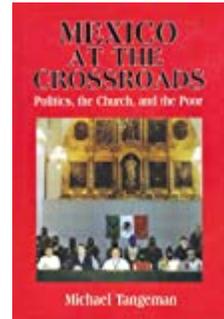




Michael Tangeman. *Mexico at the Crossroads: Politics, the Church and the Poor.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995. xiv + 138 pp. \$17.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57075-018-2.



Reviewed by Drew P. Halevy (University of Arkansas)

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Mexico and the Catholic Church have found themselves at crossroads throughout their collective history. Modern Mexico as nation is forced to choose between real reform of economic inequities, or a continuation of the status quo. The Catholic Church, as an institution in Mexico, has to choose between help for the poor or support for the elites within the system. As Tangeman writes in his preface, his book is

an attempt to examine how the Catholic Church - laity, religious, priests, and bishops - has dealt with the challenge of situating itself in relation to the poor and the powerful each time Mexico has pulled up to the "crossroads" thought its history. (p. x)

Tangeman has undertaken to give a history of the Catholic Church in Mexico, from inception to the modern day. In addition to giving this history, Tangeman is also attempting to dispel what he calls "the myths and misconceptions that hinder an understanding of the Mexican Catholic Church" (p. x). Some of these myths, explains Tangeman, include the notion that the Cristero rebellion was a hierarchy-directed uprising by reactionary and ignorant peasants, that the rise of Protestant churches was a US conspiracy, and that one can not divide the Church and its hierarchy along clean divisions of conservative and progressive; the truth is much more complex.

Although he covers the entire history of the Catholic Church in Mexico, the majority of the book is dedicated to a discussion of the Catholic Church after the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Much of the Post-revolutionary analysis is dedicated to building towards the Zapatista rebellion in 1994. Tangeman has divided the book into seven chapters, titled as follows;

Chapter One-Rebellion in the Promised Land
Chapter Two-From Conquest to Revolution
Chapter Three-From Cristo Rey to Tlatelolco
Chapter Four-Medellin and the Vatican's Silent Offensive
Chapter Five-Salinismo, The Church, and Quid Pro Quo
Chapter Six-Uprising, Uncertainty, Assassination
Chapter Seven-Election and Choices: Church, Society and the Future

The first chapter gives a detailed account of the Zapatista uprising in 1994. Not only does Tangeman tell of the uprising itself, he also gives the historical background of the Catholic Church in the area in the past twenty years. Writes Tangeman, "In a way, the rebellion was a culmination and setback to a pastoral program that preached social justice with peace" (p. 4). It is from this point that Tangeman continues the entire work. The theme of the book is to tie in the role and place of the indigenous people in the Catholic Church to their role and place within Mexican society.

The second chapter covers the rise of the Catholic Church from the conquest until the Mexican revolution. An important element of this chapter is the development of an indigenous form of Catholicism, which is best expressed in the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1531 to a indigenous Mexican. Tangeman sees this as important, since,

After all, this Virgin had chosen an Indian to spread the faith to other Indians, initiating a model of “bottom-up” evangelization that contrasted with the top-down imposition of Christianity by the Spaniards (p. 18).

Tangeman is careful to show that the Catholic Church was not a simple monolith, but rather a complex part of society that encompassed a wide variety of views within it self. Tangeman discusses the conflict between Bourbon rule in Mexico and resistance of the Jesuits. This chapter is quite useful, as it gives a brief, but informative view of the complex (and often conflicting) relationship between the Catholic Church and the government(s) of Mexico.

In Chapter three, Tangeman covers the period between the Cristero movement in 1921 to the massacre of the students at the Plaza de Tlatelolco in 1968. It is in this period that a schism started to develop among Catholics in Mexico. The attempts by the government to secularize education and place tighter control on Priests, such as requiring them to register with state governments are discussed. It is in this section that Tangeman chronicles the growing rifts within the Catholic Church, often between the Church hierarchy and lower level priests and lay Catholics. It was also in this period that there was a growing politicalization of Catholics, as seen in the rise of both political parties and Catholic associations.

Chapter four is in many ways the crux of Tangeman’s argument. Tangeman examines the Medellin Conference in 1968 and it focus on the poor in Latin America in light of Vatican II. After the Medellin Conference, there was a split between those who supported this approach, and others who favored more moderated steps in changing the direction of the Church. Tangeman devotes part of the chapter to what he calls the “Post-Medellin Backlash,” as more conservative elements of the Catholic Church so to reimpose their authority. In addition to struggles within the Church, Tangeman also examines the political developments in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, there is a twin problem, that of political corruption and economic decay. Tangeman gives an account the growing human rights abuse carried out under the banner of the anti-drug campaign.

Chapter five follows the rise of Carlos Salinas and his program of “Salinismo”. In this section Tangeman talks of the “quid pro quo” between the Church and Salinas. Tangeman writes,

It is hardly any wonder, then, that faced with a choice of either Salinas or Cardenas -the latter perhaps the true president-elect, but known for his anti-church sentiments and unable to assume power except through violent protest - the CEM (Mexican Bishops Conference) leadership chose to support Salinas (p. 71).

With the rise of Salinas (who Tangeman calls Mexico’s de facto chief of state), there was also a rise of human rights abuse. Tangeman chronicles the rise in political repression and human rights abuses, especially against Cardenas supports. Tangeman also notes the rise of abuses in the state of Chiapas. The Church is involved in this, as they worked with the government in an attempt to reform the constitution in regard to church affairs. Tangeman also asserts that in this period the Vatican worked to undercut the idea of liberation theology in Latin America that arose after the Medellin Conference.

With this rise of high level church-state cooperation, Tangeman shows that Salinas stifled church criticism of economic policies with the creation of the National Solidarity Program (PRONASOL). Tangeman rejects PRONASOL as “an incredible sleight of hand” (p. 77). In this chapter, Tangeman also addresses the role of the church in regard to NAFTA, constitutional reforms and the death of Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo at an airport shootout in 1993.

Chapter six ties together the themes that have been developed in the previous chapters. The divisions within the Church (between the hierarch and the priests in the field), the abuses of the government, and the lack of real agrarian reform. Tangeman brings all these themes together in a discussion the Zapatista Uprising. Tangeman chronicles the uprising and various reactions to it from the Church, the government and those in Chiapas.

The final chapter talks of the election of Ernesto Zedillo, and the state of Mexico today. Tangeman talks of the combination of the death of Luis Colosio, the ongoing talks in Chiapas and underlying weakness in the Mexican economy. Tangeman does not paint a bright picture for Mexico, as both Mexico and the Catholic Church are again at a crossroads. Tangeman asks in the closing paragraphs as to what the role of the Catholic Church will be in 1995 and beyond for Mexico.

Overall, I found the book quite informative and well written. For an area of Mexican history that I have never studied in depth, I found this book an excellent introduction to the subject area. This book would work quite well in a seminar class on contemporary Mexican history, as it gives not only the current state of affairs, but gives a

detailed background to the history of the relationship between Mexico and the Catholic Church.

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