," which suggests that most members are also related to more institutionalized religion. I see no reasons that would keep Pentecostalism and Spiritualism from growing substantially in the coming decade.

#### AGENTS OF ASSIMILATION

Both the Roman Catholic and "historic" Protestant denominations have served and still serve as agents of cultural assimilation in Puerto Rico. This is demonstrated by the following examples.

- Education: The predominance of the English language in Catholic schools is evident and has been denounced in various ways by the citizenry who have clearly pointed out the deliberate policy of the hierarchy to downgrade the use of Spanish. Various groups of nuns have attempted to persuade the parents of their pupils to speak English even in their homes. It is a shocking and revealing fact that a group of school children asked their Spanish-speaking priest to confess them in English. At least 55 of the total 92 private parochial schools use English as their medium of education, affecting some 42,000 students.

- Personnel: The numerical predominance of American Catholic clergy in Puerto Rico and the fact that until recently, all of the Bishops were American, is revealing. It was only after a prolonged and bitter struggle that Puerto Rican Bishops were named. The Catholic magazine *Debate*

(12 August 1962) revealed that if all of the foreign priests and nuns were to leave the island (a total of 600) there would be less than 100 Puerto Rican priests left. The numbers do not vary greatly at the present time. Among the "historic" Protestants of the 12 older denominations, most of their ministers are Puerto Rican, but there are six denominations that still have a large number of American clergy and strong ties with structures in the United States.

On the other hand we have 28 Pentecostal groups that lack any significant numbers of American personnel.

- Authority: Many Protestant denominations, even the most congregational, have had a series of North American "superintendents" in charge of their growth and development who represented the interests of those who sent them. Puerto Ricans were substituted for the North Americans only after pressure from the Puerto Rican laity and with great difficulty.

- Finance: Many of the Protestant churches have depended on American "Mission Boards" that have sponsored them. It is significant that those churches that have received less financial aid are the ones that have grown the most.

In relation to the last point, I must note that the study of Silva Gotay on the public pronouncements of the churches demonstrates a marked tendency to defend the ideas and interests of the dominators to the point that we can concur that highly institutionalized religion in Puerto Rico

*... will continue being in socio-political terms (not referring to the possibility of individual change) an institution to bless acts of state, bank openings, factories, dams, and gubernatorial inaugurations, an institution to defend the 'establishment' against just demands, and to organize acts of thanksgiving to the governors. The most radical action that this institution can put forth to defend its Christian postulates consists of opposition to abortion laws, reform of religious education, population control programs, use of public funds in the patron saints festivals, etc.*

As a last point I would mention that the marked intolerance, the contradictions, the total irrelevance and the unwillingness of the churches to see the necessity for deep change that permeates our society is causing an exodus of Puerto Rican priests, ministers, seminarians and laymen from the Puerto Rican Christian church. I can foresee the establishment of ecumenical congregations that will be very conscious of their social role and heavily involved in social and political activity, thereby breaking away from the irrelevance, dogmatism and intolerance of the institutional church.

## THE SILENCE OF THE SPIRITUALISTS

Pedro Santana Ronda

In the face of the frightful problems that stir Puerto Rico, all sectors have come up with an opinion. Some have hit the nail on the head and others have gone off on a tangent.

In the specific case of Culebra and on the problem of obligatory military service, important sectors of Catholicism and Protestantism have come out on the side of the people and have plainly anathematized the United States Navy. Cases in point are statements of Bishop Antulio Parrilla and the Reverend Franco of Rio Piedras. Any number of seminary students and Protestant ministers have stated their adherence to the cause for independence. And those who have not gone so far have shaken off the drowsiness of years past and come out on the side of Puerto Rican-ism against the spectre of assimilation.

In cities and towns is heard the voice of the nonconformist priest; of the pastor who flees the routine of the sermon that pleases everybody; like the true Christ they expose the Saturday and Sunday hypocrites. In this concert of protests and taking of positions we miss the Spiritualists.

When we speak of the Spiritualists we do not mean the modern sorcerers of fortune-telling and grotesque contortions, nor the crooks that make plenty of money at the expense of the ignorance and gullibility of the people. One day they will be the objects of the total disdain of the masses when the latter come to see and understand their trickery.

For us these new-style Merlins do not represent the ideas and ideology of the good Frenchman who with great scientific interest dedicated himself to scrutinizing the "mysteries" of the human soul. Hypolite Denizard—Allan Kardec to the spiritualists—codified a body of knowledge that years later has been of great service to modern psychology and psychoanalysis. In contemporary universities such as Duke in the United States and in Moscow rigorous scientific studies are made of facts brought out by Allan Kardec the pioneer.

These material scientific facts have a philosophical and moral consequence, an attitude toward life that cannot fit in capitalist molds. On this subject I have had very cordial discussions with good friends in the Spiritualist camp. I have alleged, and still do, that I see no contradiction between the truths of Kardec and of Marx. Truth, which is one, has many reflections, and I honestly think that both doctrines work for the good of humanity.

I am convinced that scientific Spiritualism can develop broadly in the Socialist society but not in the capitalist one and that Spiritualism can add its bit to the struggle for the liberation of our fatherland. At least, taking a stand with complete honesty on our problems will help our people in the process of differentiation.

I regard as moral cowardice the fact that members of the Federation of Spiritualists of Puerto Rico maintain themselves separated from the basic problems of Puerto Rico. To me they act with the same opportunistic streak of all the religions in this country. They look for the easiest way to evade problems. They prefer the road to the shadows, where the daily bread is assured without the anguish of the fighter. These friends fight the churches because they have left Christ behind. But have they not also left Allan Kardec behind?

Last April I told Lumen Circle that Spiritualism must begin to hear the needs of the people or it will sound like just one more religious drug. I repeat that now.

It is 1970 and radical ideas are current in the world. I remember that Jorge Quevedo told me many times not to be afraid of ideas. I think he was right. And he could demonstrate it by inviting a speaker to the Lumen Circle to talk on Marxism.

The idea cannot be brushed off with the tired old saying that "this situation is not involved in political questions". If that is really so, it can be given up for dead. I do not think that an idea that shakes the world, that even now has carried Dr. Salvador Allende to the presidency of Chile by means that my friends at Lumen call "Democratic" should have the door slammed in its face by the institution that was headed by Rosendo Matienzo Cintron. We would like to know what Ernesto Juan Fonfrias thinks about it. Now is the time to preach by example.

Let the Spiritualist leaders come out of the four walls of their centers and face up to the serious problems of Puerto Rico. Evading these problems with cares about "the other life" does nothing for those who suffer in this one. It is a good thing that they are worried about the spiritual life: that is no trivial matter. But we are on earth and we have to work, eat and live. A few smart people want to keep everything for themselves even though they go to mass on Sunday or to the Center to listen to the voice from the great beyond.

The problem is this: the life we live on earth should be lived as well as possible. And that includes the poor, those who have always been persecuted by the law; those who have always been a ladder for the powerful to climb; those who have always been tricked.

But now it's different. There is a spotlight shining from everywhere: Marxism. Perhaps it is wrong in some of its arguments. If it is, it is up to Spiritualism to get into the argument to improve and criticize honestly. If it doesn't, if it prefers to stay in the easy chair of routine waiting, the Marxist spotlight will go on making headway. And to one side the Spiritualist candle will go on playing with the wind.

## THE CHURCHES' MORAL DILEMMA AND RESPONSIBILITY

Irvin Torres

For the past few years it has been the policy of some church-oriented and sponsored organizations to consult their Puerto Rican denominational executives or structures whenever something pertinent to them pops up. This trend toward decentralization of power in some churches has advanced quickly in recent times. A policy of decentralization has been counter-balanced by the continuation or growth in other denominations of a marked dependency in every sense on decision-making bodies in the United States. The purpose of this paper is to examine both policies in the light of the effect that they have on the development of the churches in Puerto Rico, especially in regard to social action.

### PROTESTANT RELATIONS TO DEVELOPMENT

All of the Protestant denominations in Puerto Rico followed the same path of development until fairly recently: They were either non-existent or only marginal until 1898, when they were given a base for existence and a reason for being. The base for existence was the protection and official sanction of the American colonial government. This was something they entirely lacked under the staunchly Catholic Spanish colonial regime. The reason for existence was to supply the needs of a growing number of American residents, soldiers, government officials, businessmen, and the administrators of the vast sugar complexes. At the same time, the missionaries thought it was time to save the souls of all those ignorant natives. These missionaries were highly authoritarian and did not try or intend to adjust their message to Puerto Ricans but rather tried to adjust Puerto Ricans to their message. They succeeded for a number of reasons.

The Protestant churches, thinking themselves the one true church, developed a strategy of competition with the Roman Catholic Church. They took their gospel to those people who were largely ignored by the Catholic Church, the poor. The theology of salvation to a better life appealed to people who had very little to look forward to in this one and whose lives were getting progressively worse. The authoritarian and paternalistic figure of the American Protestant missionary was easy to accept if one had a feudal serf mentality. Religion became not only the escape from a harsh reality but also a way of getting back at it. "Your sinful ways (which I cannot afford) will damn you; poverty and simple ways (of which I cannot rid myself) will save me". This may sound cruel, but it is still the message of various fundamentalist denominations in Puerto Rico.

When the small independent farmers were displaced by the great sugar companies and became the impoverished workers of these same companies, the Protestant churches

started making headway. When the sugar market collapsed, they grew by leaps and bounds. The depression, which in Puerto Rico meant mass hunger, was the "Protestant age". Of course things weren't always that easy, for the Roman Catholic Church put up a fairly good fight. Sometimes the situation degenerated into violence, although usually it was reduced to fiery oratory from the pulpit.

With the coming of the post-war industrialization program, Protestantism, which by that time was fairly well-established, was used as the justifying device in the Darwinian struggle for personal well-being that became prevalent. The Protestant work ethic of material prosperity as a favorable sign from God was just what those who were advancing needed to justify their leaving others behind. Up to now I have not mentioned the Roman Catholic Church in this process; it would be good to point out the fact that this church *had always* taken part in the colonial treatment of our country. The readers should understand that the animosity between Catholics and Protestants did not stem from their doing different things but rather from the competition of both trying to do the same thing.

Today, in Puerto Rico, we have three types of Protestant denominations representing different developmental levels: The older well-established churches with a middle class clientele; the middle-age denominations who are now making the transition in membership from poor to middle class; and the Johnny-come-lately fundamentalists who are out in the urban slums with the poor, trying to drum up business.

### PROTESTANTISM: THE WORKINGS INSIDE

Those original Protestant missionaries established themselves here quite comfortably. There was money to get started and the sanction of an American-controlled government. They gave up few of their ways, this going to the extreme that several of their residences were built with *chimneys*. If we consider that life before the war meant little or no chance for any type of advancement let alone goods, wages, or security, we will find that the salvation that the missionaries offered their candidates to the ministry was a lot closer than heaven. To be a Protestant minister meant having a very good salary, security, and a position of respect with a great deal of status. (It still does). The natural reaction was for these disciples to be forever grateful to their benefactors. The benefactors of course chose those who "learned" fastest. "Learned" in this case meant to become a carbon copy of the original. We all know that the churches were not particularly famous at this time for advancing innovators

inside their structures (they still aren't), so he who advanced was he who best molded himself to the structures. Since the missionaries left their "best" disciples in their places, these are the men who in the great majority have control over the churches in Puerto Rico.

#### CENTRALIZATION AND SOCIAL ACTION

The policy of some denominations of having a centrally-controlled American administration is a carry-over from the pre-war period in which most of our institutions were controlled from the United States. The American government caught on—after nearly fifty years of fumbling—to the fact that this was a very ineffective way of administering a colony and changed its policy. Some of the denominations in Puerto Rico still haven't caught on. A few are *now* considering whether or not they should change the tactics they have been using since 1923.

If we consider that even those denominations that have local control have lost their relevancy to a rapidly changing society which is in the middle of a great crisis, the possibility of any denomination as such implementing valid programs for social change in Puerto Rico is almost nil. Those who are tied to American institutional control have no chance at all, since Puerto Rico and the United States, in spite of everything said to the contrary, are as far away and as different as the Earth and Pluto.

#### DECENTRALIZATION

When Americans discovered that it was much easier to let the natives run the colony than do it themselves, they started turning over the minor administrative roles in government to Puerto Ricans willing to do their dirty work. It was a "good" idea. Americans still have the fundamental power in Puerto Rico but they don't have to show their faces. They call this brand of colonial control the "Free Associated State". Munoz Marin once called it "colonialism with a long chain." The model looked so pretty that the United States has tried to sell it to the rest of Latin America as the solution to its problems. Of course Americans succeeded in fooling only themselves and a few of us. The prototype is regarded in most of Latin America as a slightly hilarious menace to independence. Cuba, the envy and growing hope of Latins, has now become a new Mecca. Cubans are envied because they have put the United States in check; they are a hope because they are getting away with it.

One might think that turning over control to Puerto Rican executives is the solution for our colonial church status, the rationale being that if what we lack is the power to make our own decisions, the turning over of this power to us solves the problem. This is intended to be an anti-colonial stance, and I believe that many Americans honestly accept this policy. If the colonial reality of Puerto Rico were simple, this policy would work, and the good intentions of honest Americans would bear fruit for the cause of Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, this is not the case. We are in a life or death struggle, fighting for our

freedom and the survival of our culture and identity. There on the sidelines stand the American liberals who have inherited the country and institutions that got us here, with a very sympathetic attitude telling us we have to do our best to get out on our own. The following is an example. There is a new breed of Puerto Rican Christians who would like to practice what they preach and make the church relevant to our real problems. This drive to make Christianity and the churches a force for positive social change has the foot of the entrenched reactionary structures on its neck. Unable to find support for their projects in the local structures that make life impossible for them these "young Turks" have appealed to American churches and foundations for funds. What is the answer? "We are sorry gentlemen: we sympathize deeply with you, but we do not wish to continue our old colonial policies. You must obtain the approval of your local executives before we can fund you".

#### ALTERNATIVES

The affluence of the U.S. is based largely on the economic exploitation of other peoples. Whether it be Puerto Rican sugar, Venezuelan oil, or Brazilian ores, Americans as a whole have a responsibility for the perpetuation of this cannibalistic way of life. Those who have something to offer in return had better get with it before we start biting back in earnest, or they may find themselves between *our* teeth. If American liberals are scared to death of thirty million blacks in their midst, let them think of two hundred and fifty million Latins in their "back yard", as they call our hemisphere. It is *everyone's* responsibility to put an end to the cannibalism of imperialism.

For the past hundred years Puerto Rico has had to survive the Caribe Indians; Spanish totalitarianism; French, Dutch, and British pirate attacks; periodic hurricanes; American economic exploitation and cultural aggression, and assorted other calamities. We could use some help. We consider that it is the responsibility of every honest American to supply that help since right now the United States is the largest menace to our survival. My suggestion is that you—the churches—start giving financial support to progressive projects, regardless of whose toes you step on in making the decision. This is not a reversion to colonialism but rather what we consider a legitimate demand for reparations. In view of what Americans have squeezed out of Puerto Rico in the last seventy-two years, it is a demand for very little. If we take into consideration the damage wrought by Protestantism on our people and cultural values, it is barely a drop in the ocean.

We must have the resources and freedom of movement to make our own alternatives. You can keep your knowledge and let us develop our own solutions. This boils down to "give me the money and I'll do what I please with it", and this is exactly my intention. Keep in mind where you are getting your money from in the first

place. To put a policy like this in practice we must start with the assumption that for the problem there are no borders. The exploitation of man by man works on an international level just as the corporations do.

The problem of exploitation is international, but Puerto Rican solutions must come from Puerto Rico. We do not pretend to tell Americans who are working for

change how to go about their business, but neither will we permit them to dictate to us. Each year we are invaded by well intentioned gringos who come to give us *their* solution to *our* problems—a blatant, if unconscious, continuation of colonialism.

We must each clean our own houses; we simply ask you to spread the brooms around.

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## A CHURCH SPLIT DOWN THE MIDDLE

Irvin Torres

On the 26th of June, 1970, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Puerto Rico, Luis Aponte Martinez sent a letter to his parishes requesting that the churches ring their bells on the fourth of July in compliance with a favor asked by San Juan Mayor Carlos Romero Barcelo. The protest that ensued, including the picketing of the ancient San Juan Cathedral, was a subject of controversy for weeks. In the same month of July the Protestant denominations of the Caribbean held a conference in Puerto Rico during which dissident ministers and laymen raked the Evangelical Council over the coals, long considered the most advanced organization of Protestant denominations in Latin America. The dissidents (in good number and armed with a temporary underground newspaper) accused the council of apathy in its social stances, backwardness in its practice, and of openly backing colonial structures, institutions, and education.

These occurrences were chalked up by those affected as the product of a highly politicized atmosphere in which a walk down a street can be interpreted as a political action. While it is true that political life in Puerto Rico is very much polarized, these two incidents are symptomatic of deep rooted troubles within the churches and denominations.

During the colonialization of Puerto Rico the Church limited itself to administering the sacraments. Even the Inquisition was indifferently applied while it raged in Spain.

The nineteenth century started well with the naming of Don Alejo de Arizmendi as the first Puerto Rican Archbishop. During his tenure the Puerto Rican Church came into being, for in 1809 the Archbishop officially recognized its own identity. The moment of enlightened thinking was, however, short.

After Arizmendi there came a succession of Spanish bishops who were extremely conservative in outlook. Not once during the whole century did the Church come out in defense of the Puerto Rican people; not even a statement against slavery at a time when it was obviously crumbling in the whole Caribbean. Bishop Nicolas Alonso de Andrade said of the independence movement,

"Rebellion against such a generous king as Fernando IV would be a monstrous crime and opposed to natural and divine law."

In contrast, two priests collaborated for change and paid the consequences. Father Rufo Manuel Fernandez and the Dominican Fernando Arturo de Merino, close friend of Betances and later of the Archbishop and President of the Dominican Republic, were exiled for their activity.

In the 20th century eight bishops were named; all were American until 1964. The new American bishops never made a secret of their political thinking and intentions. Puerto Ricans were supposed to be trained to be good Americans in preparation for statehood and the church cooperated fully.

With the exception of the Anglicans, there were no other non-Catholics in Puerto Rico before 1898. The first Protestant ministers on the island were the chaplains of the invading American army.

Missionaries soon came and received the protection and help of the American governors. Working mostly in the cities, the Protestant denominations have never attracted large followings, although their membership tends to be, with a few exceptions, from the upper middle class. Social composition plus economic backing (on which almost all depend) from mission boards in the United States have given the historic Protestant denominations considerable influence in Puerto Rico.

The use of Protestantism as an instrument of American cultural assimilation is a well documented historical fact. Here again there is a lack of coordinated and planned social action programs.

The fact that only the Pentecostal churches, working in the slums, have increased their number of attending members is very significant. It is demonstrative of the inability of the older denominations to attract the younger population.

The only heartening fact in all this is the birth of a true ecumenical style amongst the "young rebels", who increasingly see themselves as Puerto Rican Christians and not as Methodists or Catholics. This style, which is one of both life and labor, is the result of endless amounts of work done in coalitions in which socially conscious people from all denominations have needed each other.

If there is hope for the church in Puerto Rico to become the meaningful voice of Christianity, it lies with these types.