Cultural Missteps: A Primer
Understanding Cultural Factors as a Guide to Latin American Missions
by Bob Young

Introduction

A major factor in evaluating readiness for mission work in another culture is whether one has the ability to work sensitively yet effectively within that other culture. As illustration of the importance of this factor, I mention that one of the first concerns I address in short-term mission training, both for students and for church groups, is the need to develop both willingness and an ability to work in cross-cultural settings. Not only must those who work in a foreign mission field cross cultural barriers, they must also understand that the primary work context is the other culture, and that all that is done will be evaluated and understood in the context of the surrounding culture. The purpose of this essay is to identify some relevant cultural factors and themes in Latin America and to illustrate how they apply to Latin American mission work. I will identify the factors and show their importance by using real examples and applications from my experiences and observations.

"The differences between Latin American and North American ways of life seem minimal; and yet underlying these apparent similarities are many significant contrasts, which from time to time cause serious misunderstanding and tragic failures in comprehension."[1] This statement from Eugene Nida makes clear that the cultural divide we attempt to navigate in foreign mission work is especially treacherous. Nida goes on to point out that the careful student of Latin America sees below the surface of the differences in Latin patterns of life, and discovers very important similarities, for despite the diverse ways in the Latin world there are many shared values that help to explain the essential similarities in outlook and practice. These values have been variously analyzed, but the following is a typical listing: personal dignity, kinship ties, stratification of society, materialism (of a distinct kind), spiritual values, values of the inner state, emotional expression, fatalism, a decent way of life, and opposition to manual labor.[2] Bryson provides a similar list: personal dignity, family cohesion, social hierarchy, spiritual fatalism, propriety and decency in the way of life, and scorn of manual labor.[3] Nida identifies three important themes in Latin American life: authoritarianism and individualism, idealism and realism, machismo and hembrismo. While the challenges of the tension between machismo and hembrismo are real in 21st century Latin America, this essay will treat only the first two themes identified by Nida. These have important applications to mission work in Latin America.

Authoritarianism and Individualism

Nida first identifies a factor he labels authoritarianism and individualism.[4] Authoritarianism stands for the structured control of society from the top or center.

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[1] Eugene A Nida, *Understanding Latin Americans* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974), 3.
[2] Nida, *Understanding*, pp. 8-9, citing Lyman Bryson, Ed. *Social Change in Latin America Today* (New York: Random House, 1960), especially the article by John P. Gillin, "Some Signposts for Policy" , pp. 48ff.
[3] Bryson, *Social Change*.
[4] Nida, *Understanding*, chapter 2, pp. 15ff.

Individualism is the personal reaction and revolt against the status quo, with strong appeals to liberty and a tendency to radicalism in politics and religion. An evidence of this major cultural consideration in Latin America is the patron system. The entire culture has developed around a hierarchical support system in which various persons within this structured society develop relationships of support and dependency. While persons from outside the cultural system, e.g. North Americans, may identify the dynamics of this system as damaging and undesirable, the fact remains that this is a reality in the Latin American culture. When someone threatens my patron, I take that threat very personally. I may have an unhealthy, or even disrespectful, attitude toward my patron, but the cultural norms call for me to come to his defense. Thus, in Latin America, there are always repercussions to actions taken, far beyond what the average North American anticipates. Even when those in the culture recognize that actions taken are justifiable, the values of personal dignity and kinship ties (even in surrogate kinship relationships) will almost inevitably cause difficulties and strife.

Aprovechar

A related cultural factor is described in the Spanish verb "aprovechar." Aprovechar simply means to take advantage of or to work the system for maximum personal benefit. It is expected in the culture that persons will act for maximum advantage. As I consider the preacher training work in which I am involved, we may regret that our students often seem to come with their eyes set on increased levels of support (from the United States) or other benefits that may improve their life situation and standard of living, but we must understand that such is a part of the culture and society. There is perhaps no perfect parallel in the capitalism of the North American culture, but it is certainly true that capitalism also works to provide maximum advancement for the individual.

While some level of authoritarianism is expected in the culture, a problem develops when that authority is imposed from outside (North American influences or decisions) rather than developing naturally within the culture. Thus, while the patron system may expect the development of dependency relationships, the fact that the dependency is on an "other cultural entity" is not desirable. In one sense, we North Americans can never "win." Dependencies develop, but the Latinos will never like, appreciate, or support the dependencies, even though such may be seen as a cultural reality. In such circumstances, the individualism Nida describes will almost always come to the surface. Rebellion against authority, demands for personal dignity, and appeals to liberty with a tendency to radicalism are common reactions. Such circumstances do not call for discipline, but for understanding and for developing healthy relationships within the culture, with an awareness of the unique dynamics involved.

Idealism vs. Realism

The Latin American culture also faces a continuing polarity between idealism and realism, clearly symbolized in the figures of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza.[5] These concepts are most often seen as blended in Latin America rather than in direct competition. Idealism

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[5] Nida, *Understanding*, 36-37.

calls for an expectation of the best when such is possible. The North American presence is blessed or cursed by a constant expectation of idealism, for why would people with unlimited resources not behave always in the best, ideal way. If Latin Americans can be realistic, the expectation is that North Americans be always idealistic. No need described should go unmet, no possibility denied, no blessing foregone. Why would the North Americans not pay prestaciones, even if such are not technically due? It is the right thing to do, and after all, we are brothers. You have likely heard statements such as these.

Conclusion

One can identify and expand many more relevant factors and examples from the typical culture of the Latin Americans. This brief introduction is sufficient to help us identify how typical problems develop. The dynamics and circumstances surrounding specific events are almost always instructive. What happens when a "patron" must be removed from a mission position? What is the most effective and sensitive approach within the culture? Why are those receiving help ungrateful, even rebellious? How should North Americans respond in the face of monetary demands? Why and how might Latin Americans assume ownership of a mission work in view of the factors described above? The answers to these and hosts of other questions must be informed by the cultural disconnects and dynamics identified in this paper. If we do not understand cultural distinctives, we run the risk of seeing every opponent and every opposition as mere troublemaking.

The purpose of this paper is to increase our awareness of the identified dynamics and to begin a process of communication to determine how we can avoid cultural missteps. Within the Latin American culture, there are no easy answers to some of the challenges before us, but a first step is to seek continual growth in understanding of the relevant factors and to seek ways to integrate the work we do with the cultural understandings in the context where we work.