



The Social Psychology of religion in Puerto Rico: A Commentary

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Background

Social psychology looks at the interaction of people in Puerto Rico and the influence of religion as the core influencer of behavior. Rev. Dr. Samuel Silva Gotay is the foremost scholar in this field, and as such, we have reviewed his written works to get a feel for the meaning of religion of the social psychology of the Puerto Rican people.

Puerto Rico has been a colony since 1492. At first, Spanish and Catholic religious influences emerged with the appointment of Don Alejo de Arizmendi as the Archbishop of the island; since the U.S. invasion in 1898, the United States and the Protestant religion have had an impact on the island (Silva Gotay, 2005).

The early activity of the Church was directed explicitly toward administering sacraments and implicitly in support of the colonial regime of Spain. The dominant policy of the Church was to acknowledge Spain as a generous nation that was helping to improve the lives of the natives on the island (Silva Gotay, 2005). During the 20th century, eight bishops were appointed by Rome to offices in Puerto Rico. All of the bishops appointed to Puerto Rico were American until 1964. The American bishops were clearly supportive of U.S. policies toward Puerto Rico in a manner similar to past practices of bishops supporting the policies of Spain.

Protestantism was virtually non-existent in Puerto Rico. After the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 and the transfer of control over the island from Spanish to American hands, Protestantism began to flourish. Protestant clergy arrived as chaplains with the invading U.S. Army. The Evangelical Churches of the United States soon followed the army. In 1899, the Secretaries of the Boards of the Presbyterian, American Baptist, Congregational, and Methodist-Episcopal churches met and decided to divide the island into four sections for evangelistic purposes. In 1905, the American Baptist, Congregational-Christian, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches created the Federation of Evangelical Churches (Silva Gotay, 2005).

The Pentecostal Church emerged in the 1930s. Silva Gotay (1994) noted that the rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement and the charisma of its mission included psychosocial issues, such as:

- It is a church of the people
- The movement empowered the poor
- Lay people exerted leadership
- Evangelism moved from urban slums to rural areas, thereby generating a sense of hope and

Its functions are more indigenously linked to the island.

Religion became not only the escape from a harsh unempowering reality but a way of regaining hope through

atonement. A simple way of life and poverty is a Christ-like behavior that will bring salvation.

An indigenous sect called "Mita" best exemplifies this idea. The members run neighborhood coops in food stores, restaurants, drug stores, bakeries, furniture stores, credit (banking), and clothing, farming, and musical groups. Mita leaders claim that members of the early Christian church lived together with everything held cooperatively. While the coops themselves are said to operate democratically, higher decisions are made based on the spiritual direction of the Church elders.

Rev. Dr. Samuel Silva Gotay

Dr. Silva Gotay is a native of Ponce, Puerto Rico, and he has been a Baptist since his youth. He is a renowned scholar on the impact of church in the psychosocial development of people. His publications, which include books and refereed articles, exceed 200 in number. As the reader explores this journey of love, he or she may find that it begins with a historical overview of the Catholic and Protestant churches. Then, as the 20th century continues to evolve, more independent church groups and autochthonous sects emerge.

As Dr. Silva Gotay deliberately and effectively studies the role of religion in the social psychology of the people, he uncovers a social psychology of religion. This transformation involves institutional changes that reject the needs of the people, such as the lack of support by the Catholic Church for the abolishment of slavery during the Spanish period, the infusion of teaching of English in Catholic schools during the American period, and also the formation of community-based religious institutions such as the Pentecostal and the Mita.

His accurate perception of a church that was lacking empathy for the community of believers and churchgoers, he delved into a study of liberation theology and its manifestation in the psychological growth of the Puerto Rican people. Most recently, Dr. Silva Gotay has explored sex scandals in the Church, the Diasporas, and the role of the Church in confronting government structures on behalf of the people.

The Church as a place

Dr. Silva Gotay intertwines his personal history in a balanced way with the history of the Protestant Church and its impact of the psychosocial development of Puerto Ricans. He viewed the Protestant Church from his early life as a way of Americanizing Puerto Rican people.

He has:

1. Identified the Church as a place where the people may enhance their self image

Dr. Silva Gotay's writing examines the role of the Protestant church as a place or community of believers and visitors that serves as the center of the self-image of a typical Puerto Rican. The Church is an important part of Puerto Rican history and culture. Silva Gotay (1998) suggests that the Church is at the center of the worldview and the psychosocial context of Puerto Rican people. Finally, he warns the reader that the society and culture and the psychology of its people cannot be analyzed without considering the impact of Protestantism in Puerto Rico during the 20th century (Silva Gotay, 1997).

2. A visionary that through his research and writings the psychosocial impact of religion in community building

He was at the tip of the spear, with others who formed the Puerto Rican ministry and asserted that the Word of God was about community, mercy, caring, and hope. Religion was about the development of strong faith community, serving the poor and unempowered, and bringing all segments of the population, as a community to the arms of the almighty. This message of hope helped identify this nationalistic and populist nature of the community.

The Church began to identify the role of those people interested in the well being of their peers (both Protestants and non-Protestants). The commitment that was needed was that of being a nationalist, a new concept for Puerto Ricans, but not a new concept for people of other faiths (e.g., Judaism). A second vision is a populist definition of the role of the Church. The Church is the place; the place is the people.

3. A social psychologist that identified attachment to place as important in the emergence of the new Puerto Rican

The Protestant movement generated an attachment within a group of people that spoke two languages and

practiced two cultures. Silva Gotay explains the attachment of the people of both worlds by explaining the role of the Protestant Seminary as tool of evangelization and colonization in the Hispanic Caribbean and the Central American republics, places where the "Banana Wars" were taking place.

Given the weakness of the Puerto Rican people in the 19th century, they had difficulty confronting the role of the Catholic Church. The 20th century witnessed the emergence of a strong Protestant leadership that led the people to confront the government.

Attachment to the Church meant having a part in the development of a place with a history, a context, and a role. One could be supported and feel secure and safe. The Church became the conduit to a strong popular sense of religiosity. The Church became the platform to confront corruption, freedom of choice, and, on a more intimate note, issues related to gender.

Summary

This writer asked Dr. Silva Gotay if he was a religious person or a revolutionary. He looked at me with a smile and responded that all he knew about the psychosocial well being of the Puerto Rico was that religion was very impactful and that his role consisted of being one who had been called to speak truth to power. His role was also to mobilize the community to become a "place" with a mandate to represent the poor, unempowered, and destitute by confronting the power structure. It is only through place that a psychosocial persona is created. That place is religion and what it has represented in the development of Puerto Rico. Dr. Silva Gotay is one man who has been able to mobilize a people through the sharing of written word by uncovering the social psychology of religion in Puerto Rico.

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