

# The Two Faces of the Americas: A Theoretical Interpretation of the Influence of Theology in the Societal Development of American Countries

Nestor Vilchez, University of Southern Mississippi  
and South Florida Bible College & Theological Seminary

## Abstract

Mainstream sociological theory and development studies have long marginalized spirituality as a variable in explaining societal development, and inter-denominational Christian discourse has similarly overlooked the role of individual spiritual practice in the social construction of reality. This article addresses that gap by examining how individual spiritual practice, particularly patterns of obedience and disobedience to biblical commandments, may inform divergent sociological outcomes observed between Latin America and the United States of America. Drawing on classical sociological concepts, the study analyzes biblical intersections with hedonism, asceticism, orthodox worship, and iconodulism, using the tension between pursuit of pleasure and self-denial as primary analytical lenses. Through this comparative framework, the article argues that the distinct social realities characterizing Latin America and the United States are not reducible to political economy or secular development paradigms alone, but may be meaningfully traced to patterns of individual spiritual practice. A new theoretical framework grounded in biblical intersections is proposed to advance sociological inquiry into the relationship between religious behavior, cultural formation, and societal development in Latin America and the United States.

**Keywords:** spiritual practice, societal development, social construction of reality, asceticism, Roman Catholic theology, hedonism, iconodulism.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that the Americas are distinct in terms of societal development. Defining and measuring societal development has been a matter of discussion due to its ties with socio-political worldviews and other ideological implications. However, the fact that through empirical observation and any observations in general, any layperson can describe two

very different societal realities in the north<sup>1</sup> and the south<sup>2</sup> is indisputable. While the realm of development studies has marginalized theological analysis, this article aims to show how Roman Catholic theology led to unorthodox worship, which opened the door to embracing the hedonism that impeded Latin American social progress. On the other hand, North Americans nurtured an ascetic culture developed on biblical values.

This article will compare the economic social realities of the north and the south from a theological and spiritual perspective to complement sociological and anthropological studies on societal development. The approach is intended to broach the discussion about how Latin American societies were taught the message of salvation, and how the content, methods, and practical application of such teachings rendered different results in terms of societal development.

This article argues that one factor that has impacted development, and which has been overlooked, is the disobedience of orthodox spiritual practices that has produced a spirit of independence and disconnect from the God who prospers. Therefore, spiritual limitations due to individual practices derived from Roman Catholic theology have negatively impacted Latin America. Interestingly, the impact of Christian theology in the north has not had the same constrictive influence, and in contrast, has produced very different practices and societal results.

Historically speaking, research literature and various multilateral organization reports favor this theory in that, despite the efforts that Latin American societies have made to overcome their societal challenges, there is not one that has reached the prolific development of the United States. Latin America has demonstrated a sharp trend toward political and societal instability which has been measured through diverse indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI).<sup>3</sup>

Pointing out societal development indicators in the evolution of Roman Catholic theology regarding iconodulism in Latin America will be the first sub-problem in this article. The discussion argues that the use of icons is an exemplification that points to the cultivation of an individual spiritual practice that veered away from biblical tenets. This veering is also believed to have produced the adoption of a worldview in pursuit of certain forms of individual realizations that impacted societal development outcomes in Latin America. The impact of theology in the United States where a different worldview was adopted will then be the second sub-problem addressed. Scriptural mandates for faithful Christian practice in the U.S. fostered orthodoxy in worship and ultimately prospered the nation. This article argues that the adoption of this different worldview in the United States based on the observance of biblical tenets generated a different social reality. A linkage between individual spiritual practice and societal

development in the north and the south will thus be established through theory developed by the intersection of sociology and Christianity, explaining how societies that are motivated by and embrace more hedonic or Nietzscheist worldviews are deprived of societal development, while those fostering an ascetic worldview in their individual spiritual practice are more progressive in terms of societal development (Zhang 2024:177).

### **Societal Development in Latin America as Impacted by Roman Catholic Theology**

Societal development in Latin America can be observed from various angles. As societies are built on the basis of interaction of their members, it becomes relevant to this study to provide a theoretical interpretation that opens the discussion about the relationship between spirituality as a direct modeler of individual beliefs and forms of interaction, and the process by which such spirituality was internalized in the identity of Latin Americans (Berger and Luckmann 1966:131).

Most societal development indicators, as reported by multilateral organizations, showcase a deprived social reality that contrasts with its vast territory and natural resources. The United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) reports that 11.2% of Latin Americans were living in extreme poverty in 2022 while the total population of Latin America reached 669,973,000 in 2024.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, secular approaches to explaining the phenomena by which Latin American reality has come to its current state revolve around ideas that pertain to political and cultural aspects, which at a glance may seem to be the correct lens through which the Latin American reality can be observed and studied. However, the call for a deeper understanding of how these phenomena develop is timely in an era where sociology and anthropology have provided descriptions that, in most cases, disregard the theological aspect involved in the social construction of Latin American reality.

#### ***Iconodulism and Christian Individual Practice***

Historically, the Roman Catholic church has been actively involved in the institutionalization of Latin American countries (Smith 1998:51). Thoroughness in rendering a historical account of the evolution of Roman Catholic theology in Latin America is not the focus of this study. Rather, the goal is interpretation for the purpose of building a theory of how spirituality relates to societal development, thereby unveiling the importance of how Scriptures were taught and consequently adopted through individual spiritual practice, and subsequently applied to social interaction.

Roman Catholic theology, as it was received in Latin America, bears certain particularities that contributed to the impact it had on its societal development. One of these particularities is related to the fact that Roman Catholicism in the south developed from a variant of the Roman Catholic church outside the Spaniard territories. It is said that the Iberian Peninsula was subjected to centuries-long warfare in which Muslims “created a very special type of Catholic Church” (Schwaller 2011:9). Muslim invasions of Persia and Byzantium after 641 C.E. sparked a series of events which had direct impact on theological discourse and understanding of the Christian faith. It is believed that the Muslim expansion from Arab territories into Europe, which had a marked influence in eastern European territories, generated an active defense of iconodulism in the Iberian Peninsula in an attempt to preserve cultural transmission through the veneration of icons for specific theological purposes.

The pictures provided a more concrete and direct representation of the presence of spiritual powers. Prayer, faith, and hope were addressed beyond the symbol to the person or mystery represented, but the image itself became an object of veneration possessing its own power of intercession or even miraculous properties. (Ferguson 2013:338)

This particular Roman Catholic theological understanding of Christianity, which is believed to have spread throughout Latin American social fabric until today, emerged in stark conflict with Biblical commandments. The Scripture says very succinctly in the book of Exodus: “You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.”<sup>5</sup> On this matter, some may argue that the Bible itself provided exceptions to this general rule. For example, the Ark of the Covenant contained on its cover the images of two cherubim, which could be considered an image of heavenly beings.<sup>6</sup> Another example might be the twelve images of oxen that held the laver of water in Solomon’s Temple.<sup>7</sup>

These are only two of the appearances of imagery in the Bible that are associated with the interpretation of those who support the veneration of icons as part of the canon.<sup>8</sup> However, such arguments have been a matter of discussion very early in the work of theological interpretation, even during Old Testament times. The appearance of imagery in the Bible has been discussed from various perspectives including those connected to figurative art and the inclusion of images for political purposes. It has been said that during times of kingship in Israel, religious syncretism was present and somehow *managed* by the rulers in those times who followed their own inclinations and compromised with other cultures and gods. It is no secret that even king Solomon struggled with his own commitment to God after being chosen to build the Temple. Jewish king after king came to *allow* some representations which have been discovered more recently in archeological sites, artifacts which have been tied to *individualized* views of imagery representative of holy attributes, or worse, the holy attributes of God himself.

When seeking to assess biblical meaning in how these images were used as part of Christian spirituality, there are instances found throughout the biblical canon that should not be overlooked. For the sake of attention to cohesion and coherence of the whole of biblical discourse, the fact of imagery embedded in Jewish spirituality needs to be recognized. Firstly, the appearance of images in the Old Testament requires that the interpretation of the use of images pays heed to the cultural and historical context of the time. For example, symbolic representations are inherent in the development of the plot within biblical literature, especially noted in the composition and artistry of the temple. Icons may speak of not only the holiness or the attributes of God, but also, icons of other deities are employed to meet needs in terms of moral, materialistic, economic, social, human, and even scientific aspects of present humanity. It is argued that this use of images is therefore a valid added spiritual practice, though purportedly not to be precisely associated to veneration or the substitution of worshiping the invisible God in his attributes and holiness.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, instructions given to those involved in the fabrication or presentation of such images in the Old Testament must also be contextualized within the principle of the law of purpose. Certain instructions given by God at a certain time are, biblically speaking, construed within the purpose that God intended at that time, with that specific people, carrying a specific objective, materially speaking. With this in view, those images on the Ark of the Covenant, for example, were visual representations that held special, purposeful meaning for the Israelites, meaning rooted in the narrative of the rescue of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. There did not seem to be any indication that God commanded Moses to instruct the people to venerate those images, nor to teach them to see the Cherubim as intercessors before God in any situation. The same interpretation appears to be appropriate, for example, when discussing the twelve oxen in Solomon's Temple (Abu-Sahlieh and Sami 2003:1-61).

Returning to the fact that archeology has pointed to how the use of imagery and icons developed later into a deliberate, individual spiritual practice, we turn now to Roman Catholic theology. It seems apparent that the Roman Catholic acceptance and use of icons could have originated from the intent to reassure attachment to church and faith through visual reaffirmation. Also, the above is consistent with records that speak of iconodulism existing in early Euro-Asian Christian societies (Ferguson 2013:337). Thereafter, the impact of such views on natives in Latin America was remarkable as Roman Catholics encountered the use of icons in abundance among the indigenous religious peoples. For example, there was no uniformity, but rather great diversity in what Roman Catholic conquerors found in such an extensive land representing a wide array of pre-Colombian religious expressions (Schwaller 2011:22).

### ***Reaffirmation of Faith Through Visual Representations***

This sub-problem leads to considering an epistemological bond grounded in the veneration of icons whereby members of a society acquire and reinforce knowledge and identity. The point to note is their contributions through individual practice to the production of collective outcomes, as described by Berger and Luckmann:

Depending on the social span of relevance of a certain type of “knowledge” and its complexity and importance in a particular collectivity, the “knowledge” may have to be reaffirmed through symbolic objects (such as fetishes and military emblems), and/or symbolic actions (such as religious or military ritual). In other words, physical objects and actions may be called upon as mnemotechnic aids. All transmission of institutional meanings obviously implies control and legitimation procedures. These are attached to the institutions themselves and administered by the transmitting personnel. (1966:71)

In line with what Berger and Luckmann bring out here, the transmission of knowledge in relation to iconodulism as symbolism for affirmation of faith, while reinforcing spiritual identity through individual practice, veered away from scriptural tenets. The mandates of Moses that included the use of images, then, is used to support an argument for the use of icons in individual spiritual practice. It appears that in Roman Catholic theology, the practice of venerating icons resulted from a conciliary adaption, where scriptural interpretation adopted the subjectivity of a collegiate body heavily influenced by tradition. The same appears to have occurred in Old Testament times with the veering from God’s commandment to serve and venerate him as the one and only God. The Israelites tended toward individual spiritual compromise with other cultures and the gods of other rulers of the time (Abu-Sahlieh and Sami 2003:1-61). In this regard, The Council of Trent (1545-63), Session IV, 8 April 1546, on Scripture and Tradition, reads:

The Holy, Ecumenical and General Synod of Trent ... having this aim always before its eyes, that errors may be removed and the purity of the Gospel be preserved in the Church, which was before promised through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures and which our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God first published by his own mouth and then commanded to be preached through his Apostles to every creature as a source of all saving truth and of discipline and conduct; and perceiving that this truth and this discipline are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions, which were received by the Apostles from the lips of Christ himself, or, by the same Apostles, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and were handed on and have come down to us; following the example of the orthodox Fathers, this Synod, receives and venerates, with equal pious affection and reverence, all the books both of the New and Old Testaments, since one God is the author of both, *together with the said Traditions*, as well as those

pertaining to faith as those pertaining to morals, as having been given either from the lips of Christ or by dictation of the Holy Spirit and preserved by unbroken succession in the Catholic Church... (*italics added*) (Bettenson and Maunder 2011:264-65)

The foregoing excerpt from Trent presents a reinterpretation of the instructions written in the books of the Old Testament canon, representing instead a stance for the use of images in the same way that some have argued for their use as seemingly supported in the Old Testament. Looking beyond Scripture to traditions, the implication is that the Council did not accept exclusively Scripture<sup>10</sup> as the uttermost authoritative source for teaching, preaching, and thus, individual practice. Tradition was held at the same level as scriptural mandates, paving the road to reinterpretation of Scriptures to serve the purpose of establishing a symbolic representation of faith through the veneration of icons. In addition, the Council of Trent, Session XXV, December 1563, on Purgatory and Invocation of Saints, reads:

The holy Synod enjoins on all bishops and others on whom is laid the duty and charge of teaching, that they diligently instruct the faithful, in accordance with the use of Catholic and Apostolic Church (received from the earliest age of the Christian religion), the consensus of the holy Fathers and the decrees of the Sacred Councils, firstly concerning the intercession of saints, the invocation of saints, the honor due to relics, and the lawful use of images; teaching them that the Saints who reign with Christ offer their prayers to God on behalf of men, that it is good and useful to invoke them in supplication and to have recourse to their prayers, their help and their succor for the obtaining of benefits from God through his son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is our only Savior and Redeemer... (Bettenson and Maunder 2011:269)

For the purpose of this article, it is important to conceptualize individual spiritual practice from a purely biblical perspective that recognizes the temptation to adopt a rationalization springing from the fallen human condition in an attempt to meet God's requirements, rather than avoiding unorthodox practices at all costs. In this regard, individual spiritual practice develops by attending to God's commandments.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that God first identifies himself as the almighty God who brought his people from Egypt, appealing to what he had already demonstrated to them up until the time of the commandments. Then, he explicitly prohibits his people to have other gods before him, following the statement with the warning of negative consequences for making and worshiping images, and thereby knowingly inciting his jealousy through the misuse of his name.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, in interpreting the individual practice standpoint as presented by Roman Catholic theology and its impact in Latin American societal development, it is imperative to notice what the Synod at Trent wanted to convey in the last cited text concerning the

invocation of saints. First, the direct instruction to bishops and other teachers to “diligently” instruct the “faithful” about the views of the “Catholic and Apostolic Church (as received from the earliest age of the Christian religion)” clearly introduces the idea that an extra-biblical interpretation had become foundational as support for individual spiritual practice. The incongruence with Scripture is easily arguable due to lack of biblical texts pertaining to the intercession of saints or veneration of images or any other person, object, or being. Rather, the appearance of images in both the Old and New Testaments seems to be linked to cultural or symbolic representations intentionally presented to call attention to more complex issues related to holy and celestial happenings. The Scriptures demonstrate the use of allegory, symbolism, and other methods of instruction, but never for the purpose of establishing instruments of veneration.

Therefore, the “intercession of saints, the invocation of saints, the honor due to relics, and the lawful use of images” are new concepts introduced at Trent by the Roman Catholic Church in stark conflict with the biblical canon. Although “conflict” may be considered extreme by some Roman Catholic theologians, such incongruence with Scripture, if it does exist, as suggested here, becomes even more theologically problematic when the invocation of saints implies the need for saints in order to seek God’s favor through Jesus.

Closing arguments on this subject could be greatly extended. What is essential here is that a theoretical interpretation of individual spiritual practice as reflected in the biblical canon, that is, this work of bringing a theological argument and critique, leads to the conclusion that Trent’s inclusion of new practices contradicts the practical application of invoking God and accessing him through Jesus Christ.

The New Testament canon, in contrast and in alignment with Jesus’s words, instructs believers to see the person of Christ Jesus as the only mediator between humans and God,<sup>13</sup> and, in addition, describes Jesus as the only door through which persons can have access to God.<sup>14</sup> In contraposition to Trent, this theoretical interpretation renders the commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy a high priority, as they reinforce that God’s identity as the master and teacher of exclusivity is crucial to the work of biblically addressing the issue of individual spiritual practice.

The following sections of this article turn to the impact of Roman Catholic individual spiritual practice on the construction of a social reality in Latin America, as well as the impact of Protestant theology on the societal development of the United States. They argue that the way the Bible was taught may have affected the Roman Catholic understanding of not only God’s character, but also of how to seek and access God in practical terms, and how that impact has affected societal development in Latin America.

## **Societal Development in the United States as Impacted by Protestant Theology**

The events that led to the foundation of the United States as a nation in 1776 are intrinsically related to Christianity. However, in terms of societal development, the hegemonic state of the sciences, economy, and technological advancements in the United States has often been analyzed through the lens of geopolitical and ideological perspectives, as has development in Latin America and the rest of the world. According to the U.S. Census, by July 2023, the United States population reached 334,914,895.<sup>15</sup> In respect to societal development, indicators such as the Human Development Index cast the United States as an incomparable point of reference, far surpassing the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Social Reality in the North***

When comparing the U.S. population and its productivity as a nation with the rest of the world, it is startling that the size of the economy of each individual state of the United States can be directly compared to other entire countries' economies according to correlating data from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis and the International Monetary Fund. Such comparisons show that by the year 2019, the United States economy reached \$20.5 trillion, and, for example, the economy of the state of Florida alone was the size of the economy of the country of Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Such a measure of prosperity has historic roots in how this nation was formed and perhaps in how the individual spiritual practice of its founders and subsequent members of its society impacted its social construction of reality.

The political influence of the United States in other countries has been accompanied by almost the same prosperous footprint. In other words, countries that have had close relationship and alliance with the United States have enjoyed at some point the benefits of its advancements and prosperity. That influence has also been remarkably important when speaking about spirituality and its impact on foreign societal development. The presence of Protestant missionaries around the world has represented not only the spreading of biblical truth throughout the world, but also the emergence of a new wave of individual spiritual practice. Perhaps that has been at least in part responsible for the societal transformation effected by the contributions that the American church has made throughout the world.

The place of the United States as the world's only remaining superpower magnifies the importance of the Christian history of North America. The spread of American influence around the world has meant that American versions of the nature, purpose, and content of the Christian faith have also spread widely. At the end of the twentieth century the churches of the United States were sponsoring approximately 70,000 overseas missionaries. (Noll 2002:1)

It is important to highlight how religious freedom could have played a role in the formation of American individual spiritual practice. On the one hand, the theological plurality of the first colonists in America may have led to openness toward diverse readings of Scripture. This reliance on the work of interpretation of the Bible apart from European church-state theological models would have been enhanced by the freedom from extra-biblical interpretation and dogmas springing from tradition. Regarding plurality, Mark Noll shares about the religious landscape that “the Congregationalists and Anglicans were the largest denominations at the time of the American founding in 1776” (2002:22). Another insight brought by Noll is that “After the creation of the United States, the religious freedom mandated by the United States Constitution, along with already-existing pluralism and openness to the nation, left churches to their own ingenuity” (2002:21).

### ***Orthodox Worship and Individual Spiritual Practice in the North***

Furthermore, the newcomers’ decision to spread throughout the American territory allowed for freedom of reflection, which may have reinforced ideas birthed in the Reformation, yielding implications in terms of individual spiritual practice:

The huge expanse of North America gave churches the kind of breathing room that simply had not existed before. This breathing room allowed Christian groups that had felt confined in Europe a chance to develop their own religious visions out of their own internal resources. It allowed European religious antagonists to drift apart. It also gave creative souls every possible opportunity to proposed new versions of Christianity. (Noll 2002:12)

Interestingly, the characteristics of early American individual spiritual practice were highly influenced by Protestantism rather than Catholicism. This fact is unique to the USA context, as compared with Latin America. It should be noted that the people responsible for the early social construction of reality in the United States were predominantly individuals whose spiritual practice was anchored in the biblical canon, apart from adherence to Roman Catholic tradition (Noll 2002:45). On the other hand, individual spiritual practice below the Rio Grande was nurtured in Roman Catholic theology. This accounts for how the table was set for the construction of a very different social reality. The framework for the distinction between ideologies is historically tied to religious and political conflicts between European monarchies. Noll notes, “The religious border between the United States and Mexico was defined by the antagonism that existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between the Iberian Catholic Hapsburg monarchs and the English Protestant Tudor monarchs” (Noll 2002:211).

There is no doubt that the United States has much more to offer in terms of prosperity and societal development than any other country in the world. As a young and modern nation

with over 250 years of republican history, the country's methods for bringing together a society that works for the benefit of all, both domestically and internationally, have been attributed to various factors, while overlooking individual spiritual practice.

The fact that the majority of its influential personalities, or founding fathers, involved in establishing the United States of America held a Protestant spiritual view cannot be overlooked. One of the first to observe and document the importance of individual spiritual practice from a sociological perspective was German sociologist Max Weber. Weber described the attachment that these Protestants had to asceticism as an influential practice in their daily lives beyond religion. As Noll insightfully summarizes:

In the famous phrase of the German sociologist Max Weber, these Protestants practiced a “this-worldly asceticism.” Like the medieval religious, they practiced asceticism, or the disciplined organization of all life and attitudes for the glory of God. But unlike the monks and nuns of the Middle Ages, these Protestants thought that discipline for God should be exerted in the world. Family life, business practices, political decisions, management of leisure time – all such concerns should be pursued with religious seriousness. (Noll 2002:46)

Zachary Taylor, the twelfth president of the United States, referenced the Bible in writing that: “It was for the love of the truths of this great book that our fathers abandoned their native shore for the wilderness.”<sup>18</sup> This is a concise testament of what these Protestant fathers established as a beacon for advancing the project of the United States. Americans embraced virtues through individual sacrifice for obtaining better rewards, individually and collectively, and understood this ethic as spiritual practice and as part their relationship to God. Noll writes: “They were seeking not a private space to be religious but a free space for their religion to transform. Later contributions by Protestants to American democracy, capitalism, individualism, and voluntary association all sprang – sometimes for good, sometimes for ill – from the character of the sixteenth-century Reformation” (2002:46).

## **Toward a Theory of Biblical Intersections**

It has been a challenge to draw a clear connection between individual spiritual practice rooted in Roman Catholic theology and societal development in Latin American as observed today. It seems that there exists, and somehow persists, a reluctance toward social scientific analyses of individual spiritual practice and its influence in social terms in the Latin American and U.S. contexts. Many today still argue that Roman Catholic theology has nothing to do with the failure of Latin American societal development. Some have even suggested that such a statement constitutes a paradox that cannot be proven true unless through biased appreciations, or as a direct attack against the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, this article

calls for not underestimating the true calling and purpose of any Christian. That calling is to bring light to darkness, even if that carries the risk of crossing the boundaries of exclusivists who believe that the inclusion of God into scientific discussion diminishes the relevance or scientific rigor of the study.

### ***Sociology and Christianity***

The blending of sociological theory and biblical principles provides a pathway toward assessing the link between individual spiritual practice and societal development. This section suggests building a new theory of interpretation based on sociology and Christianity, one that uses a hermeneutic of “biblical intersections” to address the spirituality of social agents. In other words, it is necessary to introduce a scientific theory developed under the umbrella of sociology and Christianity which employs qualitative research for identifying meanings located in social phenomena:

One of the core dogmas in modern social science is methodological atheism, which maintains that “all scientific explanation must be this-worldly, never referencing supernatural or transcendental realities” (Porpora 2006:57). Until the second half of the nineteenth century, social scientists were free to use expressions such as “it is not necessary that God himself should speak in order that we may discover unquestionable signs of his will” (de Tocqueville 1840:8). However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, any social scientist who dares to speak in favor of God in their research will be quickly declared the enemy of science and ostracized from the scientific community, as evidenced by the tragic fate of Arnold Toynbee (McIntire and Perry 1989), the famous British historian who claimed that “human affairs are recalcitrant to laws of Nature” (Toynbee 1961:609) and that history is a “vision of God’s creation on the move.” (Toynbee 1987b:350) (Zhang 2024:177)

The bifurcation between theology and social sciences may have discouraged studying the role of Roman Catholic theology in the social construction of reality, as has been the case in Latin America. The citation from Tong Zhang above, representing the Protestant camp, notes the bias against perspectives which include the biblical worldview. The fact is that even Protestant theologians may have ruled out the validity of theological analysis of societal development. Scholarly discussion of this theme has been constricted due to the agenda to keep God and theology marginalized from fields of scientific research. In actuality, there are important questions to be explored in the realm where sociology and Christianity intersect.

The most common reason for excluding theism from social science is the positivist attack that the concept of God is transcendental and non-falsifiable and, consequently, fails to qualify as an object for scientific studies. However, such an argument is based on a deeply flawed understanding of the nature of

science (and human knowledge in general). No scientific theory can permit falsifiability for each of its elements because a scientific theory is “a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edge” (Quine 1951:39). Even the most commonly known scientific concepts, such as force, magnetism, and genes, are non-falsifiable “cultural posits” to work “a manageable structure into the flux of experience” and, epistemologically, differ from God “only in degree and not in kind” (Quine 1951:41). (Zhang 2024:177-78)

Through cultural understanding, comparative analyses have provided extraordinary findings in advancing theory for various purposes, especially in social science. For theologians, as well as for sociologists, factual analyses carry different motivations, and thus seek different conclusions. On the one hand, theologians tend to concentrate their studies on either individual relationships (believers) or collective relationships (nations) that feature a biblical awareness of God and God’s agency. On the other hand, sociologists direct their attention to studying causal variables and interpret their correlations, whether positive or negative, to render explanations of how societies interact, change, and evolve. In both of these fields of study, producing theory is a common and even logical objective. Zhang goes on to note the perspective of secular scientists:

Secularists’ only epistemologically valid argument for excluding God from social science is that, as a cultural posit, it is less efficacious than other social science concepts such as subconsciousness, institutions, and economic fundamentals for rationalizing human nature and social evolution, (...) *thus it is arguable that such a viewpoint is also untenable and that a monotheist God can serve as the core concept of a promising social science paradigm which can answer many historical and sociological grand questions in a particular parsimonious manner.* (italics added) (Zhang 2024:177)

Zhang introduces a well-founded argument for explicating the phenomena involving societal development. Regarding his theory, he writes, “In contrast to materialistic laws of social evolution, such as historical materialism and social Darwinism, it posits that the fundamental determinant of social evolution is the motive, or more generally worldview, of people rather than any material conditions”. Zhang presents the “definition of God, auxiliary definitions of good and evil,” as well as “auxiliary theories about the will and power of God,” through propositions that interrelate each other through logical implications, rendering “a law of social evolution named the law of divine selection” (Zhang 2024:177).

Moving forward in the quest for a link between individual spiritual practice and societal development in Latin America, it is relevant to note what Frederick C. Turner observed.

Traditionally, the ethic of Latin American Catholicism has opposed free enterprise capitalism in favor of more corporatist practices, and, despite the fact

that Latin America's most democratic leaders have been Catholics, the force of the Church has generally opposed the imposition of the North European and North American models of democracy. The interrelationships between contemporary Catholicism and political development appear to be particularly meaningful in five areas: mutual adaptation, legitimation of humanization, association of activity, and diversification. (Turner 2011:7)

Catholicism in Latin America evolved into a humanistic pragmatism which compromised its orthodox position on various alternatives of individual practice. The question may be posed as to whether the veering from biblical tenets, as exemplified in the veneration of icons and other theological reinterpretations rooted in tradition, may have led to an individual spiritual practice in Latin America characterized by religious syncretism (Turner 2011:7).

### ***Describing Motives and Worldviews***

Zhang describes two propositions and then a third drawn from the logical development of the first two. The first two propositions deal with the nature of morals, expressed in a teleological argument that posits that human actions find thrust in any of three motives: the hedonic motive, the survival motive, and the sacrificial motive. Each of these motives is attached to pleasure, power – defined as the ability to acquire life-sustaining resources – and the sacrificial motive, the latter driving humans to sacrifice the pursuit of pleasure and power (2024:178-79). Zhang establishes that each corresponds to a specific worldview conceptualized by their pursuits, in that hedonism promotes the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, Nietzscheism is the pursuit of power, and asceticism the sacrificial motive. The latter “describes the world as an altar on which each individual must sacrifice himself for an omnibenevolent transcendental entity, and its extent can be determined by how much it encourages sacrificing individual pleasure and power without asking for returns (2024:178-79).<sup>19</sup>

A second proposition espoused by Zhang is described as the will and power of God, which states that, on the other hand, “God wants humans to be virtuous – to serve God rather to pursue pleasure and power, and God wants and has the ability to reward the virtuous with more pleasure and power and punish the evil with less pleasure and power” (2024:178-79).

These two propositions result in a third proposition called the law of divine selection which yields a clear view of how the motives pursued by individuals impact the societal outcome as proposed in this thesis:

Significantly, Proposition 3 challenges two core dogmas of modern social science: 1) materialism or functionalism, because it claims that, rather than the material conditions, the meanings of life or worldviews of the people of a society fundamentally determine its evolution, and 2) Darwinism, because it claims that

human society progresses by individuals sacrificing their pleasure and power rather than by individuals fighting each other for survival (power). This proposition supports Weber's interpretive sociology, which places the study of humans' perceived meaning of life at the center of social studies (Weber 1905; 1920). It also formalizes Toynbee's hypothesis that "history was a theodicy in which progress was measured by an awareness of God" (Perry 1989:101) and that the study of material factors should be subordinate to the study of religious factors. (Zhang 2024:180)

The link between the worldviews held by societies and their societal consequences is illuminated here by Zhang. At the core of the link, progress is defined in terms of societal development as "a society is more progressed if it possesses greater productivity, and, humankind is more progressed if it possesses greater power or productivity" (2024:184). Zhang also clarifies that progress of a society does not depend on its "ability to acquire resources other than through production," as progress has to do with the power of production and not the production itself (2024:184). In other words, it is arguable that, based on current societal development outcomes in Latin America, individual spiritual practice as impacted by Roman Catholic theology resulted in deprived social conditions despite having vast economic and educational opportunities and resources, while it appears that, in the United States, orthodox worship as individual spiritual practice defined the re-affirmation of faith in God as that source of power of production.<sup>20</sup> They constitute two very different social realities.

To illustrate, it is helpful to present a classification of worldviews as laid out by Zhang, which sheds light on the attachment of each worldview to each of the motives described above.

**Table 1. Zhang's classification of some major worldviews<sup>21</sup>**

Worldview	Hedonism	Nietzscheism	Asceticism
Catholicism (Pre-20 <sup>th</sup> C.)	Intermediate	weak	weak
Protestantism (Pre-20 <sup>th</sup> C.)	-	-	Strong
Confucianism (Lixue)	-	weak	intermediate
Judaism (Pre-20 <sup>th</sup> C.)	-	-	strong
Taoism/Buddhism	intermediate	-	weak
Communism	-	strong	-
Nazism	-	strong	-
Neoliberalism	weak	weak	weak
Protestantism (Post-WWII)	weak	weak	intermediate
Machiavellism	-	intermediate	-

It is relevant to note that according to this theory, Catholicism before the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by an intermediate degree of hedonism, while being weak in Nietzscheism and asceticism, respectively. Zhang points out that “intermediate hedonism encourages abstention from productive and profitable activities” (2024:186). Also, analyzing Catholicism further in the era before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, weak Nietzscheism “typically disguises the pursuit of power as the pursuit of productivity or pleasure” (Zhang 2024:187), and weak asceticism “typically does not advocate active sacrifice, including honest work, learning, and preservation” (Zhang 2024:184). Zhang then eloquently describes the social consequences of hedonism as being responsible for societies becoming dysfunctional in “every social domain” (2024:186). As has been argued here, these elements of spirituality impacting social development point to the need for a theory of biblical intersections, that is, for a way to include an assessment of possible causes and effects taking biblical mandates into account.

### ***Biblical Intersections: Asceticism in the USA Context***

Zhang’s concepts are a translatable theory that serves as a lens for analysis of the state of orthodoxy and progress in the United States. The U.S. has enjoyed years of prosperity that have been unquestionably described as unprecedented in modern history. Its attachment to Protestant values and orthodox individual spiritual practice, as described above, seems to have shaped the way the members of its society render results collectively in societal development. Evidently, American Protestants have been obedient to sound biblical mandates without compromising their Christian practice with extra-biblical teachings or tradition. This has been the calling of its most influential founders, and it has prevailed throughout its years as a republic exemplifying the highest standards of an ascetic society. As Zhang observes,

In a purely ascetic society, a) the people live to fulfill their callings, so they are individually the most productive given the existing technology and institutions; b) the intelligent members will voluntarily choose science as their vocation, so technology progresses rapidly, and scientific breakthroughs may occur; and c) the institutions that can best protect everyone’s right to fulfill their callings rise naturally. (2024:186)

Individuals of the United States seem to have invested themselves in spiritual practices that included sacrifice for future reward, including an emphasis on reward in the afterlife.<sup>22</sup> The avoidance of compromising their individual spiritual practice for the sake of their own realization is demonstrated in their commitment to good deeds and the true common good.<sup>23</sup> Also, the fact that American society has been a promoter of equality in terms of collective contribution<sup>24</sup> has also played a role in their adoption of an ascetic worldview.

The most important characteristic of an ascetic society is equality, which delivers liberty, security, and justice. Ascetic equality is about equality in duty, which everyone fulfills at the cost of their own power and pleasure, and equality in value, which means that everyone is equally valuable as long as they diligently fulfill their duty. This notion of equality is compatible with inequality in individual rights or power, such as opportunity, wealth, or political power, which is efficient given that people are born with differential talents in managing resources. (Zhang 2024:186)

In the wake of the first signs of American educational reform, one of the most pressing issues was to adjudicate the purpose of education for societal development (Goldstein 2015:87). The United States' concern for education required building rapport not only in their systems but also in people. Americans have honored education and have made it available to every sphere of society.<sup>25</sup> Its concept is simple: trust in the individual is extended as each one appropriates responsibility not to defraud or cheat for the sake of honoring God<sup>26</sup> and fulfilling a mandate of individual spiritual practice to hold each other accountable for their own behavior.<sup>27</sup>

The second important characteristic of an ascetic society is trust because the causes of mistrust, such as dishonesty, aggression, and irresponsibility, are of Nietzscheist and hedonic origins. Trust is the key to exchange, delegation, and specialization, all of which increase cooperative efficiency while creating asymmetries in information, knowledge, and power. The larger the scale of cooperation and the higher the degree of specialization, the more asymmetries they create and the more trust is needed to sustain them. Due to its high level of trust, an ascetic society can sustain large-scale and intricate social cooperation and specialization. Because Protestantism and Judaism are the only two strong ascetic worldviews, the Protestant-Judaic West before the Secular Revolution was the only strongly ascetic society to have existed. (Zhang 2024:186)

As already noted, asceticism in the realm of sociology is considered a concept of self-denial and rejection of pleasure. In short, it is directly related to sacrifice. Hedonism, on the other hand, is directly related to the pursuit of pleasure. At this point, it seems that, based on Zhang's theory about the consequences that result from these two motivations, implications can be made. It is not out of the question that in the case of Latin America, iconoclasm as explained above is a marker for individual spiritual practice, and may be sociologically identified as hedonic. A similar interpretation can be rendered in the case of the United States. It is not out of the question to argue that a society that tends toward asceticism may draw that discipline from embracing orthodox individual spiritual practice.

## Biblical Intersections

This article proposes a new theory based on biblical interpretation and its intersection with the conceptualizations developed throughout. The assumption supporting this theory is that individual spiritual practice must be assessed by the degree of compliance with the biblical commandments found in Exodus 20. If individual spiritual practice is analyzed through these criteria, concepts such as iconodulism and hedonism can be part of a framework of social causation. This is support for making a case for the impact of Roman Catholic theology on Latin American societal development. The same theory of causation can apply in the analysis of the impact of Protestant theology, orthodoxy, and ascetism on societal development in the United States.

Biblical intersection is at work in this link of spiritual practice and social outcomes. In other words, the sociological phenomena and these individual pursuits, as proposed here, have causal inter-relation that can be qualitatively assessed, if observed through a biblical interpretation of intersection. Six biblical intersections are as follows:

First intersection: In God's terms, "obedience is better than sacrifice."<sup>28</sup> The fact that asceticism is related to sacrifice does not entirely validate the idea that sacrifice on its own is responsible for societal development in the United States. There is something more.

Second intersection: Also, God sees "rebellion as the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness as inequity and idolatry."<sup>29</sup> God specifically instructs his people "not to have other gods before him."<sup>30</sup> There will be consequences for those who obey and for those who disobey reflecting the same principle in the first intersection.

Third intersection: Disobedience brings along separation from God.<sup>31</sup> The reaffirmation of faith through visual representations—iconodulism—is in fact disobedience and stubbornness. This builds upon the first and second intersections.

Fourth intersection: Roman Catholic theology as articulated at the Council of Trent deliberately overlooked biblical commandments and taught iconodulism which, biblically speaking, satisfied the pursuit of humanly constructed theology disregarding the invisible attributes of God.<sup>32</sup> This reflects the third intersection.

Fifth intersection: The satisfaction of humanly created theology, as understood by sociological theory, is a factual representation of human pleasure—hedonism. This biblical intersection is explained by the fact that those whose reaffirmed their faith through visual representations were turning to vile passions.<sup>33</sup> This reflects the fourth intersection.

Sixth intersection: Obedience as expressed in asceticism does not relate solely to self-denial or sacrifice. Sacrifice is just a marker of how obedience within an ascetic society rendered the results seen today in the United States, just as iconodulism is a marker of how disobedience within a hedonic society resulted in Latin American societal development failure.<sup>34</sup> This reflects the opposite of the hedonism brought to light in the intersection.

## Conclusion

It is not only the ideologies drawn from politics and development studies that have marginalized the study of spirituality and its meaningful application to understanding societal development. Even the discussion among Christian denominations seems to have overlooked the importance of individual spiritual practice in the social construction of reality. The truth is that, while two different realities are now clearly seen in the two American faces of the north and the south, individual spiritual practice in both realities commonly overlooks the consequences of obedience or disobedience to God's biblical commandments for societal development. The pursuit of pleasure and its opposite, self-denial, as analyzed from the sociological lens, have served as points of reference in an analysis of biblical intersections with hedonism, asceticism, orthodox worship, and iconodulism. A new theoretical framework based on biblical intersections has been suggested here for the purpose of explaining how sociological phenomena in Latin America and the United States might be traced back to individual spiritual practice.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "north" refers here to the United States of America.

<sup>2</sup> The term "south" refers here to the territories south of the Rio Grande. Also, the terms south and Latin America are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

<sup>4</sup> CEPALSTAT Portal de Datos y Publicaciones Estadísticas. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026.

[https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?indicator\\_id=3328&area\\_id=927&lang=en](https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?indicator_id=3328&area_id=927&lang=en).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20:4.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 25:17-22.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 7:23.

<sup>8</sup> This discussion not only confronts the interpretation that contradicts the canon and its mandates in relation to the forbiddance of venerating icons, but more importantly, it discusses the impact that such an individual spiritual practice may have had, in practical terms, in societal development in Latin America.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 17:22-26.

<sup>10</sup> *Sola Scriptura*: a term introduced by Martin Luther (1483-1546) to express the need for holding the Bible as the only authoritative source, inspired by God, in terms of theological interpretation and individual Christian practice.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21.

---

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 20:2-7.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5.

<sup>14</sup> John 10:1-9.

<sup>15</sup> Census.gov. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223>.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations. n.d. "Specific Country Data." *Human Development Reports*.

<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/USA>.

<sup>17</sup> Visualizing U.S. states GDP vs countries. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026.

<https://howmuch.net/articles/comparing-us-states-to-entire-countries-by-gdp-2019>.

<sup>18</sup> Liberty.edu. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026.

[https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=owners\\_manual#:~:text=George%20Washington%20\(First\)%20%E2%80%93%20in%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D%20D](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=owners_manual#:~:text=George%20Washington%20(First)%20%E2%80%93%20in%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D%20D).

<sup>19</sup> Luke 6:35-36.

<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 8:17-18.

<sup>21</sup> Zhang, Tong. 2024. "Ethics and Society: A Theory of Comparative Worldviews." in *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity*. edited by Dennis Hiebert. New York, NY.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 8:18-27.

<sup>23</sup> James 2:26; 2 Timothy 3:27.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 3:28; Genesis 1:26-28; Proverbs 22:2; John 3:16.

<sup>25</sup> The Civil Rights Movement was necessary, among other things, to push for equality in education for black people in the 1950's and 1960's.

<sup>26</sup> Proverbs 9:10.

<sup>27</sup> James 1:23.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Samuel 15:23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 20:3.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 28:15-20.

<sup>32</sup> Romans 1:20.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 1:26.

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 20:4-6.

## References

- Abu-Sahlieh, Aldeeb, and A. Sami. 2003. "The Figurative Art in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Law." "Liberté de l'art et Indépendance de l'artiste, Publications de l'Institut Suisse de." *Droit Comparé* 50:1–61.
- Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bettenson, Henry, and Chris Maunder, eds. 2011. *Documents of the Christian Church* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Oxford University Press.
- CEPALSTAT Portal de Datos y Publicaciones Estadísticas. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026. [https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?indicator\\_id=3328&area\\_id=927&lang=en](https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?indicator_id=3328&area_id=927&lang=en).
- Census.gov. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223>.
- Ferguson, Everett. 2013. *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*. Vol. One. MI: Zondervan.
- Goldstein, Dana. 2015. *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Liberty.edu. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026. [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=owners\\_manual#:~:text=George%20Washington%20\(First\)%20%E2%80%93%20%E2%80%9C,in%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D%20D](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=owners_manual#:~:text=George%20Washington%20(First)%20%E2%80%93%20%E2%80%9C,in%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D%20D).
- Noll, Mark A. 2002. *The Old Religion in a New World*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Schwaller, John. 2011. *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond*. New York: New York University Press.
- Smith, Brian H. 1998. *Religious Politics in Latin America: Pentecostal vs. Catholic*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Turner, Frederick C. 2011. *Catholicism and Political Development in Latin America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- United Nations. n.d. "Specific Country Data." *Human Development Reports*. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/USA>.
- Visualizing U.S. states GDP vs countries. n.d. Accessed March 13, 2026. <https://howmuch.net/articles/comparing-us-states-to-entire-countries-by-gdp-2019>.
- Zhang, Tong. 2024. "Ethics and Society: A Theory of Comparative Worldviews." in *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity*, edited by Dennis Hiebert. New York.

Direct correspondence to Nestor Vilchez at [Nestor.VilchezSaavedra@usm.edu](mailto:Nestor.VilchezSaavedra@usm.edu)