The Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Guatemala
Amy L. Sherman

This book describes the Protestant revival of recent years in Guatemala, and discusses its implications for economic development. While the analysis is based upon data collected by the author in Guatemala, she clearly believes that the conclusions drawn are applicable at least in other countries of Latin America, and perhaps in other parts of the world as well.

The Protestant revival in Guatemala began in the 1960s, but spread rapidly after the mid-1970s. Sherman attributes the revival to several factors. Dislocations and suffering caused by political violence led Guatemalans to question the sufficiency of traditional beliefs and to search for more meaningful alternatives. The severe earthquake of 1976 also caused great suffering, which seemingly made people more open to the Christian message. The earthquake also brought numerous Christian relief agencies to the country, many of which engaged in evangelism and some of which began long-term ministries. Concurrently, parts of the Bible were translated into indigenous languages so that evangelistic preaching could take place in these languages. As a result of these and other factors, Evangelical Christians now account for an estimated 25%-35% of the Guatemalan population.
An introductory chapter of the book discusses the role of religion in political life and sets forth the methodology of the study. The author notes the reticence of the academic community to consider that culture, much less religious worldview, might significantly affect the economic development process. Part of the problem has been that studies of religion’s effects have usually considered broad categories of nominal religious affiliation. Sherman insists that a distinction can be made between genuine belief and nominal affiliation, and that when this is done religion does show up as an important variable in economic development through its effects on both attitudes and actions.

Part I of the book, entitled “Setting the Context,” consists of three chapters. In the first chapter Sherman surveys the literature on the relationship of culture to economic development. She begins with Max Weber, and works her way up through Gunnar Myrdal, Joseph Schumpeter and his disciples, David McClelland and Tomas Roberto Fillol. She notes that during the 1970s discussions of culture’s influence on development fell out of favor and became politically incorrect. She then discusses the resurgence of cultural analysis during the 1980s through the contributions of authors such as Thomas Sowell and Lawrence Harrison.

In Chapter 2 Sherman narrows the focus from the impact of culture on development to the effect of religion on development, particularly in Latin America. She summarizes explanations given by scholars for the spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America. She identifies eight areas of behavioral change resulting from religious conversion which have positive ramifications for economic development. These are: adopting the Protestant ethic, integrating into the fraternal network or alternative community, curtailing alcohol consumption, investing in family well-being, strengthening marital bonds, pursuing literacy and education, pursuing nonagricultural employment, and increasing exposure to outsiders.

Chapter 3 narrows the focus further to a study of the Cristo-pagan worldview of the Mayan Indians. Sherman handles this subject with sensitivity, acknowledging that there is much to be valued in traditional Mayan culture, and pointing out that its religion is certainly not the only impediment to Guatemalan economic development. In this chapter she draws upon both previous scholarship and her own experiences in Guatemala to analyze the implications of the Cristo-pagan worldview for economic development. She notes that the fatalism and fear which characterize the system inhibit planning and technological development. She explains how adherents to this worldview see the world as a zero-sum system in which one can prosper only at the expense of others. As a result, various customs designed to level income inequalities serve both to deaden incentives and to discourage investment and entrepreneurship.

Part II, entitled “Orthodoxy and Economic Transformation,” consists of two chapters. In the first of these chapters Sherman describes a Worldview and Development survey which she developed and used to gather data from 1,000 rural Guatemalans. In addition to questions probing religious worldview, the survey gathered data on demographic variables, work experience, and educational levels of the respondents and their families. The survey instrument, which is presented in its entirety in an appendix, is detailed and sophisticated in its design.

The actual survey was carried out by a private research firm in Guatemala using interviewers fluent both in Spanish and the indigenous language of the people in the area where they were working. One thousand interviews (two hundred in each of five geographically diverse areas of rural Guatemala) were conducted in June 1993. Data collected from the survey allowed statistical testing of hypothesized relationships, lending credibility to the book’s main theme which could hardly have been established otherwise.
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Sherman did not find a clear connection between religion and economic development until genuine religious belief was distinguished from nominal religious affiliation. After this distinction was made, using adherence to certain doctrinal propositions as the distinguishing factor, she found that “...orthodox Evangelicals consistently outscored members of other religious worldviews on the attitudinal variables most associated with favorable development prospects” (p. 86). These variables included the value placed on education, degree of fatalism, regard shown for women, openness to change, emphasis given to personal initiative, and willingness to accept merit-based outcomes.

The survey results of Chapter 4 are supplemented in Chapter 5 with the results of in-depth interviews of individual Guatemalans. Over a six month period Sherman interviewed in total more than 100 Guatemalans, most of them Evangelical pastors, at six different sites. This field work allowed for probing more deeply into just how religious conversion affected the lives and attitudes of those converted. A frequently-recurring theme was the beneficial effects of sobriety of converts who had previously abused alcohol. Not only was family life transformed, but additional funds were made available for enhanced nutrition, education, or investment.

The next two chapters, in a section entitled “Orthodoxy and Democratic Capitalism,” shift the focus from the effects of Christian orthodoxy on the private lives of adherents to its effects on the economic and political system. In the first of these chapters Sherman finds that, contrary to common perceptions, Evangelical Christians in Guatemala are at least as likely as other groups to vote and otherwise participate in the political process. They support religious liberty and are tolerant of pluralism. Their general respect for the rule of law fosters both economic development and survival of democratic institutions. Sherman concludes that “...it seems likely that the theological and sociological dynamics of the Protestant community will contribute to rather than detract from the growth of a democratic political culture in Guatemala” (p. 146).

In Chapter 7 Sherman addresses the idea of communitarianism in Guatemalan society and Evangelicals’ relation to it. She points out that while Evangelical Christianity rejects both Marxist communitarianism and the communitarianism of Mayan traditionalists, it does provide an alternative communitarianism of its own. However, while providing a level of community support for the individual, this alternative communitarianism is at the same time much more compatible with, and supportive of, the market system than is either of the other two types.

In a concluding chapter, Sherman considers whether the Evangelical revival occurring in Guatemala (and in some other countries) could represent a third reformation, similar to those which occurred in Western Europe at the time of the Protestant Reformation and in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Will the changes be profound and permanent? In her view, this depends largely upon whether orthodox Christians work to transform the existing institutions of society and to create new ones as necessary to sustain the changes.

The Soul of Development is carefully researched and masterfully written. It is an honest work in that Sherman, while making a powerful case, gives full consideration to opposing views and contrary evidence where it exists. Her accounts of conversations and experiences with individual Guatemalans make her subject come alive. They also help to keep the reader focused on the fact that economic development is fundamentally about improving the lot of our fellow human beings. I encourage members of the Association of Christian Economists to be sure that this book is in their institution’s library. Those whose field is economic development will want to own a copy and to recommend it to their students.