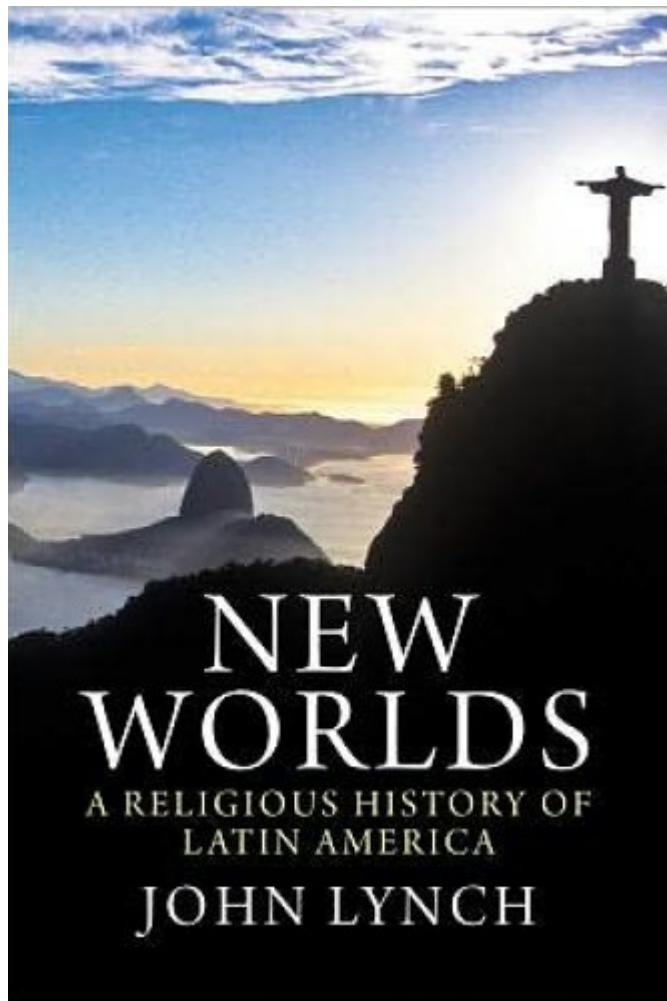


*New Worlds*, by John Lynch

reviewed by [Kenneth P. Serbin](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



### New Worlds

By John Lynch

Yale University Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

With this synthesis of the 500-plus-year history of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, John Lynch has furnished an important and intricate piece of the

puzzle of the story of global Christianity.

*New Worlds* is a badly needed book. Latin America, the scene of an epic clash of cultures resulting from the European conquests of the 15th and 16th centuries, is today home to more than a third of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics. For decades, much high-quality scholarship has examined the many facets of the Latin American church, as well as other religious trends. However, only with this book has a scholar from the English-speaking world produced an overview of the complex and controversial topic of Latin American Catholicism.

Although *New Worlds* is a religious history, Lynch, professor emeritus of Latin American history at the University of London, uses the perspectives of social, institutional and political history to provide a complex view of religion and the church. He practices history at its best, providing a clear explanation of how and why religious institutions and customs evolved after the arrival of the Europeans in 1492. Over and over again, he illustrates how very messy and immoral the state of social, political and religious affairs could become under the aegis of the Catholic Church. He does not apologize for the church's shortcomings.

One of his central themes, buttressed with the latest scholarship, is a critique of the long-held notion of a "spiritual conquest" of the natives by the Spaniards and Portuguese. He emphasizes instead that there was a process of melding. "In the subsequent fusion each side strove to impose or preserve the maximum possible amount of their own culture," Lynch observes. "The result was a certain continuity of Indian religion and survival of ancestral ways within a new Christian structure."

Lynch thus rejects the idea of a zero-sum game for the natives. For instance, in his discussion of the Spanish encounter with the Maya in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala, Lynch affirms that "Christianity had much to answer for in the ordeal of the Maya." However, he also states that on the "positive side" Christianity "promised to release them from their cyclical prison"—a circular, ahistorical notion of time—"and make them free to accept time and progress and to live as individuals contributing to history and change." This interpretation will surely add fuel to the centuries-old debate over the European conquest of the New World.

After describing the history of the church during Latin America's colonial era (1492–1810) in the book's first three chapters, Lynch spends the next four portraying the creation of a uniquely Latin American church, with significant nation-

specific characteristics, in the 19th century. Lynch explores the deep religious conflicts—including wars—that took place in this period largely as a result of the emergence of independent, classical-liberal states that sought to diminish the power of the church by placing restrictions on the clergy and church property and ultimately via disestablishment. Both collaboration and tensions between the church and the state, which have extended into the 21st century, are defining characteristics of Latin American society; they are sharply distinguished from U.S. culture's emphasis on separation of church and state, of the sacred and the secular.

The most detailed and most interesting section—especially for those tuned into contemporary religious affairs—is found in the final five chapters, which focus on the challenges posed to the church by modernity, democracy, revolution and dictatorship in the 20th century. Lynch recounts, for example, the church's deeply divided positions in revolutionary Nicaragua, its clash with the communist state in Cuba and its courageous defense of human rights under dictatorships in Brazil, Chile and elsewhere. Lynch also provides a fine overview of the impact of Vatican II on the Latin American church and its search for social justice.

Lynch draws broad conclusions about the two most innovative and controversial developments of the recent Latin American church: liberation theology and Christian base communities, the latter known in Spanish as *comunidades eclesiales de base*, more accurately translated as “grassroots church communities.”

Closely analyzing the works of liberation theologians such as the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Brazilian friar Leonardo Boff (who later left the ministry), Lynch concludes that the Vatican's need to “probe and prowl” around liberation theology—it officially silenced Boff for two years in the 1980s—lay in that theology's reliance on Marxist “methodological points” and on dependency theory (a reworked interpretation of imperialism) for understanding Latin American reality. Lynch is also critical of liberation theologians:

The irony was that liberation theology was perfectly capable of standing on its own feet in Christian sources without recourse to Marxism and its derivatives, least of all at a time when the collapse of communism was undermining its Marxist base and when dependency theory in particular was becoming a museum piece.

Furthermore, liberation theology singled out poverty as a unique justification of Christian faith, ignoring “other truths of revelation.” As Lynch points out, many Latin American countries were developing middle classes. Today Brazil has a majority middle class, and Mexico is not far behind. This is a key breakthrough for the region and calls into question the notion of Third World status for these countries. Lynch asks whether Christian theology has a message for the middle class too.

On the positive side, Lynch recognizes that the emergence of liberation theology represented an important advance for the entire Catholic Church and perhaps all of Christianity. “It was the liberationists who rescued theology from oblivion and restored confidence to believers,” he writes. Lynch could also have noted that liberation theology is no longer in vogue in the Latin American religious and political environment. It seems to have a greater following among academics, particularly theologians, outside of Latin America.

In his discussion of base communities, which Lynch identifies as a development that was welcomed even by the skeptical Vatican, he unquestioningly adopts the liberationist assumption that these communities burgeoned, when in fact some scholars have questioned that claim. The truly notable growth in 20th-century Latin America occurred in Protestant—in particular, Pentecostal and so-called neo-Pentecostal—churches. Protestant growth has far outstripped that of the base communities.

Readers desiring deep analysis of the Protestant phenomenon will need to look elsewhere; as Lynch states at the outset, “for five centuries the defining religion of Latin America has been Catholic and this is the assumption on which the book has been written.” He does devote about nine pages to Protestants and Pentecostals in a chapter titled “Difference and Diversity,” which also includes a brief discussion of the Latin American Jewish community and Afro-Latin religions.

I agree that Catholic tradition remains the bedrock of Latin American culture and society. Yet Lynch might have included an entire chapter on Protestant development, given the rapidity of its growth and the seriousness of its challenge to Catholic political and religious hegemony—as daunting as the past challenges of revolution and dictatorship. Lacking such a discussion, the book could have been more accurately subtitled. Recent scholarly writings have also examined a key Catholic response to Protestant growth: the emergence of a Catholic charismatic renewal that has engaged large numbers of faithful in church services, healings and

revival-type activities.

With any book of great chronological and geographic depth, it's nearly impossible for the author to cover all of the literature and developments. Errors inevitably crop up, as in Lynch's assertion that Dom Hélder Câmara, the late archbishop of Olinda and Recife in Brazil, won the Nobel Peace Prize. In reality, Brazil's military dictatorship lobbied hard behind the scenes to help ensure that the nominated Câmara did not receive the prize.

In spite of these shortcomings, *New Worlds* provides an excellent overview of its topic and is a handy reference work that readers can dip into according to their needs and interests. The volume is extremely well documented, and readers interested in examining particular questions in greater depth can consult Lynch's notes. For many years to come *New Worlds* should stand as a key reference point for anyone interested in delving into the religious framework of Latin America, as well as its extension into the United States, where population growth among people of Latin American descent points to the advent of an ever more Latino society.