

*Rendering Unto Caesar*, by Anthony Gill, and *Religious Politics in Latin America*, by Brian H. Smith

reviewed by [Philip Berryman](#) in the [October 27, 1999](#) issue

Twenty years ago the churches in Latin America were viewed as playing a major role in resisting military dictatorships and in developing new revolutionary social models. Recently, attention has shifted to the remarkable growth of Latin American Pentecostal churches. In Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and elsewhere, as many Protestants as Catholics may be in church on any given weekend.

Anthony Gill and Brian Smith bring two very different approaches to analyzing the Latin American religious climate. Smith, a political scientist at Wisconsin's Ripon College, gives equal space to Catholics and Pentecostals. (He pays little attention to historic Protestant denominations.) His guiding question is what their future relationship might be, especially as they exert political influence. How will they rival or cooperate with each other? In some areas Catholics and Pentecostals might wish to collaborate—for example, by advocating for the family or the poor, or by opposing corruption. Perhaps conservative Protestants will defend authoritarian governments, while socially minded Catholics will oppose them; or perhaps Pentecostals, most of whom are poor, will become more socially radical, while authoritarian Catholics will remain socially conservative.

When we examine controversial issues more closely, however, we discover that they may cut several ways: Protestants understandably wish to level the playing field by ending Catholic privileges (special status in law, some government support), while Catholic hierarchies defend the "Catholic" identity of their countries. Both Catholic hierarchies and Pentecostal churches oppose efforts to liberalize laws in areas such as divorce, abortion or sex education, but many Catholic laypeople, both practicing and nonpracticing, hold more liberal views on these issues. It is likely, therefore, that Protestants and Catholics may sometimes cooperate and sometimes oppose each other according to complex patterns. Smith's deft and judicious study covers a remarkable breadth of recent research on this topic.

Thumbed through quickly, the book by Gill, a political scientist at the University of Washington, might seem a conventional church-and-state study. What makes the

book stand apart, however, is its use of rational-choice theory to explain the behavior of two hierarchies faced with brutal military dictatorships in the 1970s. The Chilean bishops publicly resisted their government, and the Argentine bishops did not.

By analogy with microeconomic theory, rational-choice theory postulates that individuals try to maximize their utility in a world of scarce resources—utility being understood in broader than cash terms. Church hierarchies, in particular, will act differently when they have a monopoly (as the Catholic Church did until very recently in Latin America) and when they face pluralism. Gill asserts that rational-choice theory allows one to prepare hypotheses and submit them to rigorous testing. He intends his book to be understood and evaluated as such an effort. Implicitly, at least, he suggests that scholarship on the Latin American church can and should move from a descriptive to an explanatory mode.

This framework is most successful in dealing with the long period from colonial times until very recently when the Catholic church enjoyed a quasi-monopoly in religion. In such a situation, it was in the interests of the bishops (though not necessarily the interests of the church's mission) to seek and retain alliances with their countries' elites.

In the 19th century the bishops formed alliances with conservative parties to protect themselves from liberal reforms that would, for example, have secularized marriage. Because the poor majority had little influence on the bishops' social status, the bishops had little incentive to serve them. The chronic shortage of clergy meant that most Latin Americans only infrequently saw a priest and did not attend mass regularly. As the first Protestant missionaries appeared in Latin American countries, it was easier for the Catholic hierarchy to use its elite connections to restrict them than to mobilize Catholic resources to compete with them.

Gill argues that the Chilean bishops as early as the 1940s were forced to compete with Protestants for the allegiance of the poor, and they took initiatives to do so, starting with Catholic Action. In contrast, the Argentine bishops faced little competition and continued to neglect the poor. Having been sensitized to the plight of the poor by greater pastoral involvement, Chilean bishops were more willing to defend them after the coup led by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973. They issued public statements supporting the poor and took initiatives such as the Vicariate of Solidarity, while the Argentine bishops stood by silently while 9,000 or more people

were "disappeared" by official forces.

At one point, Gill divides Latin American Catholic episcopacies into those that did and those that did not oppose authoritarian regimes. He says the Salvadoran did so, and the Guatemalan did not or, at best, was a unique "neutral case." But according to my observation, the Guatemalan bishops gave a far more effective witness to opposition than did the Salvadorans (even though both cases were mixed). This may be a minor point, but it indicates that Gill's method forces him to flatten the data to a misleading extent. With regard to his central case study, I am unpersuaded that it is possible to isolate a single factor as the primary determinant of differing behavior. Just why the Argentine and Chilean bishops reacted differently to similar situations remains an interesting question. A more satisfactory answer will come from a comprehensive approach, rather than from an effort to isolate some decisive single variable.