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ARTÍCULO III

What were the cultural and religious effects generated in Neogranadian society as a result of British intervention during the independence period?

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Abstract

Religious diversity in Colombia has been gaining strength and influence in social, cultural, educational, and political sectors. However, this surge has sparked a struggle that dates back to the war of independence. With the British support provided during this period, various religious movements emerged within the territory. Many

soldiers of the British Legion were Presbyterian, but there were also Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, or Protestants. This contribution investigates the cultural and religious effects at a cultural level, considering Colombia's strong connection to Catholic hegemony.

Keywords:

Religion, Colombia, Protestantism, Liberal Republic, Protestant Missions

Introduction:

Historically, Colombia has been characterized by a strong inclination towards conservative currents heavily influenced by Catholic hegemony since 1492. The arrival of the first Spanish missions marked the beginning of a significant religious influence, leading to the systematic destruction of indigenous sanctuaries and idols, intensifying the war of images (Gruzinski, 2003). The Franciscans played a crucial role in the evangelization campaign that began in 1525, aiming to establish a new religious dominance in America and eradicate perceived "paganism" (Gruzinski, 2003).

Despite shifts in Spain's internal dynamics and its loss of territories in America, the Catholic Church maintained a considerable influence on political power in Colombia during and after the war of independence (López, 2011). The post-independence period saw political confrontations between federalists and centralists, with religious dynamics becoming intertwined. Federalists advocated for a church-independent state, fostering religious freedom, while centralists sought a direct relationship with the Holy See, reinforcing Catholicism as the only religion in Colombia to exert

influence in political, cultural, and academic realms.

Religious evolution in Colombia has been ongoing since the Spanish



conquest, where Catholicism was initially dominant. Gruzinski (2003) notes the challenges faced by early evangelizers in distinguishing between God, the Virgin Mary, and their images. Protestantism gained prominence in Colombia, challenging the Catholic hegemony, with the consolidation of Protestantism officially occurring in 1950 after facing significant obstacles from the Catholic Church.

The introduction of British legions in 1818, initially aimed at strengthening military power for independence, indirectly facilitated the growth of religious diversity. Treaties signed with other nations further protected the religious rights of foreign traders and merchants, laying the foundation for the establishment of new religious currents. This adaptation to changes in religious and social perceptions led to a division in the country, prompting constant changes in the constitutional framework (Figueroa, 2009).

The expansion of religious offerings in Colombia suggests that Colombian society began a process of strengthening free conscience and respect for differences, which in modern societies can be interpreted as a secularizing process (Figueroa, 2009). It is essential to highlight how the presence of British soldiers and traders would later lead to attempts to form Bible Societies in the country, initially supported by the government of Santander and various Masonic lodges present in Colombia at that time. Additionally, these projects received backing from the liberal currents of the era. This support led to the emergence of the first Baptist churches between 1845 and 1856, marking a deeper development of Protestantism in Colombia. The arrival of Reverend Henry Barrington Pratt, sent with the purpose of establishing a Protestant church in Colombia, initiated Presbyterian work linked especially to educational projects through American schools (Moreno Palacios, 2010, p.17).

However, the consolidation of Protestantism faced challenges not only

from Catholic opposition but also from the significant political instability in the second half of the 19th century after achieving independence. This period saw frequent reconfigurations and restructuring within both the religious and political spheres due to the internal deterioration experienced by Spain and its territories during the 18th century (López, 2011).

While Protestant foundations were laid in the 19th century, it was not until the first half of the 20th century that Protestantism took firm root in Colombia. Despite limited social growth, it had a social impact, supported by the arrival of numerous missions and the establishment of churches. This work aims to present the role Protestantism has played in Colombia within the religious field and its broader impact on social, political, and economic aspects. The question, "What were the cultural and religious effects generated in Colombian society as a result of British intervention during the independence period?" allows for an analysis of the development of Protestant ideas in 19th-century Colombian society and their current repercussions in the 20th century, creating social and political impacts influenced by religion.

First Protestant Currents in Colombia

The Colombian War of Independence, occurring between 1810 and 1819, aimed to achieve the territorial emancipation of the then-known Viceroyalty of New Granada. Led initially by Camilo Torres and Antonio Nariño, this extensive process witnessed a significant division among citizens—those loyal to the Spanish monarchy and those promoting independence. By 1811, the provinces of New Granada had grouped and proclaimed themselves an independent state, yet five years later, troops loyal to Fernando VII regained control through a brutal regime led by "the pacifier" Pablo Morillo, completing the new reconquest of New Granada (Becerra, 2009, p.1).

The decisive battle in 1819 ultimately consolidated independence, ending Spanish colonialism and establishing the occupied territory of New Granada as the Great Colombia, as defined by the 1821 political constitution. This achievement was made possible by the support of the British Legions. Following the advice of British Colonel James Rook, Bolívar sent Luis



López Méndez and José María del Real to England to secure military support.

López Méndez, in exile in England, recruited volunteers through diplomatic and propaganda means, offering economic remuneration, land, and military ranks to those willing to fight alongside Bolívar. The British government, while officially declaring neutrality to safeguard its commercial interests, supported and provided officiality to the recruitment points established by López Méndez. According to Colonel Guillermo Plazas Olarte, a total of 5,808 foreign soldiers arrived in Colombian territories between 1817 and 1819 (Gómez Jaramillo, 2017).

The presence of the British Legion in Colombia in the 19th century introduced the country to new religious currents, as many of the contributing soldiers were Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, or Protestant. While their primary goal was militaristic, this historical juncture laid the groundwork for cultural, social, and religious transformations in the country.

With the end of the war, many legion members returned to their country, while others remained in Colombia. Colonel James R. Fraser, who later became Minister of War and Director of the Polytechnic School of Bogotá, played a crucial role in initiating attempts to form Bible Societies in the country. His influence led to a letter sent to the Scottish Church, requesting the sending of missionaries to Colombia. However, due to a lack of funds and personnel, the Scottish Church forwarded the letter to the Presbyterian Church in the United States, resulting in the dispatch of the first Protestant missions to Colombia. Among these missionaries was the pioneer of Colombian Protestantism, Henry Barrington Pratt (Sanín, 2019, p.42).

On March 8, 1856, Henry Barrington Pratt arrived in Santa Marta, sent

by the Foreign Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Initially intended for missionary work in West Africa, Pratt was redirected to Colombia due to a request from James Fraser, a member of the British Legion residing in the country. With Pratt's arrival, Protestantism began to establish itself in Colombia. The Protestant

vision aligned with the liberal reforms of the first half of the 19th century, aiming to separate church and state. By 1865, some Colombians began attending Protestant services. Between 1867 and 1877, Reverend Pratt translated the Book of Psalms into Spanish, laying the foundations for translating the Bible into Spanish.

The establishment of Protestantism faced societal resistance, as there was no freedom to practice Protestantism openly. Those who did were often excluded as "strange" individuals. Concepts of religious plurality were far from being established in Colombian society during this period. Nevertheless, the development of Protestantism gained momentum in the country due to the presence of foreign soldiers, introducing new religious currents. This prompted discussions about religious tolerance and freedom, leading to a constitutional clash. While the constitution of 1832 had no articles opposing the practice of other religions, it also lacked legal backing explicitly permitting it (Cortés, 2017, p.49).

Foreign and Trade Policy as a Protestant Tool

However, with the end of the war, the increase in commercial activities and the redirection of foreign policy led to the possibility for individuals to practice their faith openly. Yet, more than ensuring freedom of worship, the Colombian government and society aimed to establish commercial ties and promote migration to boost the nation's population and wealth. This, in turn, would strengthen sectors contributing to the economic, agricultural, industrial, scientific, and artistic development. Consequently, various treaties and diplomatic mechanisms were initiated to foster trade



liberalization, providing support and guarantees for foreign traders to practice their faith in Colombian territory without hindrance. This is evident in treaties such as the 1825 Treaty with Great Britain, which emphasized the need to guarantee and respect the right to worship for British residents in the national territory. The treaty stipulated that such worship could take place in chapels, private spaces, or designated places for religious activities. Another example is the Treaty of Friendship, Navigation, and Trade between Colombia and the Netherlands signed in 1829. Article 15 explicitly stated:

"The subjects of His Majesty the King of the Netherlands, residing in the territory of Colombia, even if they do not profess the Catholic religion, shall enjoy the most perfect and entire security of conscience without being exposed to be troubled, disturbed, or disturbed on account of their religious belief, nor in the exercises proper to their religion, provided they perform them in private houses and with the due decorum for divine worship, respecting the laws, customs, and established practices for this purpose."

On the other hand, the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty signed with the United States in 1846 explained in Article 14: "Likewise, the citizens of the United States will enjoy in the territory of the Republic of New Granada perfect and unlimited freedom of conscience and will exercise their religion publicly or privately in their own homes or in chapels or places of prayer designated for that purpose, in accordance with the laws, usages, and customs of the Republic of New Granada."

Due to the wars of independence, a significant economic crisis affected the country. However, it accelerated the early international processes with Colombia. The signing of these treaties aimed to bring a sense of modernity to the emerging republic. Additionally, through the emerging mercantile relationships, themes such as cultural diversity and the exchange of ideas gained momentum in the Americas. With the signing of these treaties, both parties sought to promote and protect their interests directly or indirectly, fostering various cultural changes.

The formation of the first republic aligned with a liberal vision on commercial matters gained traction. The opening of internal markets was intended to stimulate economic activity geared towards external markets, encouraging the export of products such as cotton, tobacco, and indigo.

This new trade openness went hand in hand with religious issues. Blanco (2007) argues: "Throughout the constitutional period, policies such as protection of religion and the expansion of episcopal seats, reduction of holidays, and promotion of missions in Guajira, Casanare, and Mocoa were implemented. A broad program of public instruction was undertaken, lazarets were reorganized, new routes facilitating trade

were opened, and the import trade, as well as industry, was expanded."

Although demonstrations of religious beliefs other than Catholicism were not allowed during this period, foreign soldiers and merchants soon began engaging in activities such as promoting Protestant propaganda through various translations of the Bible into the vernacular of the time. These actions would propel Protestantism in 19th-century Colombia. It is noteworthy that this development occurred within the context of a foreign policy approach that aimed to liberalize the economy, promote migration, and engage in trade with predominantly non-Catholic countries. Cortés (2017) asserts: "The law did not establish religious tolerance because it existed from the origin of the republic with public treaties, which were 'more respected laws,' such as the one celebrated with the United States in 1824. This treaty established that citizens of both countries would enjoy freedom of conscience in the other without being bothered by it."

Or the one celebrated with Great Britain in 1825, which allowed British residents in the country to have 'security of conscience' without being bothered by it."

Likewise, this set of treaties, laws, and activities would later lead to new immigration laws. In contrast to the exceptions made in the aforementioned treaties, these guaranteed freedom of worship for foreigners, either publicly



or privately. This was supported by the decree signed on September 10, 1847, which granted migrants "from their arrival in the country, full and absolute freedom of conscience, being able to exercise religious worship" publicly or privately, without causing them the "least annoyance or disturbance" (Cortés Guerrero, 2017, p.56).

First Steps towards the Colombian Bible Society

Additionally, the arrival of Pastor James Thompson in 1825, also known as Diego Thompson, added to this narrative. He was a Scottish Baptist pastor and a key promoter of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Thompson, originally from Ecuador, aimed to establish and strengthen the first Colombian Bible Society. According to Moreno Palacios (2010), this society was:

"A proposal of Protestant origin in England and the United States, which was part of missionary efforts that churches in these countries made for the proclamation of the Gospel during the late 18th century. The goal was to spread the reading of the Bible as promoted in Germany, the Netherlands, and England after the pietistic revival." (p.41)

Concerning the establishment of the Colombian Bible Society, the objective was to support traders and missionaries who were beginning to promote Bible translations in the vernacular of 19th-century Colombia. This aimed to disseminate a distinctly Protestant teaching that sought to generate a great revival, akin to what had already occurred in Germany, the Netherlands, and England, and to evangelize and propagate the Protestant message. (Ojeda, 2026).

After various meetings between Pastor Thompson and different men from the elite of that time, the official opening of the Colombian Bible Society was successfully realized on April 4, 1825. As Thompson (1827) asserted in his book "Letters on the Moral and Religious State of

South America," the society's main objectives were:

"To facilitate for all Colombians the reading of the divine Word, in their own mother tongue, based on approved versions, such as that of Father Scio, or the celebrated Torres Amat, recently published in Madrid with all the necessary licenses; and this objective will be achieved without infringing in any way the articles of the Council of Trent." (p. 263)

With the rise of the Bible Society and the promotion of its ideals, attacks began from ecclesiastical authorities demanding that translations should be done only by Catholic authors. This undoubtedly led to the dissolution of the Colombian Bible Society, as Diego Thomson's proposed Bible clearly did not meet these criteria. Added to this, top Catholic authorities, such as bishops and popes, condemned all Bible societies worldwide, claiming they were against traditions.

However, despite the Society being in the midst of a crisis, it received support from Francisco de Paula Santander. The educational and

teaching foundation promoted by the Bible Society was based on the Lancasterian education model, which encouraged the development of the logic of freedom. It was a model for everyone, ensuring comprehensive coverage for the entire school population and creating strategies for children who, due to displacement and poverty, could not access education. Echeverry (2010) states:

"One of the first expressions of republican freedom was the educational coexistence of children of different colors and varying degrees of wealth. It can be said that the monitorial method made an adjustment in the diagram of social relations within the school. Position in the classroom would no longer be determined by color or wealth but by individual capabilities in relation to the topics taught." (p.110)

This sought to promote competition among students to achieve their own



goals, aiming to guarantee the rights of children. For this reason, **Santander** supported Thomson because he was a key representative of the Royal Lancasterian Society of London and a promoter of this model based on a Lutheran conception of education guided by the Scriptures. This, in turn, caught the attention of Bolívar himself, who contacted teachers and even Joseph Lancaster, the creator of the Lancasterian method, offering him \$20,000 to strengthen the educational system. A fundamental pillar of this method was reading the Bible, an act prohibited for Catholics. Although the educational model did not intend to exclude religion from the core of teaching, it did diminish the power that Catholicism exerted over educational processes in the country. However, the reality was that Catholicism was in decline, prompting the search for various alternatives to breathe new life into education, this time with a more secular focus.

For Diego Thomson, one of the promoters of this system in Latin America, education was like a path leading to progress and civilization. There was a global conception based on the idea that the international division of labor would provide economic prosperity for everyone. (Moreno, 2010, p.38)

Hence, different Colombian bishops prohibited the promotion of Bible reading, stating that neither the people nor the teachers were capable of understanding the Bible. They promoted the use of catechisms, such as

Father Gaspar Astete's, as the conventional method of teaching. However, opinions were divided at that time. While some supported the Catholic position, others advocated and promoted Bible reading. Nevertheless, the Catholic stance persisted, categorizing the Bible Society and Protestants as sects promoting obscure teaching through vulgar language. The significant financial instability and the various political crises that Colombia went through in 1828 led to the failure of the first attempt of the Bible Society in Colombia in 1934, where it dissolved.

New Nation, Great Challenges

The attainment of independence in Colombia heralded new societal changes. Consequently, the project known as Gran Colombia was initiated, marking the formation and consolidation of new republics in the Americas. The government found itself grappling with a novel institutional order, characterized by centralizing tendencies that, as Moreno (2010) underscores, posed various challenges. Citing David Bushnell, Moreno notes:

"The need for qualified personnel to assume new positions due to the absence of colonial officials and the high degree of political centralization assumed by the Congress from Cúcuta made both Venezuelans and Ecuadorians feel excluded, with limited participation, complicating the functioning of the Executive." (p.35) Therefore, the primary challenge facing the new government was to create mechanisms of citizen participation accessible to an ignorant and uneducated population. Amidst this struggle, a fundamental project emerged—the establishment of an educational system to address the prevailing lack of education. Initially managed by the Catholic Church, Francisco de Paula Santander proposed a new roadmap before the Congress in 1826. His proposal demanded, at a minimum, a school in each parish, a grammar school in each canton, a college in each province, and a university in each department. However, Lancasterian learning methods, approved by the Congress of Cúcuta, proved to be the most successful in that period. Moreno Palacios (2010) affirms:

"One of the projects implemented to achieve this goal was the creation and promotion of an educational system alternative to that managed by the Catholic Church. This new project aimed to disseminate the rudiments of knowledge, without which a nation could not achieve development comparable to the enlightened world. Santander published a curriculum in 1826, and the Congress in the same year passed laws mandating the construction of a school in each parish, a grammar school in each canton, a



college in each province, and a university in each department." (p.36) Due to these reasons, Lucas Matthews failed in his attempt to revive the Society. Although Santander had supported and promoted society for its educational model, in 1835, he decided to withdraw his support. This decision followed the Vatican's recognition of the Republic of Colombia as a state. However, "this tension was a constant of the Catholic Church not only in Colombia but also in several countries in Latin America, such as Mexico, Peru, and Brazil" (Moreno, 2010, p.39). By 1837, attempts to reestablish the Bible Society failed due to the opposition of Archbishop Manuel José Mosquera, a prominent opponent of Protestant currents and the teaching of the Bible in Colombia. Despite the society's initial failure, it contributed to the strengthening of multiculturalism in Latin America, succeeding in other emerging nations even if it faltered in Colombia.

The impetus behind Colombia's new international relations as a nascent nation, which began through various commercial and diplomatic activities, initially sought to completely disassociate from the Spanish-imposed structure on society. However, it also aimed to introduce an air of religious tolerance, an idea that gained traction with the arrival of José Hilario López to the presidency in 1853. The liberal period he ushered in promoted a more sovereign environment across various social domains. This, in turn, facilitated the establishment of religious pluralism. Consequently, Protestants sought to reintroduce their ideas into Colombian society.

This was exemplified by Ramón Montsalvatge, who, upon arriving in Cartagena, began evangelizing and distributing Bibles with the support of the American Bible Society. By 1855, Montsalvatge initiated his ministry in Cartagena. Despite initial success, he faced opposition from the Catholic Church, accusing him of attempting to de-Catholicize the population and attacking the Eucharist. Catholic attacks persisted, leading Montsalvatge to

return to New York, concluding his ministry in Colombia.

However, a year later, in 1856, after multiple attempts to consolidate Protestantism in Colombia, Reverend Henry Barrington Pratt arrived. Having trained as a pastor at Princeton Theological Seminary, he chose to commence his ministry in Colombia, specifically

in Bogotá. Pratt established a preaching center that, over time, became the first organized evangelical church in the country. Leveraging the guarantees that liberalism provided to Protestants, Pratt, a proficient Bible scholar, created his own version known as the Modern Version. While the government did not oppose him, Catholic priests vehemently opposed Pratt and his Protestant ideals.

The Protestant diffusion in Colombia during the 19th century was primarily linked to minority sectors, more connected with missionaries and reverends on social and political grounds than religious decisions. Initially promoted mostly by liberals who were interested in opposing the Catholic Church rather than converting to Protestantism, the Latin American evangelical movement was considered a failure compared to the cases of Mexico and Brazil. Figures of membership and the establishment of temples proved challenging to consolidate. Moreover, these activities were mainly confined to Bogotá, as noted by Moreno Palacios (2010).

In Bogotá, since 1856, the first explicitly religious meetings were held, specifically targeting English expatriates residing in the city for economic reasons. In June of that year, the first worship service in Colombia was conducted in English at the Dickson Hotel, attended by ten foreigners and two Colombians.

As a result, the liberal journalism of the time began disseminating the sermons preached by Reverend Pratt in these gatherings. This was done to counteract the growing influence of the Catholic Church in the country and simultaneously question the church's involvement in political matters. This technique inadvertently facilitated the growth of Protestantism through propaganda. However, it proved counterproductive, as proselytizing Protestant practices carried high risks. Consequently, evangelical activities focused solely on social



sectors associated with missionaries.

By 1857, the British and Foreign Bible Society started printing editions of the New Testament. Reverend Pratt, with the assistance of Duffield, sold and distributed around 7,000 copies of Protestant Bibles that year. This led the Catholic Church, represented by the archbishop, to prohibit the use of these Bibles and even threaten excommunication for those who read or promoted them. Sanín (2019) notes:

"Meanwhile, in Barranquilla, 6,000 people had broken ties with the Catholic Church and asked Rev. Montsalvatge to establish a Protestant church for them in the city. But Montsalvatge's work commitments with schools in Cartagena prevented him from going to Barranquilla. There were also calls from other towns in the Costa area." (p.48)

Fueled by these events, Pratt explored potential future areas of action, focusing on Medellín, Socorro, Cúcuta, and Bucaramanga. He considered these provinces to be regions of free opinion. In 1858, Pratt met the former minister Paredes, who, along with his family, operated two private schools in Bucaramanga. Despite constant attacks by the bishop of Pamplona due to their strong Protestant beliefs, both schools continued to function. This year also saw the enactment of a new constitution, mainly by conservative congressmen. Nevertheless, they supported social rights and religious freedom, as reflected in Articles 11 and 56:

Art. 11. The government of the States is forbidden: 3rd. To intervene in religious matters.

Art. 56. The Confederation recognizes all inhabitants and passersby. 10th. The free, public, or private practice of any religion; but the exercise of acts disturbing public peace or deemed punishable by pre-existing laws shall not be allowed.

Conclusions

Summarizing the presented information, while the foundations of Protestantism in 19th-century Colombia were established following a historical event like the War of Independence, this religious movement encountered various difficulties, challenges, and obstacles.

These factors at different times hindered its progress, such as the political instability the country faced throughout this period due to conflicts between

centralists and federalists. This led to multiple changes in the constitutional framework, creating and discarding laws according to the ruling government, contributing to internal conflicts like the numerous civil wars that unfolded during the 19th century, some of which persist to this day. Moreover, societal resistance to change or new ideas and significant cultural differences made it challenging for Protestantism to gain full acceptance in the country. This difficulty was exacerbated by the struggle to promote Protestant ideas in a conservatively oriented country supported by Catholicism. The latter, being not just the official religion but also conducting various anti-Protestant campaigns, held significant power and influence over politics and decision-making. Despite these challenges, Protestantism gained substantial ground, facilitated not only by the influx of foreigners into the country driven by the war but also by the premature internationalization initiated through diplomatic relations. These efforts aimed at securing commercial treaties played a crucial role in promoting this new religious movement.

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