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Leftward, Christian Soldiers:
Many Latin Churches Revolt

By Erich Bridges

SAO GERALDO DO ARAGUAIA, Brazil (BP)--Brazilian military authorities claim 13 p asants ambushed federal police in 1981 in the northern village of Sao Geraldo do Araguaia.

Two Roman Catholic priests, both French missionaries, were arrested and tried for: Inciting violence and promoting "collective disobedience to the law and class struggle." Both were deported last year.

This church-state showdown was far from the first of its kind in Brazil--and far from the last. Southern Baptist foreign missionaries reject direct political involvement in any country but a growing number of other Protestant and Catholic ministers, missionaries and theologians in Latin American declare that faith without political action is no faith at all.

"When you see your own people raped and killed by rightist terrorists...and when you realize that two percent of the population already controls three-quarters of the wealth, you cannot bury your head in a Bible and ignore these realities," says a Catholic missionary in Central America. "In the midst of such violence, not to take sides is to take sides."

The Roman Catholic Church has always taken sides in Latin America but now it's switching sides. For centuries Catholic bishops shared power with the military leaders and landed families of the region. Now many bishops call generals "tyrants" and urge seizure of rich landowners' properties.

Why the change? Thousands of once-quiet Catholics (and Protestants) sprang into action after the revival of military dictatorship in numerous Latin American countries during the 1970s. Hundreds of priests, religious workers and missionaries were arrested or killed, including El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated while saying mass in 1980.

Pope John Paul II urged peace and moderation during his march visit to Central America, a region where rightist and leftist terror has killed thousands of innocents. Well-versed in the realities of life in a communist state, the Polish Pope calls for justice for the poor and oppressed but warns the faithful not to sanctify any one political formula (such as Marxism) to achieve it.

In Latin America today, Catholics are on both sides of the conflict but the Pope may find even his enormous influence will bring little calm. For many, faith has become inseparable from politics.

The seeds of change sprouted after decades of rapid urban growth shook the Catholic church's entrenched structure of domination. To regain losses, the church helped form labor movements and Christian democratic political parties. Many young reformers embraced Marxism.

Th Latin American Conference of Bishops condemned the "institutional violence" of dictatorship and the "colonialism" of capitalist enterprise. Many priests and nuns have interpreted the bishops' statements as a simple call for ministry to the poor but others have taken them as a mandate for radical political action.

A powerful new doctrine also challenges the Pope's political neutrality: liberation theology. Responding to the revolution in th traditional Latin American church in the last generation, a number of Catholic and Protestant theologians in the region developed this concept setting forth their case for change.

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Liberation theologians declare God is the great liberator of history, freeing people from every sort of bondage--spiritual, social, economic, political. To the Egyptian oppressors God said, "Let my people go." When they refused, he acted, crushing their might and freeing the children of Israel from poverty and slavery.

In Christ, God identified himself completely with the poor, say the liberationists. He entered the world through humble birth and declared in his first sermon his mission to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, liberate the oppressed (Luke 4:8).

Liberation theologians reject the "spiritualizing" of these events--that is, interpreting them in spiritual terms alone. God continues to act in history, they assert, sometimes through mass revolutionary movements.

Does liberation theology then embrace violence as a means of bringing justice to the world? Leading theologian Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru maintains those who "attribute violence to the theology of liberation do not know what they are talking about." But in fact many liberationists readily approve of "armed struggle" to free exploited people.

A controversial example from Africa is the World Council of Churches' "Programme to Combat Racism," under renewed attack after critical profiles appeared recently in Reader's Digest and on the CBS news program 60 Minutes.

In 1978 the World Council awarded \$85,000 to a Marxist guerrilla alliance fighting the white-ruled government in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). On June 15 of that year Southern Baptist missionary Archie Dunaway was stabbed to death by guerrillas on the Sanyati Baptist Hospital Compound in Rhodesia, one of dozens of Protestant and Catholic missionaries murdered during the seven-year war.

The World Council insists its grants to guerrillas in Rhodesia and several other countries have gone strictly for food, medical supplies and other "humanitarian" aid. But guerrilla funds are then freed and funneled into arms. The \$85,000 grant drew widespread condemnation; the Salvation Army, a founding council member, suspended membership.

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, a huge government-coordinated rally greeted Pope John Paul's arrival March 4, with the cry, "Christianity and revolution--there is no contradiction!" The Catholic Church, numerous mission groups and many other public organizations in Nicaragua supported the 1979 overthrow of the corrupt Somoza regime by Sandinista guerrillas.

Today, however, liberationists find themselves defending an increasingly hard-line Sandinista junta with close military ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union. The Sandinistas regularly censor the press and arrest opponents. They are accused of exporting violent revolution to neighboring countries like El Salvador, forcibly relocating and allegedly murdering rebellious Misquito Indians and harassing the Catholic Church itself.

Some mission groups have been pressured to leave or denied visas. Southern Baptist missionaries left Nicaragua last April on the advice of Baptist leaders in the country, though cooperation in literature ministry continues.

But the Maryknoll Order, a U.S. Catholic missionary society, continues to support the Sandinistas, explaining their actions as necessary unpleasantnesses of the revolution. Former Maryknoll missionary and communication director Miguel D'Escoto is Nicaragua's foreign minister. He and several other priests in the government have rejected the Pope's command that clergy refrain from direct government involvement.

The contradictions of liberation theology appear when theory collides with reality. But its teachings strike a deeply responsive chord in the hearts of poor and downtrodden people who find hope and courage in a God who declares his special concern for them.

That chord is being struck in Latin America now and the poor are responding. The nature of their response will determine the future of the church in the region, and possibly the future of the region itself.

Israel, Church Council Issues
Fuel Church-Politics Debate

By Mary Jane Welch

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Debate over support of Israel and the political activities of the National and World Council of Churches is focusing attention again on Southern Baptists' long-time stand against involvement in politics overseas.

For the denomination's Foreign Mission Board and its 3,200 missionaries in 96 countries, the issue is crucial. Board officials have long said an apolitical stance toward their host governments is essential for carrying out their primary task--evangelism and church building.

In 1974, the Foreign Mission Board adopted a statement affirming its commitment to political neutrality, but also affirming a concern for the spiritual and humanitarian welfare of all people regardless of their political convictions. The statement asks missionaries to "refrain from political actions or statements that might jeopardize the witness for Christ in any part of the world."

While few Southern Baptists would disagree with the statement on first reading, they make exceptions on individual issues. Some Southern Baptists interpret the Bible as saying they must support Israel regardless of how it affects witness in Arab countries. A Baptist pastor has announced he will reintroduce a pro-Israel resolution tabled at last year's Southern Baptist Convention.

Others say missionaries working where people face injustice must speak out against the parties inflicting it, even if they get booted from the country.

Most missionaries accept and appreciate the board's policy, but world political issues that concern U.S. Baptists are even closer to them. Those issues touch the people they live with.

"One of the most difficult things for new missionaries is to separate what is gospel--basic biblical principles--from cultural markings," says one missionary. "I do believe there is a place for social ministries and involvement in government. But as we go from America, we must be very, very careful. We are dealing crossculturally."

He has pinpointed the reason most often given by board officials for their apolitical stance: Missionaries are guests in the countries where they work. As guests, they have no right to tell their hosts how to run their homes.

Another missionary disagrees with that philosophy. The argument that missionaries shouldn't be interested in their host governments comes "close to being a 'cop-out,'" he says. "We don't use that argument about any other vital issue--the lost, the sick. The board's policy is necessary, but it is inconsistent with the rest of our behavior."

The policy can be interpreted, he says, to mean: "Be politically neutral when the choice is to say something upsetting; don't be if you can ingratiate yourself. To the extent this is implemented, it is not a spiritual but a pragmatic policy," he adds.

His stand suggests that of some other denominations. Roman Catholics have become identified, especially in Latin America, with a fight against poverty and injustice that often brings them into conflict with political parties. Some have paid for that stand with their lives.

The National Council of Churches, which represents a number of mainline Protestant churches, and the World Council of Churches have recently come under attack by Readers' Digest and CBS' 60 Minutes for alleged support of revolutionary groups around the world.

Christian groups which take political stands charge that evangelical Christians have buried their heads in the sand and reduced their faith to another worldly fantasy that ignores people's urgent needs.

Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks disagrees. "I don't believe that the missionaries I know are lacking in the willingness to be prophetic or take a stand," he says.

Missionaries should teach basic biblical principles on morality, ethics, human rights, the right of the individual, justice and righteousness, he says. And they should encourage individual Baptists to apply those principles as they take part in their own national life.

Missionaries can cite numerous examples where overseas Baptists are doing just that. One missionary says the government in his country welcomes the church as long as it sticks to talking about the Bible, faith, healing, tithing and witnessing. But some pastors have been reported to the police for remarks in the pulpit that strayed from that agenda. Those pastors were called in by the police to listen to tapes of their sermons and explain comments in them.

Parks also points out that the board's neutral political stance has facilitated, rather than hindered, ministry to people in need.

"I think it has enabled us to live above the political strife in a country and to continue to meet human needs on both sides of some very bitter divisions and has enabled us to continue to minister, even when transition has come and some groups have not been allowed to stay," he states.

Parks cites Uganda as an example. When the Tanzanian army chased former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin from the country, Southern Baptists were able to make arrangements for the first planeload of medical aid to enter Uganda. They could do so because two missionary couples had stayed in the country after Amin banned most churches. Staying within the letter of the law, they quietly operated a Bible correspondence school and assured the Ugandan people that they could.

Political neutrality has enabled Southern Baptists to stay in many countries despite changing political climates, but it has not always guaranteed safety. Missionary Archie Dunaway was murdered during guerrilla warfare for Zimbabwe's independence two years before the war's end. Southern Baptists curtailed some ministries during the war, but they stayed there, carrying out spiritual, medical and educational ministries that continue today.

The Foreign Mission Board has clearly drawn the line telling its missionaries not to campaign for or against particular political candidates or parties, but steering clear of all political implications is difficult, if not impossible.

No missionary can work in a foreign country unless the government there grants him visas and work permits. Southern Baptists' growing development ministries require close cooperation with governments. Southern Baptists provide medical and educational personnel to government institutions in many countries.

Although the Foreign Mission Board is increasing its ministries to man's body, it maintains that its primary ministry is still spiritual. Political change will not solve the world's problems.

Clark Scanlon, a board staffer who spent 27 years as a missionary in Latin America, says, "The problem is that any utopian society trips on the inherent evil within persons. Only Jesus Christ can make a new person. The making of a new person in Christ Jesus is the central message the church has to offer to a revolutionary society--or any other society."

Parks acknowledges there are times when just preaching that message can have political implications, but says Southern Baptists must not back down when that is the issue.

A missionary agrees, "I would speak up if the church and basic forms of the church were restricted to where it was impairing the preaching of the gospel. At that point, I couldn't be quiet."

Few missionaries live and work in countries where they enjoy all the rights they would have in their native land. As guests in those countries they may enjoy even fewer rights than the countries' citizens. At the very least, their ministry can be ended by provoking their host.

Says Parks, "I think in some situations the self-restraint of not speaking out has enabled us ultimately to be of greater service and meet more human needs than we might have been able to meet had we simply relieved ourselves of our own frustration by condemning a leader or a particular faction.

In its policy against political involvement, the Foreign Mission Board "is expressing its commitment to established Southern Baptist principles," pointed out Parks. "The validity of this approach appears confirmed in the expanding opportunities to enter new countries, as well as the results seen where service is now being given."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond Bureau of Baptist Press

Bible Conference Launches
California Growth Emphasis

Baptist Press
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ARCATA, Calif. (BP)--In a two-county association where some 90,000 persons have no church affiliation, area Southern Baptists have launched efforts to reach more persons for Christ through Sunday Schools.

More than 200 persons met at Trinity Baptist Church recently for a three-day Bible Conference to begin a growth emphasis scheduled to last six weeks. Simultaneous revivals in many North Coast Baptist Association churches will start Easter as part of the effort.

Association-wide goals for the project call for a 15 percent gain in Sunday School enrollment, weekly visitation by representatives of each teaching unit and a weekly Sunday School attendance of 50 percent of those enrolled. Each church has set individual numerical and prayer goals.

The 19 Southern Baptist churches in Humboldt and Del Norte counties have a combined membership of fewer than 2,000 persons living in an area 50 miles wide and almost 200 miles long. More than half of the pastors are bivocational.

"It is good psychology for our people to get together in a larger group," observed Paul Smith, director of missions for the association. "When we worship, it is usually in groups of 100 or fewer. Most congregations are in the 50s."

Meeting together, despite the great travel distances required by some church members, builds spirit, said Smith. "It shows us that there are more of us than we think."

While it may not sound impressive that one group traveled as far as 50 miles to attend sessions, mountain roads make such a journey lengthy.

"Distance is a barrier to conferences such as this," said Smith. "The roads are extremely curvy. There is one person who takes Dramamine before traveling to any associational meeting."

"I've come to realize the value of bivocational pastors since I've been here," Smith continued. "Because these pastors support themselves, we can have churches where we couldn't have them otherwise. We have many communities that never could support a pastor."

Smith said he feels there is a difference in the impact a bivocational pastor has on the community where he lives. "He has a witness a full-time pastor never could have," he said. "Working alongside others shows them his life from a different perspective."

Baptist Sunday School Board consultants Ralph Murray and Andy Anderson, from Nashville, Tenn., along with Harold Graves, president emeritus of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif., provided Bible study, growth training and inspiration.

"We're hoping to see growth as a result of the conference," Smith said. "It has exposed people to what they ought to be doing. All of it is just plain work. It is easier for us to complain about nobody coming to church than it is to invite them and to provide something when they get there".

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