Reviews:

From the Publisher:

This interdisciplinary study breaks new ground by exploring relations between Protestants (mainly Pentecostals) and the Sandinistas in revolutionary Nicaragua, which to date have received scant attention. It challenges the view that most Protestants supported the Sandinistas (in fact, the majority vigorously opposed them) and establishes why many believed Nicaragua was heading towards communism or totalitarianism. Meanwhile, the Sandinistas expressed irritation with Pentecostalism’s otherworldliness and support for Israel. Pentecostals were harassed, even brutally repressed in the northern highlands, leading many to join the Contras. That a minority of Protestants supported the Sandinistas caused further problems. Pentecostals and Sandinistas were ideological rivals offering an alternative vision to the poor: revolution or revival. As Pentecostalism exploded, a collision between the two was inevitable.

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Calvin L. Smith, in Revolution, Revival and Religious Conflict in Sandinista Nicaragua, investigates a unique element of the rise of the Sandinistas in 1979. Much has been written about the social, political, and economic elements of the victory of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, but Smith maintains that Christianity played a unique role in the way the revolution developed. Smith turns long-overdue scrutiny to the apparently homogeneous and unified pro-Frente Nicaraguan Protestants. His significant work brings exhaustive archival research and interviews of key religious and political actors to bear to challenge that homogeneity and unity.

Smith examines three widely divergent interpretations of the Protestant-Sandinista relationship. The first maintains that the Sandinista regime was proactively anti-Christian. The second holds that persecution of Christians was passive and the result of splits between the “historic Protestants,” who generally supported the Frente, and pro – United States Evangelicals. Finally, others maintain that any Sandinista policies that were harmful to religion were reactive expressions of frustration with Washington’s support of Evangelicals. Smith contextualizes these interpretations by
Smith also analyzes the relationship between Somoza and Protestants to establish a necessary baseline against which to measure the later dynamic between Protestants and Sandinistas. In doing so, he effectively challenges the predominant interpretation of the Somoza-Protestant relationship. Smith ultimately characterizes the Somozas’ attitude toward Protestants as largely indifferent, rather than as using Protestants as a “prop” or as dupes through which the regime maintained control.

One of Smith’s more important contributions is his exploration of the multifaceted Protestant reaction to the Sandinista revolution — a reaction that belies the widely accepted, yet one-dimensional interpretation of Protestant support for the revolution. The primary tenets of Protestant support for the revolution include the Evangelical concern for the plight of the poor and their embrace of a general agenda of social reform. This support manifested itself in a variety of ways, from the more concrete, such as financial aid funneled into government food and vaccination programs, to the more ephemeral pro-revolutionary sentiments voiced from the pulpit.

This emphasis on the support by many Evangelicals, however, ought not to obscure the fact that many conservative Evangelicals condemned the Sandinistas as Marxists who would soon turn on the church. In fact, Smith effectively deconstructs the apparent Protestant unity by drawing clear lines between leaders and grassroots members, conservatives and social advocates, “historics” and “Pentecostals,” rich and poor, and pro-government and pro-revolutionary activists, all of whom found a home under one “Protestant” roof. These differences lie at the heart of Smith’s conclusion that “contrary to popular understanding, the majority of Protestants did not support the Sandinistas” (p. 134). A key to this apparent contradiction is that, while the vast majority of Protestants supported and participated in Sandinista revolutionary social projects, this does not mean the same as supporting the government itself. Conservative Protestants criticized the Sandinista regime for its Marxist roots, its extensive propaganda effort, and the conscription of Protestants into the ranks of the revolutionary army.

Smith effectively historicizes Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism in their sociopolitical contexts vis-à-vis Sandinismo. Pentecostals’ eschatology led them to avoid social involvement, thereby affording the government latitude, with which it pursued the revolution. Insofar as Evangelicals, who were more involved in fighting for social justice, presented themselves as barriers to the regime’s programs, the Sandinista regime responded with harshness. Key was the Sandinista demand that everyone participate fully in the revolution. The crux of the matter came in the various ways Christians balanced their religious affiliation with their revolutionary obligation. Smith’s best work lies in his explication of this at times contradictory balancing act. Coverage of linkages between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Sandinistas, and the Evangelicals and the Contras adds to the seductive complexity of this work.

This book is a vital addition to the growing bibliography of revolutionary movements in Latin America. Smith’s exhaustive research, combined with an intimate voice possible only through close personal contact between the author and many of the actors whose experiences color the pages, will secure this volume’s place in scholars’ libraries. It will appeal to specialists and advanced students in the field, although its complexity and fairly frequent reliance on a multiplicity of acronyms may confuse general readers or undergraduates. MattheW A. Redinger, Montana State University Billings doi 10.1215/00182168-2008-362