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Review by Michael Cangemi, Binghamton University

In her 1992 essay “Transnational Activity, International Society and World Politics,” the political scientist M.J. Peterson noted that “A sound understanding of world politics depends on understanding the different types of societal actors operating transnationally, the various relations that can exist between them and states, and the sorts of tactics they adopt in their efforts to influence states.”¹ Peterson’s observation encapsulates succinctly one of the most significant trends within diplomatic historiography during the last twenty years: a greater focus on how non-state and transnational actors influence interstate relations. This development has facilitated diplomatic historians’ consideration of how commerce and trade, popular culture, science, and sports, among any number of other phenomena, have shaped U.S. foreign relations.² Lauren Frances Turek’s exemplary “To Support a ‘Brother in Christ’: Evangelical Groups and U.S.-Guatemalan Relations during the Ríos Montt Regime” adds to this literature by examining arguably the most transnational of all forces – religion. By explaining how evangelical Protestants in Guatemala and the United


States influenced both countries’ bilateral relations in the early 1980s, Turek’s article is a welcome addition to recent studies on Latin American Protestantism and religion’s effect on U.S. foreign policy formation.3

Two overarching arguments are evident throughout the article. First, Turek contends, “connections between evangelicals in the United States and Guatemala influenced U.S. relations with the Ríos Montt regime and the response of the Guatemalan government to U.S. politics” (691). Turek supports this claim by providing a detailed account of how U.S.-based evangelical groups and missioners flooded Guatemala after a massive earthquake devastated the country in 1976. What followed was a fundamental transformation of Guatemala’s spiritual demography; by 1982, one of every four Guatemalans claimed membership in an evangelical church. (695) José Efraín Ríos Montt was among them, having converted from Catholicism to Pentecostalism through missioners from California’s El Verbo church. After Ríos Montt assumed the presidency in March 1982, evangelical organizations like El Verbo and evangelical leaders Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell utilized their political contacts in the United States and Guatemala in an attempt to strengthen the countries’ diplomatic ties and to secure U.S. military aid for the Ríos Montt government’s violent suppression campaigns against the country’s indigenous population.

Why did U.S. evangelicals invest in Ríos Montt? Turek’s second argument provides some insight. Turek writes, “When Ríos Montt adopted the distinctive language and leadership style of their particular form of apocalyptic American Christianity, U.S. evangelicals thought they had found…the personification of their most deeply cherished objectives” (719). In short, Ríos Montt’s millenarian rhetoric, steadfast reliance on El Verbo members within his cabinet (which ranked other junta members), and fervent anticommunism allowed Robertson, Falwell, and other U.S. evangelicals to believe that Ríos Montt was effectively one of their own.4 Evangelicals in the U.S. “marshaled supporters and funds” for Ríos Montt from the business and private sectors, and urged evangelical American citizens to urge their elected officials to lift U.S. government sanctions against military assistance to Guatemala. While U.S. evangelicals and neoconservatives alike championed Ríos Montt to the Reagan administration, however, Congressional and public opposition to the Guatemalan government’s persistent human rights violations forced the administration to keep Ríos Montt at arm’s length.

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4 One example of Ríos Montt’s millenarianism is his call for a “Nueva Guatemala,” in which a new country would arise after exterminating subversion within the country. See Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57-65. Ríos Montt was committed enough to this vision that state letterhead briefly included “La Nueva Guatemala.”
To substantiate her arguments, Turek utilizes an impressive array of primary sources, including U.S. Embassy cables from Guatemala and a number of evangelical periodicals and El Verbo publications. They work together to accentuate Ríos Montt’s different personae. What emerges is a depiction of Ríos Montt in which he was simultaneously the standard bearer for U.S. evangelicalism in Central America and a potentially valuable, albeit unpalatable, ally against Communist incursion. Turek’s sources give depth to why Ríos Montt considered himself a “brother in Christ,” and why this alarmed U.S. officials.

While Turek’s article is comprehensive, two of her points would have benefited from deeper interrogation. First, although Protestantism grew wildly in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake, further analysis of how the Guatemalan government’s historically adversarial relationship with the Catholic Church facilitated this growth would have better contextualized the role of religion in modern Guatemala. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Guatemalan government consistently diminished Catholicism’s political and social influence. The result, as the religious historian Emelio Betances has argued, was a small, weak Catholic Church susceptible to competing sects.5 This tension helped create Guatemala’s marketplace of Christianity, and in turn helped evangelical Protestantism flourish beginning in the 1970s.

The second is Turek’s statement that Ríos Montt and other evangelical leaders repeatedly claimed that Guatemala’s insurgents, and not the military, were responsible for the country’s astounding number of human rights abuses. Here, Turek writes “Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Reagan seemed to take the general at his word…” (711) This is accurate and correct. However, the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City had routinely qualified reports of the country’s violence and atrocities with a disclaimer that it was impossible to know definitively who was responsible, and had done so for several years before President Ronald Reagan took office.6 What accounts for the administration’s willingness to take Ríos Montt at his word when diplomatic officials had, to that point, been reluctant to assign definitive culpability? Additional interrogation of this point has the potential to yield fruitful results.

These points notwithstanding, Turek’s article is a noteworthy addition to scholarship on U.S.-Guatemalan relations and Latin American Protestantism. Her detailed analysis, rich wellspring of sources, and compelling arguments make this article an engaging and worthwhile read for U.S.-Latin American relations specialists and non-specialists alike.

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