David Martin's *Forbidden Revolutions*

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Abstract

This article finds its focus in David Martin's *Forbidden Revolutions: Pentecostalism in Latin America and Catholicism in Eastern Europe*, a short but prescient book published in 1996. In it, David explores the failure of sociology to appreciate forms of religion that transgress Western expectations. Not only does he reveal their importance for the sociological agenda, but underlines their significance both in the lives of countless individuals in Latin America and in the transformations of Eastern Europe in 1989. The final section of the article places the book in a longer trajectory of Martin's publications.

Keywords Catholicism · Eastern Europe · Latin America · Pentecostalism · Religion · Secularization

Introduction

My contribution to this symposium in honour of David Martin will focus on what is probably his shortest book. This was published in 1996 under the title *Forbidden Revolutions: Pentecostalism in Latin America and Catholicism in Eastern Europe* (Martin 1996); it contains three chapters and covers less than 100 (smallish) pages. The contents first saw light of day as the F.D. Maurice lectures given at King's College, London in May 1991 and repeated at St Paul's College, Sydney a year later. In the Preface, David speaks of a series of revisions before publication as a book.

The three chapters can be summarized as follows. The first is primarily conceptual and deals with the idea of the margin, underlining right from the start that being at the margin does not imply impotence. The following chapters are case studies which illustrate this fact: the first examines Pentecostalism in Latin America and the second Catholicism in Eastern Europe, each of which turns out to be a powerful solvent of monopoly power (1996: x). The case studies are brought together by an underlying reflection: why is it that Catholicism has sustained significant losses in Latin America but has outlasted communism in Eastern Europe? As ever in David's thinking, the answer can be found in the detail: times and places matter –

a great deal more, it turns out, than the assumptions of sociological theory.

The paragraphs that follow take the chapters of *Forbidden Revolutions* one by one and stick pretty closely to the text. The article ends, however, with a retrospect that places the book in a longer trajectory of David's writing. At the same time, it reflects on the changing place of religion in the global regions under review. In Latin America, Pentecostalism continues to thrive, noting however the presence of the revolving door – a “mechanism” already foregrounded in *Forbidden Revolutions* (1996: 63). In Eastern Europe, the optimism of the 1990s has given way to something rather different. Most recently, the phenomenon of populism has begun to assert itself – bolstered, it must be said, by somewhat different understandings of Catholicism from those imagined here.¹

The “Forbidden” Revolutions

Chapter 1 of *Forbidden Revolutions* confronts an unresolved issue in the sociology of religion. Why is it that both the phenomenon of religion as such, and the branches of social science that deal with it, are deemed marginal in the modern world? The facts belie this situation. Religion is central to the lives of more than 80% of the world's population (Pew Forum 2012); it follows that it should also be central to the sociological agenda, and all the more so as the social sciences turn increasingly to the global context.

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¹ In re-reading the text, however, I noted the use of the term “populism” in connection with the Polish case (p. 71). It gave me pause for thought.

Western intelligentsia, however, continues to think of religion in two overlapping ways. On the one hand are those who see no future in studying something that is bound to diminish as modernization develops. On the other are a growing number who have been brought up short by recent events – the most obvious being 9/11 – and declare that religion is not only “back”, but necessarily toxic. To say that David was irritated by both assertions is an understatement.

The first option is dealt with at some length in the conceptual exposition set out below. It frames the argument in *Forbidden Revolutions*. The second – though crucially important in itself – is less relevant to the present discussion since by and large it became mainstream after the book was published.² It serves, however, as a reminder that both the F. D. Maurice lectures and the subsequent text belong to the final decade of the twentieth century: that is after the cataclysmic events of 1989 but before 9/11. The timing is important.

The discussion in Chapter 1 finds its focus in the damage that is done when Western assumptions and the theories that underpin them – meaning by this “standard sociology” – are imposed on situations in other parts of the world. Put differently a wholesale embrace of the presuppositions of the European Enlightenment (notably in its French forms) has all too often prevented scholars, not to mention politicians and policy-makers, from acknowledging the continuing presence of religion beyond the West: that is in places where modernization has not resulted in secularization and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. Presence, moreover, is simply the starting point. In *Forbidden Revolutions*, we are directed to the tangible *benefits* of religion in the lives of countless individuals and the communities of which they are part, as both are caught up in rapid and unexpected social change.

Crucial to this process is the break-up in the hegemony of power. Grassroots activity generated by Pentecostal congregations in Latin America and decentred forms of Catholicism in East Europe carve out autonomous spaces in which alternative narratives can establish themselves, nurtured by the signs and symbols of religion. The latter are not only demonstrably powerful, but are available for use at critical moments. A vivid example from my own research is exemplified in the following anecdote. The Jasna Góra monastery in Częstochowa (Poland) has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, but the monastery took on a new significance in the decades leading up to 1989. The painting of the virgin that it houses became an icon of Polish resistance to Soviet domination. Countless Poles came to visit the icon, but the icon was also taken in

procession to the people. So much so that the practice was disallowed by the communist authorities. What followed makes the crucial point: the frame was taken in procession without its icon – an irrefutable illustration of the power of symbol (Davie 2000: 157).

All too often, however, such signs and symbols, not to mention the power that they represent, are invisible to a Western observer. Explaining why is central to David’s account. The answer lies in four false polarities which must be set on one side if we are to move forwards. These are the oppositions of left and right, liberal and fundamentalist, political and apolitical, cultural and structural. Each of them is taken in turn to demonstrate how Western-trained observers not only misinterpret the things that they do see but fail altogether to grasp what really matters. Take, for example, the dichotomy of left and right, very often associated with radical and conservative. But who in Eastern Europe should be described as “radical” in the years approaching 1989 and how should the churches – or smaller groups of believers – be placed along this continuum? Was it not the churches rather than the communist government that merited the descriptor “radical” as they found ways of sustaining an alternative narrative and offered spaces in which to express this? Liberal and fundamentalist are equally distorting if all forms of conservative religion are deemed “fundamentalist”. Pentecostals may well be conservative in their readings of the Bible, but they are quite other in “their essential thrust, which is the free and democratic availability of the gifts of the Spirit” (Martin 1996: 10–1). To misunderstand this is to distort the very essence of the phenomenon that you are trying to explain.

The polarity of political and apolitical will be developed in the case studies that follow, but a word must be said about structure and culture. Central to the argument of *Forbidden Revolutions* is a repudiation of the notion that culture is simply derivative of structure and that only the latter is “the arena of effective power” (1996: 15). From this perspective, confining religion to the realm of culture necessarily deems it marginal – an argument closely linked to “strong” versions of the secularization theory. Not only is secularization linked to marginalization, but it implies in turn privatization and thus inconsequentiality. David turns this argument on its head. In both Latin America and Eastern Europe, the forms of religion under review are indeed relegated to the margin, but it is here that they gain the freedoms to act in innovative and consequential ways. It is hard to discount a religious movement now numbering some 250–300 million people (Pew Forum 2006),³ and no serious observer of the events

² That said, premonitions can be found in *Forbidden Revolutions*. See, for example, a telling aside: “[T]he subjective condition of people with religious faith is irrelevant to the dynamic of real action. The only exception to this appears to be in their capacity to do harm, in which respect they are held to be remarkably potent” (1996: 15–6).

³ The Pew Research Centre regularly updates its material on Pentecostalism, both in Latin America and elsewhere. See <https://www.pewforum.org/topics/pentecostals-and-pentecostalism/> for more information (accessed 15 December 2019).

leading up to the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 can ignore the role of the churches in this process. The details are developed below.

One further point is important: that is to appreciate that neither of the case studies under review should be seen as monolithic. There is as much variety regarding church-state relationships in Eastern/ Central Europe as there is between some of these countries and their Western counterparts. Poland and Ireland, for example, have more in common with each other than either does with the complexities of the German case which, until reunification, lay across the border of the free world. The same diversity can be found in Latin America, offering different opportunities to Pentecostal communities. A great deal turns on the outcomes of the Catholic Church's clash with secular power. In some parts of the continent (Colombia for example) the Church survived intact; in others (Uruguay) it was pretty much defeated and secularism established; in a third group (Brazil and Guatemala), the power of the Church was eroded but no real alternative emerged. It was here that evangelical religion found its place: in the parts of Latin America where "the spiritual premiss remained intact, but the institutional cradle of established religion was cracked and weakened" (1996: 21). Chapter 2 of *Forbidden Revolutions* elaborates this theme.

The Latin American Case

The chapter begins with an overview of Pentecostalism in different parts of the world; in addition to Latin America, its presence is discovered in China, the Pacific rim, South India, parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the European fringes – all of which are different. This is not a case of one size fits all. What does become clear, however, is the importance of modern communications as individuals and groups move across the globe. Pentecostals are well-placed to respond positively to such opportunities.

A sociological section follows, indicating the sources that have aided David's thinking in this field. These include the work of Elie Halévy and Alexis de Tocqueville – the former arguing that conversion to evangelical religion is more likely to lead to peaceful evolution than a revolutionary upheaval, the latter affirming the place of religious congregations in the building up of social capital. Pentecostals illustrate both tendencies, as they seek out spaces in society to call their own. In so doing they inevitably encourage pluralism, as they assert their autonomy distinct from the world around them. David captures this stance in one of his most telling quotes: Pentecostals, he tells us, "bind themselves together on rafts of discipline and hope and, so far as is possible, cut themselves off from the corruption and violence all around them, most evidently in the political sphere" (1996: 12).

An additional point is important: Pentecostal congregations should not be confused with the "base communities" of liberation theology. The two are differently positioned: one is freely located (often on the margins of society) and the other is embedded within the Catholic Church. Even more important than the distinction as such is their relative receptions in Western discourse. For the reasons already mentioned, Pentecostals have received scant attention whilst base communities fit much better into scholarly debates about liberation theology. Empirical detail, however, is lacking in both cases, and would reveal similarities as well as differences. Both groups deal with the poorest in society. Significantly different, however, is an increasingly studied phenomenon: the self-understanding of women in Pentecostal communities. Their evident ability not only to find their own place but to curb their errant husbands is hugely consequential, not least for children in a context where the temptations of the street are manifold.

The comparison between Pentecostalism and the base communities draws in detail on the Latin American case, as does the section that follows on the essence of Pentecostal faith. Once again, a quotation brings this powerfully to life. In seeking to explain why communities of faith are also communities of hope, and why this combination results in a greater capacity to survive, David writes:

... when people seek to rope themselves together on very slippery slopes, maintain disciplines, respect certain priorities, husband the emotional and other capital sunk into their families, and above all have a God-given validation of the value of their own lives and persons, then their life chances are genuinely enhanced. (1996: 44-5)

In short, conversion changes people; it also brings about a sense of agency and self-worth which leads in turn to "betterment" – a word frequently used in this discussion. Self-education, starting with the Bible, is central to the process. The myriad pastors and lay-leaders that direct these activities are themselves brought to life in a series of pen portraits, which reveal temptations as well as advantage. The results are impressive but not everyone stays on the straight and narrow. The range moreover is vast, encompassing countless street preachers and tiny chapels on the one hand all the way to the megachurches on the other. The difference in scale is immense and – unsurprisingly – the larger the enterprise, the more immediate the temptations.

What then can be said about political impact as such? It depends considerably on what is included in the term. Simply creating enclaves that bit by bit turn themselves into something approaching a civil society is itself a political act. Such spaces, moreover, fit variously into the societies of which they are part – as ever the context matters. Broadly speaking, however, withdrawal to the margin provides a means of escape from older

ties, many of which are damaging. The Catholic Church conversely is “tied in”. Crucially, therefore, it is the presence of Pentecostal communities that is fragmenting this inclusive political hegemony, becoming – as indicated in the Introduction – a solvent of monopoly power. Overt or explicit political engagements, in contrast, are relatively rare and limited to the countries noted above where Pentecostalism has made its greatest gains (Brazil and Guatemala). Compromises are inevitable and not all would-be politicians have emerged unscathed. Concerns about corruption are, it seems, well-placed.

That said, the overall impact of Pentecostalism is immense, not least on the Catholic Church as such. The chapter concludes with a brief speculation about the future in both Latin America and beyond.

Catholicism in Eastern Europe

I have read a good deal about Pentecostalism both in Latin America and elsewhere, but it is not a topic that I know first-hand. I do know Central and East Europe and can respond very immediately to David’s account of what happened in the decades preceding 1989.

The story is both similar to and different from the above. It is similar in the sense that it concerns a church or churches banished to the margin which become a privileged space; it is different in the more overtly political scenarios discovered here. In Eastern Europe, the margin was imposed rather than chosen, but became nonetheless not only a conduit for symbolic opposition, but – at the crucial moment – a major channel for revolution.

Central to the East European story is the version of secularization experienced in that part of the world. In Russia in 1917 and much more widely in the 1940s, secularization was imposed across the Warsaw Pact countries, meaning that religion was confined to the private sphere. The degree of severity varied from place to place, but everywhere the communist regime – bolstered by its secular ideology – moved to the centre, effectively replacing the historic churches which suffered, at times grievously. There were, however, unintended consequences: in the decades that followed it was the secular regimes that experienced the corruptions of power; the churches meanwhile claimed the advantages of the margin, becoming amongst other things the guardians of a more authentic memory.

The key pages of this chapter in *Forbidden Revolutions* contextualize this narrative in a more general understanding of secularization. The discussion begins with the four “models” that frame a great deal of David’s work: that is secularization in Latin America, North America, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The process is different in each case. Finer analyses of the Eastern Europe case follow acknowledging the distinction between Central and East

Europe, the rather different religious cultures of Catholicism and Orthodoxy and the wide variety of national identities found within each. Religions, ethnicities and nationalism converge and compete and are particularly dangerous in places where “the tectonic plates of the world religions press into and under each other” (1996: 72). The break-up of the former Yugoslavia is but one example in a part of the world where Islam, Orthodoxy and Catholicism sit side by side, not always peacefully.

These complex, competing and at time explosive elements must be kept in mind if we are to understand both how the revolutions of 1989 came about in each of the countries under review and what might emerge in the future. Two out of the five countries foregrounded in David’s chapter can be taken as examples, neither of which paradoxically is Catholic. The first is the former East Germany – a Central European, Protestant and significantly secular place. It was here, however, that the seriously eroded and closely surveilled Lutheran Church became – despite everything – the meeting place for resistance at the crucial moment. In 1989, nonviolent demonstrators assembled night after night in the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig initially for prayer, meditation and music; gradually swelling in number, they spread out into the surrounding streets and chanting “Wir sind das Volk” (“We are the people”). Surprised at the size of the protest, the security forces backed off. The role of the churches was clearly pivotal but it was short-lived; within a very few years, East Germany had established itself as one of the least religious countries in the world, never mind Europe.

Orthodox Romania offers a different and to an extent more violent scenario. Here a dominant national church – itself infiltrated – had established a *modus vivendi* with the government, largely at the expense of the religious minorities who were located in the northwest of the country. It was among the latter, however, that the revolution found a foothold, its spokesperson being László Tőkés – a Hungarian pastor from the Reformed Church in Timisoara. First attempts at protest ended in the loss of many lives; a day later the tanks retreated leaving the people of Timisoara in charge of the city. The pattern repeated itself in other cities including Bucharest. Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife attempted to escape but were captured and shot on Christmas day. In each place the signs and symbols of Christianity were a central and clearly potent element in the protest despite the compromised status of the Orthodox Church. And unlike the former East Germany, Romania is a country where the religious indices remain high.

The stress on the power of symbols came back to me many years later courtesy of a research proposal that I was asked to review. The project focussed on the place of religion in the lives of older people in Romania, Bulgaria and the UK; it drew on exceptionally rich data derived from extended interviews with individuals born in the 1920s and 30s. In the fullness of time, I was asked to contribute a preface to the monograph that emerged from the project. In it I wrote:

The Orthodox tradition enacts its understandings of faith; in the Western tradition – and more especially in its Protestant articulations – the emphasis lies more on teaching than doing. Despite – or perhaps because of – my familiarity with the latter, I found the first-hand accounts of family celebrations, or of three generations tending the icon lamp as they rose in the morning, extraordinarily vivid. (Davie 2013: xiv)

Invisible to Western observers, these were the habits of a generation that both preceded and outlasted the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. At the crucial moment the reservoir of symbols that these people sustained formed a critical element in an extraordinary, and relatively speaking peaceful, reversal of fortunes. As David puts this: “[t]he marginal took centre stage and reoccupied sacred space for the liminal period that inaugurated change” (1996: 90). Thereafter it retreated from the limelight.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

In the Preface to *Forbidden Revolutions*, David suggests that this book has something of an interim character. Its publication followed his seminal work on secularization (Martin 1978) and his first book-length treatment of Pentecostalism (Martin 1990). What came after was a sustained and creative body of work that developed the themes in *Forbidden Revolutions* in a multiplicity of ways. For which reason I see this book not so much as “interim”, as a stepping stone to new and richer accounts: on the one hand of secularization both in different parts of the world and in an ever-widening range of topics (in architecture, poetry and music for example)⁴; and on the other of Pentecostalism as a major element in global Christianity and – quite simply – as a way of being modern for huge numbers of people in the global south. A notable feature in this trajectory can be found in David’s critical reappraisals of his core themes.

One such can be found in *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Martin 2005). *Forbidden Revolutions* finds its place in the Introduction, underlining once again the crucial point: “that the dominant grand narrative of the Western intelligentsia disallowed both developments” (2005: 1), adding that the apolitical nature of Pentecostal Revolution continues to render it invisible. The pages that follow contain both recapitulations and new material. Chapters 9 on “Secularization: Master narrative or several stories” and 10 on “Pentecostalism: A major narrative of modernity” stand out.

Both topics, moreover, are equally present in *Sociology of Religion: A David Martin Reader* (Wei and Zhong 2015), in which the first chapter of *Forbidden Revolutions* is included in

the section on “Religion and Politics”. I was privileged to write the Foreword to this collection (Davie 2015). In this, I remarked on the less than charitable reception that Martin’s engagement with Pentecostalism had in its early days. Painful though this was, it is not difficult to explain: as already indicated the academy was not ready for a serious discussion of a global shift which, in their terms, was not meant to happen. Their reaction is revealingly illustrated in the following anecdote:

The power of the ruling paradigms came home to me most forcibly on a bus full of Western academics in Guatemala. When told that 66 percent of the population was Catholic they asked no questions about where the rest might be, even though the answer shouted at them from texts on huts in remote El Petén, storehouse churches called “Prince of Peace”, and buses announcing “Jesus is coming”. (Martin 2001: 27)

The real key to understanding the significance of both secularization and Pentecostalism to David’s thinking lies, however, in his autobiography (Martin 2013). Chapter 10 of *The Education of David Martin* covers his early years at the London School of Economics during which the elements of his approach to secularization were taking shape. Key publications included the provocative “Towards eliminating the concept of secularization” (Martin 1965), the rather more empirical *A Sociology of English Religion* (Martin 1967), and the anticipatory “Notes for a general theory of secularization” (Martin 1969). This last fed directly into the *General Theory*. An early-expressed need to make sense of the role of religion in society (2013: 4) was working itself out in an important body of writing. Even more striking are the links between David’s family life and his engagement with Pentecostalism. The parallels are vividly captured in the following sentences: “The moment I saw the Encyclopaedia and the Dictionary next to the Bible in the homes of Latin American Pentecostals I knew where I was. This was my childhood, my father’s house and my mother’s father’s house, but far, far away and much later” (Martin 2013: 6). The point is made in the initial pages of the autobiography—the somewhat unexpected dénouement comes on pp. 209–16 in an account of a single day in Chile in November 1991.

Multiple scholars now work in the field of Pentecostalism. Not all of them agree with David’s interpretations, nor he with theirs (Martin 2017: 171) but few would dispute the scale of the constituency or the importance of the topic. No-one, least of all the Catholic Church, can ignore this phenomenon. Similar attentions are directed to the changes taking place in Europe, not all of which are reassuring. The feelings of euphoria experienced after 1989 could not last as a heady optimism gave way to haggling over property and land. The ferocity of the conflict in the Balkans shocked the world. Here religion, ethnicity and nationalism intersected with extreme

⁴ See in particular Martin (2020).

violence as Catholics in Croatia, Bosnia, and Slovenia, and Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, clashed with Orthodox Serbs and with each other. A new phenomenon is now apparent, provoked at least in part by the high levels of immigration into Europe from the Middle East and Africa – a trend that peaked in 2016. Populist parties, supported more often than not by dominant churches, endorse programmes and policies that are exclusive and excluding: of minorities, of migrants, and above all of Muslims. The combination is not confined to Central and East Europe, but it is particularly prevalent there. The situations in Hungary and Poland, and indeed Russia itself, come to mind as churches, once excluded from power, are now firmly ensconced to the detriment of others. Forsaking the margin, they succumb to the temptations of power – their chosen partners are unattractive.

Like many others I observe what is happening with unease. Most of all, however, I miss the fact that I can no longer pick up the phone and talk through the issues with David, to whom I have turned for wise advice since I was a graduate student at the LSE some 50 years ago.

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