

James Luther Adams Foundation Forum on Religion and Society

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According to Steve Mott, president of the JLA Foundation, Adams once wrote the following sentence, which could serve as the text for my lecture today: “A fairly good test of a religious liberal is his/her capacity to recognize authentic religious and prophetic qualities among evangelicals” (*Twenty-first Century Ministry Booklets*, Vol. 5: 21). I think JLA could make this statement in large measure because of his own evangelical roots. Today I want to talk about how what I learned from him has helped me understand the progressive contribution of evangelicals and Pentecostals in Latin America, and in Brazil in particular.

During one of my first trips to the northeast of Brazil, 25 years ago I met a young Brazilian sociologist from Sao Paulo who was studying the Peasant Leagues then springing up in that arid, poverty stricken region. The farmers who were organizing these leagues to be able to buy seed and equipment and to market their products cooperatively. During her research this novice investigator, who was a serious lay Catholic, discovered that indigenous Brazilian “Crentes” as she called them (a term inclusive of evangelicals and Pentecostals) even though they constituted only about 10% of the population then (the percentage is higher now) had done the lion’s share of the work and provided most of the leadership. Eager to uncover the link between the crentes’ religious faith and their work with the leagues, she interviewed several of them and asked what the connection was. They seemed puzzled by the question, she said, and shrugged their shoulders. This in turn puzzled her, but the more she lived among the crentes and attended their services, she began to understand what the connection was. The crentes, she

explained, are practiced list makers. They are used to compiling lists of people they intend to visit in their evangelization campaigns or to invite to church meetings. They knock on doors (there were very few telephones in those days), then check off who was not at home, who responded favorably, who slammed the door. Then they return, sometimes again and again. If the door was opened, they learned how to get their message across quickly and clearly. These skills, the sociologist finally noticed, were exactly the ones needed for organizing peasant leagues. No wonder the crenes had set the pace. I almost decided to entitle this lecture “Blessed are the list-makers.”

I open with this vignette for a couple reasons. First because it encapsulates two of the key elements in JLA’s social theology: first, the essential qualities of a religious faith can be discerned most clearly in the shape it gives to the institutions it spawns; and second, the vital importance of voluntary associations to any healthy society, both of these symbolized in his most famous dictum, “by their groups ye shall know them.”

I also mention this story because it comes from a region which has fascinated me for the past thirty years and because it confirms JLA’s premise in a part of the world he knew little about. JLA believed that voluntary associations were the seed bed and life blood of any genuine democracy. They mediate between and among the larger structures of economy, government, education and press. They provide alternative patterns of organization and unofficial networks. They school people in the indispensable skills needed to make democracy work.

Most people know by now that the growth of evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism in the developing world in the past thirty years has been nothing short of spectacular, and Pentecostals account for 90% of it. These two movements—Evangelicals and Pentecostals—are often intertwined, and I will include them both within the term “crenes,” a name that is often

attached to them and that means “believers” in Portuguese. Pentecostals now number about 500 million, which makes them the largest non-Catholic grouping among the globe’s two billion Christians. In Latin America that growth has been as fast as it is anywhere, and it is fair to say that in recent years crente congregations have become one of the main sources of voluntary associations. Two or three Latin American countries already have crente majorities, and others are headed in that direction. When I visited the religious census office in Rio de Janeiro five years ago, they told me that in the previous year, in the *municipalidad* of Rio alone, 427 new crente congregations had been established. In the same year, only one new Roman Catholic church was built and only two Umbanda temples.

Despite the misapprehension of many North Americans, the crenes have neither remained aloof from politics, nor have they replicated the American religious right. Careful analyses of their political behavior indicate their voting patterns tend toward what might be called the “center left.” In the recent Brazilian presidential elections, for example, a large majority of crenes voted for Lula and the PT (Workers’ Party). The political trajectory of the crenes was captured two years ago when a close observer wrote about the “*inquierization de los evangelicos*” (the “leftification of the evangelicals”).

Historically, Latin America has not been a continent richly endowed with voluntary associations. In general one is born into whatever one belongs to. Be it state or nation or tribe or church, you *find yourself* in a collectivity. You do not *join* it. But to be a crente you have to join something. To borrow a famous distinction from William James, most Latin American collectivities are made up of the “once born.” Virtually the only exceptions to this rule have been labor unions, ecclesial base communities and crente religious congregations, which are constituted by the “twice born,” people who have made a conscious choice to join something. All

this means that the stunning growth of the crenes is a critical key to the democratization of the whole region, especially since they are beginning to participate in public life in an active way, hold public office, and to seek to formulate a “public theology” of their own.

But the continued growth of the crenes and their contribution to democracy are in no way guaranteed. They are often fragile, vulnerable to both socio-cultural pressures from without and threats from within. Much of the rest of this paper will focus on how these often frail outposts of democracy are faring, and therefore on what the prospects for democracy are.

What does it take to make democracy work? A consensus is emerging among scholars that at least three preconditions are required.

First, there need to be contending parties with different political projects, and regular free elections in which the losers turn over power to the winners. This condition, however, is the bare minimum, and by itself scarcely produces democracy.

Second, democracy requires what Jefferson called “an informed and active populace,” which is free to participate in policy deliberations and takes the time to do so. A populace that is informed but not active, or active but not informed, will not suffice (to say nothing of a populace that is neither).

Third, democracy necessitates a society in which the human and civil rights of all its people are legally guaranteed and actively enforced.

Some writers have suggested that a fourth requirement for democracy is a market economy, but others doubt it. China has a rampaging capitalist economy, but few of the essential elements of democracy mentioned above. In parts of Latin America, on the other hand, democracy has been gaining in recent years often without reference to economies. Some observers of the recent history of Russia believe that the rapid imposition of market capitalism

there has actually undermined the chances for democracy. Polls show most Russians now associate democracy with profiteering, corruption, and thuggery.

In view of these requirements for democracy, what are crente congregations in Latin America doing to nurture them, and thus to influence the shape of the public square?

Without a doubt, crenes, whether in North America or South America, have always been very public about their faith. They preach in the streets and in the markets. They make lists and knock on doors. It is difficult to stroll through a favella in Brazil on any given evening without hearing the local crente congregation broadcasting its music and message on crackling loudspeakers. But this does not yet mean they have a “public theology” in the sense in which the word is used today, that is, a conceptualized approach to influencing public policy decisions.

Until recently the crente contribution to democracy has been an indirect one. Their role calls to mind the observation of Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 19th century that it was of American religion that provided the indispensable fertile soil for democracy. Without the myriad congregations and other voluntary associations he found in America, he wrote, there would not be the “habits of the heart” democracy requires. In the religious congregations he visited, Tocqueville observed, people learned to discuss issues, make corporate decisions, compromise where necessary, link moral principles to current issues, and, finally, to accept the results these procedural strategies produced. Having learned these skills in the congregations, he wrote, they could then apply them in the public arena. In short, the free churches of America, unhindered by state sponsorship or hierarchical control, built networks of responsibility, trust, and an idea of the common good that made America an ideal venue for democracy.

[See Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y. 1969). Also see Rowan Ireland, “Popular Religions and the Building of Democracy in Latin

America: Saving the Tocqueville Parallel,” in Journal of International Studies and World Affairs 414: 111.]

There is a difference between becoming a crente in Latin America, and joining a religious congregation in the United States that Tocqueville visited. In Latin America choosing to *become* a crente often exacted a high price, sometimes evoking the scorn of one’s neighbors and family, and, until recently, often legal and semi-legal persecution. For the Latin America crente this initial choice required more risk and more courage. It was risky. But it instilled what might be called a “habit of choosing,” and hence of not feeling one is trapped forever in one’s station. Becoming a crente also endows very ordinary people with a sense of dignity: they are important to God and to their fellow human beings as bearers of a vital, life-giving message. To borrow a phrase from North American black culture, they can say, “I am . . . *somebody*.” Again, once instilled, this sense of dignity and importance cannot be easily eradicated.

Here a cautionary note is necessary. It is important to remember that the main purpose of crentes, unlike the Catholic base communities, has not been to influence the realm of public policy. Crentes believe they have been called to love and praise God, to receive the priceless gifts of the Spirit, and to carry the precious message to the farthest corners of the world. It is also true that some crente preachers constantly exhort their congregations not to become contaminated in “this world,” especially since in any case it will soon pass away with the triumphant return of Jesus. But as their numbers increase and they see that their participation in public life can make a difference, crentes preach less about an imminent return of Jesus and more about how to live as Christians in a fallen world, and even sometimes make it a better place.

One clear and present *inner* threat to the crentes’ capacity to nurture democracy is a tendency among some of them to curtail democracy in their own congregations. Their emphasis

on charismatic gifts can make their leadership authoritarian: “If God has put me in this position of power, why should you question my decisions?” This might be called the rise of the return of the *caudillo*, this time as pastor. Further, dynastic leadership is not unusual. Fathers often hand their pastorates down to their sons. Such leadership leads to a kind of clientelism as pastors make deals with whatever ruling powers there may be: votes in exchange for patronage. Multiplying rapidly now, and full of rich promise for a democratic future, crente congregations could however petrify and shrivel because of their own internal weaknesses.

But the crentes also face threats from without. Ruling regimes in authoritarian countries do not worry so much about the ideology of evangelical/Pentecostal congregations. They worry because these people are “list makers.” They know how to get people together, regionally, nationally, and even internationally, and authoritarian regimes are famously fearful of rival networks of information and organization. An example from elsewhere illustrates this. The Falun Gong in China are not crentes, but they do form voluntary associations. Still, the Communist government was not really much concerned about their somewhat esoteric spirituality until they assembled 100,000 people in Tiananmen Square. Then the authorities were shocked and fearful, and they cracked down.

In Latin America, during the early of their growth, these threats from without came both from the Catholic Church and from governments it influenced. But except for a few places, such as the Chiapas province in southern Mexico, this kind of opposition is rare today.

Perhaps the clearest threat to the future of the crentes in Latin America is a combination of within and without. It is the danger of their being drawn into what Harvard historian Charles S. Maier in his book Among Empires terms “the [American] empire of consumption.”

Maier recognizes that a fierce debate is currently raging about whether the US either is or has an empire. Our question here is: If the US is or if it has an empire, is Latin America is part of it? Plainly many Latin Americans think that the answer to these questions is an emphatic yes. Week after week statements by Latin American councils of churches, bishops' conferences, and theologians bristle with attacks on American foreign policy, the Iraq war, NAFTA, and what they term "neo-liberal" economics. But the point is that if indeed Latin America is part of an American empire, then we can expect to see it controlled the same way Americans exert control anywhere else. That method is a combination of both 1) military might, either threatened or used, which happens periodically, and 2) cultural hegemony, which goes on all the time. This hegemony is conveyed both through the cultivation of elites and by the mass distribution of American media and consumer culture.

But is empire a useful framework for understanding the context in which Latin American crente congregations now live? If it is (and, once again, many Latin Americans believe it is), is the idea of "civil society," coined originally by eastern European states during the era of Communist rule, any longer useful for understanding our present world situation? Maier doubts it. He documents how all empires by their very nature tend to transform grassroots institutions in their own top-down image. They "[extend] their gradients of privilege and participation outward through space and downward into society."

They replicate their hierarchical structures and their divisions at all spatial levels, macro and micro—at the level of community and the workplace as well as the continent...all recapitulate the structure of the whole. (Maier, 10)

This is where the complex inside/outside threat to crente congregations comes in. Unlike their forebears in the years before the inundation of their continent with mass media and

consumer culture, today's crentes swim in it every day. Crentes are not Amish. They do not withdraw into enclaves. They live, work, go to school, and shop enmeshed in their societies. But the fact is that consumer culture always tends to lure people away from citizenship. It transmutes them into consumers. This means that the political environment in Latin America has begun to replicate the North American consumer marketing approach to politics, an approach that contradicts the highly participatory style the crentes engender and cultivate.

But the consumerist style is not just the wolf at the door, it also a very large camel's nose rather far inside the crente tent. It finds expression in the "gospel of prosperity," sometimes called the "name it and claim it" theology, derived in large measure from North American sources. This current has begun to influence large numbers of crente churches, but it has found its major bearer in the *Igreja Universal de Reino de Dios*, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG). It is the fastest growing denomination in Latin America, and has now spread to dozens of other countries. The UCKG promises its adherents that if they contribute generously they will receive not only salvation and health, but wealth, not just in a world beyond, but in this one. Moreover, the organizational structure of the UCKG, organized on the pattern of North American sales campaigns, is wholly different from the congregational style of most crente churches. Its adherents are more like customers or clients than members. It makes no bones about expecting a price for its blessings and exorcisms. It markets itself on television and owns the second largest TV network in Brazil. Nearly all the other crente churches have tried to distance themselves from the UCKG. Many Pentecostal leaders now refer to it as "pseudo-pentecostal," and consider its influence a noxious virus. But it continues to grow.

This ugly dispute points to possible destructive fractures in the wider crente community. Brazilian sociologist Reginaldo Prandi believes that although classical evangelicals in Latin

America are continuing to make the kind of contribution to democracy described above, Pentecostals are not doing so well. He sees what he calls two “nations” emerging in Brazil from the deluge of globalization. The one on top is what he calls “post-ethical” consumption-driven culture found in swank sections of the cities and the boutique crowd, the “me-first” people who have no concern whatever for the common good. At the bottom is what he calls the “pre-ethical” culture of people whose daily struggle for survival allows no time for luxuries like pondering the common good or being an active citizen. Poles apart, and with not much in between, neither generates the stuff needed to build democracy.

[Reginaldo Prandi, “Perto da Magia, Longe da Politica,” in Relidade Social das Religiones no Brazil: Religiao, Socieddade e Politica, ed. by Antono Flavo de Oliveira Pierucci and Reginaldo Prandi, Sao Paulo, Hucitec: 93-105.]

Prandi’s observation suggests that we need another pre-condition for democracy. In addition to the ones noted above, a democracy needs a populace whose basic creaturely needs are met. People scrambling for the next meal for their children or the rudiments of health care just do not have the leisure to be participatory citizens.

What comes next? Crentes are known everywhere in Latin America for their straightforwardness and honesty. They are sought out for lower and middle level clerical jobs in the bureaucracies because employers know they will stay sober, arrive for work on time, and not steal the petty cash. But they still live in societies in which a huge chasm separates the top peak from the vast bottom. In a sense crentes find themselves caught *between* civil society and empire, between the promise of a participatory society and the seductive pressures of the empire of consumption. Still, they continue to bring to marginalized and wounded people a message of dignity and hope. At the same time many poor crentes are becoming aware of the painful

contradiction between their sense of worth and favored status *within* the congregation and the humiliations they face every day as the cast-offs in the larger society. Perhaps the most critical question posed for us and for the crentes themselves is: Where will this growing contradiction lead?

There are at least two possibilities. Socially marginalized crentes, especially those infatuated by the spurious promises of the prosperity gospel, could become increasingly bitter and cynical. After you have prayed fervently for a better job, a stove that works, or a warm house and contributed as generously as you could to the church, but no house, no stove, and no job appear, then what? Some people will relapse into fatalism or withdraw into religious ghettos and give up on citizenship and participation. Or, they could begin to see—as many already have—that to live in a society in which their humanity is respected will require vigorous advocacy of real structural change. This is why some observers believe that crentes could become the core of fundamental nonviolent change. They might move on from their fascination with Acts II (the gifts of the Spirit) to Acts XVII (“These people who have been turning the world upside down have now come here”). Is this a genuine possibility?

No one knows, of course. But two core crente beliefs will play a decisive role: conversion (“you must be born again”) and holiness (“be not conformed to this world”). In political and cultural terms conversion means that people *can* change and that therefore fatalism—either personal or societal—is not acceptable. Holiness means that you need not buy into the latest mind-numbing fads of consumer commodity culture. You can be “in but not of this world.”

Jim Adams’s favorite intellectual activity was to chart how institutional patterns that arise first in religious congregations, sometimes small and marginal ones, can ultimately shape and transform the larger society. There is no guarantee that this will happen in the ongoing history of

Latin American crentes. But it could. Blessed are the list makers for they shall be called the children of God.