

Who Killed Norman Dabbs?

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The name Norman Dabbs sparks recognition in only a few circles: members of King St. Baptist Church in Hamilton; students of Bolivian missions; and perhaps students of Canadian Baptist history. The rest of the world probably has not heard of him. He might have been remembered as a significant contributor to the Canadian Baptist mission to Bolivia—as an educator, evangelist and a pastor. Unfortunately, he is remembered as the first Canadian Baptist martyr. His life was cut short by a mob that attacked Dabbs, amongst others, as they held an evangelistic meeting in their community, Melkamaya. His mission work barely lasted nine years after his arrival in Bolivia in 1940;¹ on 8 August 1949 he was killed.

The *Canadian Baptist* described the death of Rev. Norman Dabbs this way:

We do not yet know all the details of Norman Dabbs' martyrdom. Indeed we may never know them all. But of this we can be sure, the admixture of passion, stirred by drunken rioting, and of hateful prejudice, fomented among unlettered natives by unscrupulous agents of class and religion, produced the violence which brought death to Norman Dabbs and a gallant group of Bolivian Christians.²

The Hamilton Spectator added the detail in its obituary that "Norman Dabbs . . . was killed yesterday during an uprising among Communist-led Indian tin mine labourers."³ These various sources suggest factors surrounding Dabbs's death: labour unrest, class, religion and economics. The following essay explores a number of these conditions in which

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Norman Dabbs worked and lived. It will suggest that, historically, these concerns have remained unsettled in Bolivia and form a large part of rural Bolivian life. That is to say that the social fabric of Bolivia itself – with elements of nominal Roman Catholicism, religious syncretism and economic oppression, mixed together by a few fanatical local priests – killed Dabbs.

Before looking at his context, we need to understand a bit about the man himself. In some correspondence, Norman's son, Frank described his father as a student of history. Norman Dabbs's book, *Dawn over the Bolivian Hills*, chronicles the history of Bolivia and specifically the history of Bolivian missions. Norman Dabbs knew the Bolivian social and cultural fabric. Not only a student of history, he was, foremost, a dedicated missionary. His last sermon, preached in his church, The Church of the Risen Lord, in Oruro was based on the text, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."⁴ Dabbs believed this text. He followed Christ first as a pastor, then as a missionary. As a missionary and a student of history, he viewed his place as part of the unfolding of God's history.⁵

His belief that God is in control of history is clearly seen in a sermon, "Can Man's Atomic bomb Destroy God's World?" given at Castlefield Baptist Church in Toronto on 28 January 1946. During that furlough period, with the war fresh on everyone's mind, he taught on the theme that God is in control: "THAT ALL THE FORCES OF DESTRUCTION AND EVIL, HOWEVER TERRIBLE THEY MAY BE, ARE OVERRULED AND CONTROLLED BY GOD" (emphasis in the original). He believed, deeply, that God ruled history, both good and evil. Referring to the Book of Revelation he stated that historical events "cannot transpire until someone takes the book and breaks the seals." Further in the sermon he said, "Let me repeat that all this reveals that all the forces of evil are over-ruled and controlled by Christ." He then goes on to point to weather delays in the events of World War II, suggesting that "we must see God's hand in the month's delay that saved Moscow; and we must see God's had in the fog over Dunkirk."⁶

God not only rules, but "controls all things for a REDEMPTIVE PURPOSE." Referring to chapter seven of Revelation, God's redemptive purpose is the "Gathering out a People for Himself." Similarly, in the same sermon series he preached, "Cosmic Civil War." He understood that all physical violence reveals a deeper drama – that the earthly part is the visible, and suggested that "behind the physical desolations, the destruc-

tion, the wars, the criminality and cruelty of events in this world there are great, powerful spiritual forces . . . There is a Spiritual adversary, his name is the dragon, Satan and the devil. We do battle with him in our souls and the conflict reaches to all corners of the universe.”⁷

And so his battle, his calling, the cross he bore was to bring the Gospel as a weapon against the devil that some of his attackers claimed possessed him He entered the battle very aware of the danger. As his wife wrote in a letter to Canadian Baptist leader Dr. Bingham:

You will recall that at the end of May [1949] two American engineers,⁸ as well as a Bolivian Engineer and a young boy, were killed by local leaders of the syndicate or miners’ union in the syndicate building in Sglo Veinte [one of Bolivia’s largest tin mines of the day] . . . In addition to killing the two Americans, other Americans were beaten up. Afterwards some 600 employees were dismissed because of their affiliation with the syndicate.⁹

Further in the same letter, Lorna Dabbs states that evangelical trips into the region were curtailed for the following months (May until late June). She makes the point to say, “Norman did not run heedlessly into danger.”¹⁰ Norman was committed to do his work in spite of the danger. When a similar incident occurred between “drunken Indians” and missionaries, Norman stated, “Someone may yet have to give his life for this work.”¹¹ He knew the danger. He avoided situations that were especially dangerous, but did not shy away from his work; he headed into Bolivia fully aware of its danger and fully prepared to face it.

The Bolivia he was aware of was deeply and historically a Roman Catholic country. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Bolivian constitution contained a sentence that read, “The State recognizes and supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion, prohibiting the public exercise of any other faith.” In support of that constitutional statement, the country’s Penal Code stated, “Everyone who, directly or through any act, conspires to establish in Bolivian any other religion than that which the Republic professes, namely, that of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church, is a traitor and shall suffer the penalty of death.”¹² In other words, the Catholic faith held not only predominance, but a legal monopoly that dated back to “the Spanish Conquistadors.”¹³

Early Protestant missionaries saw the Catholic faith as their enemy and preached against it to near-disastrous results. A fiery preacher from Ireland named William Payne moved into Cochabamba about the time the

first Baptists were there in 1902. He preached a series of sermons that “mercilessly flayed the Catholic Church.”¹⁴ Payne suffered an attack during which all his possessions were burned and only police intervention prevented him from being burned along with his things. Perhaps in response to Payne’s experience, Baptist missionaries decided to act wisely and carefully within the social system, rather than be aggressive opponents to the existing Catholic Church.¹⁵

The strategy of two early Baptist missionaries, Rev. A.G. Baker and Rev. Robert Routledge, proved to be more effective in both evangelism and in social reform. The former was a scholarly man who lectured frankly, but without aggression or offence about the “principles of democracy, education, social justice, and religious liberty.”¹⁶ Routledge focused his attention on English education. The combined effect of these early missionaries was the garnering of respect from the Bolivian government. This respect led finally in the autumn of 1905 to the constitutional amendment that allowed other religions to exist along side the Roman Catholic faith.

By the time that Dabbs was active in Bolivia, evangelicals (not only Baptists) had made significant impact on the country. The Roman Catholic Church, however, continued to believe in and to seek a religious monopoly in the country. Dabbs stated that “the Roman Church announced its intention of seeking not only a preferential status in Latin America but a monopoly of the religious life.”¹⁷ He pointed out that the Catholic writers assumed that 100 per cent of the nation was still Catholic. The writings he might have been referring to were a series of documents from North American to South American Catholics, calling for peace during World War II:

We send our cordial greetings to our brother Bishops of Latin America. We have been consoled by recent events which gave a sincere promise of a better understanding by our country of the Bishops of Central and South America. Citizens of these countries are bound to us by the closest bonds of religion. They are not merely our neighbors; they are our brothers professing the same faith. Every effort made to rob them of their Catholic religion or to ridicule it or to offer them a substitute for it is deeply resented by the peoples of these countries and by American Catholics. These efforts prove to be a disturbing factor in our international relations. The traditions, the spirit, the background, the culture of these countries are Catholic. We bishops are anxious to foster every worthy movement which will

strengthen our amicable relations with Central and South American. We express the hope that the mistakes of the past which were offensive to the dignity of our southern brothers, their culture, and their religion will not continue. A strong bond uniting in true friendship all the countries of the Western Hemisphere will exercise a most potent influence on a shattered post-war world.¹⁸

This document suggests that Catholics generally considered Bolivia their domain. When *Time Magazine*, for example, reported Dabbs's death, the writer was accurate when he wrote:

The 20 workers of the Canadian Baptist Mission have . . . built schools and hospitals . . . given out free medicines, [and] taught converts to speak Spanish and English . . . Bolivia's Roman Catholic clergy tends to regard such activity as an intrusion into its vineyard. Many an Indian miner has been told that the Protestants are "messengers of the devil"; more sophisticated Bolivians have been warned that the evangelistas are advance agents of Yankee imperialism.¹⁹

In a *La Press* article a few years after Dabbs's death, Catholic priest Father Albert Sanschagrin expressed similar sentiments: that evangelical mission efforts were invasions into Catholic territory. He called for more Catholic missionaries "to fight against the Protestant invasion." And, later in the same article, he suggested that "the presence of militant Protestantism becomes in many instances a provocation which leads to unfortunate incidents."²⁰

However, neither were the evangelicals, Dabbs included, ecumenical in their denominational views. The *Canadian Baptist*, in the article that remembered Dabbs, called for more missionary work since "That darkened land needs the light; that priest-ridden land needs Christ."²¹ The evangelicals' attitude towards the Catholic religion in general was a plague of, in Dabbs's words, "apostasy."²² His words can be used as representative of evangelical thought. In the sermon, "The Devil's Last Fling" that he gave during a furlough sermon series in January and February, 1946, at Castlefield Baptist Church in Toronto clearly states his belief towards the denomination:

His battle was with Babylon (Rev 15-18). "Babylon is THAT SYSTEM THAT ENTHRONES SIN, be it political, be it social, be it religious, or be it all these things put together" . . . It does not

appear to be too difficult to identify the religious system represented in xvii 1-6 . . . And, who is it that is full of the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus? . . . there can only be one answer. It is the Roman Church . . . And, to me there is no apostasy as black, or as complete, or as deceptive to those without spiritual discernment as the apostasy of the roman church. It is the reversal of Christian truth.²³

It must be said that not all Catholic evaluation of Protestant work was unrelentingly negative. Some Catholics themselves observed that Protestant (Baptist and Pentecostal) missionary efforts had been more successful than Roman Catholic in mobilizing laymen for evangelistic work. Therefore, they have proven more effective in spreading the gospel. That is, the pastors are assisted in their evangelistic work by laypeople who are, as Catholic missiologist Roger Aubry observed, “among the people, sharing the same life, speaking the same language, suffering the same scarcities.”²⁴ Further, one Catholic, after visiting the Peniel Hall Farm²⁵ assessed its success in glowing and appreciative terms. Dabbs reported that Markin C. Kyne, a Catholic specialist in economics, stated:

To the Canadian Baptist Missionaries at Huatajata on the shores of Lake Titicaca has fallen the privilege of disproving that the Bolivian Indian of the alitplano is an apathetic suicide, a compound of drunkenness, laziness and dishonesty, a dying introvert, a social embryo and a moral bankrupt. Through their [the Canadian missionaries] program of the regeneration of the Aimara Indian, returning them their self-respect, a new light has flashed on the whole scope of their existence. There at the Huatajata Farm of the Canadian missionaries, they are proving that a system of private ownership on the co-operative basis is a distinct advantage to the Indian and White alike, and – also, that the only foundation of the redemption of the Indian is to be found in moral and spiritual regeneration.²⁶

Roman Catholicism had enjoyed a long and significant history in Bolivia. With the exception, it appears, of some Catholics who admired the evangelicals’ success in spreading the gospel and their social reform, Catholic exclusivity still held sway. However, the practice of the religion itself did not appear to be “orthodox” Catholicism.

Although Roman Catholic by name, Bolivia’s predominant religion had a uniquely syncretistic face in the rural communities. As it relates to the Dabbs case, the days surrounding the killings were “national holidays

in Bolivia.”²⁷ Part of the holiday ceremonies were to appease Tio, the devil in the mine. The native religion into which the evangelicals ventured was a mixture of Roman Catholic and ancient pagan beliefs, both of which led the native population to take devils very seriously. The miners were all aware of and fearful of Tio, and the early August festival was to appease this devil. Miners believed that mine accidents did not just happen, but were caused by Tio and so he must be appeased. The religious syncretism was evident – even self-conscious – in that festival, as seen in this description: “We serve liquor from the bottles each of us brings in. We light the Tio’s cigarette and we say, ‘Tio, help us in our work. Don’t let any accidents happen.’ We do not kneel before him as we would before a saint, because that would be sacrilegious.”²⁸ In the documentation surrounding the deaths, many people are quoted as saying that evangelicals were devils.²⁹ If the people believed that evangelicals had the devil inside, that devil would be Tio, the cause of mine accidents. The syncretism described in the statement above mixed the elements most important to the people to whom Dabbs wanted to minister: Roman Catholicism, pagan superstition and the economic life in the tin mines.

Bolivia was a country in the midst of severe turmoil and unrest – even revolution at times – between the years of 1946-1952. The nation depended on tin for 71 per cent of its exports.³⁰ When tin prices were high, as in times of war, the economy was strong. However when prices were low, living got hard for the miners. A poignant description of the life of a typical mine worker was written in the early 1960s by Barrios de Chungara, the wife of a mineworker. She reported that the conditions she described – eighteen hour days of feeding her family, making food to try to sell in the market, having her children stand in line at the store for staple food items, and still living in abject poverty – existed since the 1940s.³¹ When the labourers revolted and tried to protest their living conditions, they were “brutally repressed . . . even to the extent of [the government] using artillery and aircraft to bomb workers’ districts.”³²

Under these conditions one should expect labour unrest. Part of the problem, as it related to Norman Dabbs’s work, was that evangelicals were seen as agitators, and became targets for attacks. In his thesis, David Phillips quoted from a letter of Gordon R. Turner:

The ring leaders [of labour unrest] have been imprisoned here and those who attend meetings here are relatives and friends visiting prisoners. Because the evangelicals treat them as human beings and

not as animals, and because the Communistic teachings turns them against Rome, they are wrongly connecting Communism with evangelicals and some come to the meetings.³³

What Turner reported as a general belief – that Communism and evangelicalism were associated – was expressed near Melkamaya specifically. In a letter to H.S. Hillyer of the Canadian Baptists, Pastor Sabino Quiroga of Uncia (the larger town near Melkamaya) stated, “The subprefect of Uncia accused us of fomenting an uprising of the Indians and on the basis of this false accusation he arrested four evangelical Indians and detained them in gaol from August 1st to August 10th.” This Bolivian pastor went on to say he was taken prisoner and heard the subprefect say, ““These evangelists are devils and the sons of devils and to kill them is in no sense a crime’ . . . With this language the subprefect attempted to frighten the evangelical Indians in the presence of the Roman Catholics.”³⁴ As suggested, the riot that resulted in Dabbs’s death was a result of antagonism toward evangelical Christians because they were considered, in part, economic agitators.³⁵ A few Catholic priests took advantage of these suspicions, their own anti-Protestant views and the August festival to spark the riot.

Ten days after the killing, Rev. Earl C. Merrick of the Canadian Baptists visited the site and the officials who were conducting the investigation in an attempt to put together the sequence of events. He learned, through a couple of witnesses,³⁶ that two priests had traveled to the area during the weeks prior to August 1949, warning the people against the heretics of the “Evangelistas,” the implication of which was “in the interpretation of the Church, that they were outside the law.”³⁷ In her letter to Dr. Bingham, Lorna Dabbs reported that one of the dead, Luis Guerrero had been approached “by a priest named Navarro, a week or so before August 8. The priest called Guerrero a fool for becoming an evangelical, told him they’d get him yet and were letting him fatten for the kill.”³⁸ The priests were evidently stirring up the population against evangelical missionaries.

There can be no doubt that tension existed between the evangelical missionaries and the Roman Catholic priests. The tension showed up in both rhetoric and action. That is, there was an attitude of resentment that flowed both ways and there is evidence that the resentment contributed to the activity on 8 August 1949.

It must be pointed out that all Bolivians did not share the resentment and antagonism. Even those who were not evangelical but lived in the urban centre of La Paz were appalled by the killing. In *La Razon*, the leading daily newspaper in La Paz, the journalist reported that the news left him “dumbfounded.” The author continued,

Especially so, because the motive behind the act was the sordid passions of religious hatred. It is a shame, and it cannot be excused. As if the beliefs that a man may have could be purged by an arbitrary decree sponsored by intolerance. Because the Crime of Uncia [nearest town to the scene of martyrdom] was motivated by a totalitarian view of religious faith the more reason why it should be repudiated. It is not enough to be beset by political disturbances but now we have a war of fanaticism to humiliate the liberal conscience of the people. God must be greatly grieved with this act perpetrated in His name.³⁹

There was a voice of moderation in the country, even if it was in the city, far from the rural, mining communities.

Norman Dabbs worked, lived and ultimately died amidst the tension and syncretism of rural Bolivia. I suggest that Dabbs was completely aware of the situation, and dedicated his life to his mission in spite of the danger. Tension and syncretism were not murderous, however, until a couple of rural priests sparked the fire that combusted, resulting in Norman Dabbs’s death.

Who killed Norman Dabbs? He was called to serve during one of Bolivia’s most tumultuous years. Rural Catholic priests, fearful of losing their influence, apparently stirred up native miners to attack the evangelical meeting. They took advantage of the syncretistic religion and accused evangelicals of having the devil, the very devil that the miners feared lived in their mineshafts and caused accidents. In addition to religious superstition and manipulation, the miners were in a state of economic unrest. It appears, then, from the evidence that Norman Dabbs, while not a specific target of their antagonism, was caught in the mob’s anger, and thus suffered a martyr’s death.

Endnotes

1. For a report of his arrival, see Norman Dabbs, “La Paz – Field,” in *Among the Telugus and Bolivians* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Overseas Mission Board, 1941), 130.

2. "Rev. Norman Dabbs – Christian Martyr," *Canadian Baptist*, 15 September 1949, 3.
3. "Blame Indian in Norman Dabbs' Death," *The Hamilton Spectator*, 9 August 1949.
4. J. Gordon Jones, *Greatness Passing By!* (Toronto: Baptist Federation of Canada, 1967), 77.
5. As described by Norman's son, Frank Dabbs in a personal letter to the author, 18 April 2005.
6. Norman Dabbs, "Can Man's Atomic Bomb Destroy God's World? [sermon]," 28 January 1946, Canadian Baptist Archives, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton (hereafter CBA).
7. Norman Dabbs, "Cosmic Civil War [sermon]," 29 January 1946, CBA.
8. These engineers were Christians and called "Fellow Workers" (see *The Enterprise* 60 [October 1940]: 1).
9. Lorna Dabbs to Dr. Bingham, 19 September 1949, transcript in CBA.
10. Lorna Dabbs to Dr. Bingham, 19 September 1949, transcript in CBA.
11. "In Memoriam," *Canadian Baptist*, 15 October 1949, 3.
12. Inez J. Bell, *The Kantuta Blooms in Bolivia* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Overseas Mission Board, 1971), 24.
13. Theo Bus and Matthias Preiserk, "Can Bolivia's Church Understand Itself?" *One World* 87 (1983): 12.
14. Bell, *The Kantuta*, 25.
15. Bell, *The Kantuta*, 25-26.
16. Bell, *The Kantuta*, 26.
17. Norman Dabbs, *Dawn Over the Bolivian Hills* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, 1952), 194.
18. Myron C. Taylor, "Catholic Appeal for Victory/Peace, 11/14/42." Available from <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box52/a467bb06.html>; accessed 23 April 2005.
19. "Murder in the Vineyard," *Time Magazine*, 22 August 1949. Available from <http://www.time.com/time/archive/printout/0,23657,800607,00.html>; accessed 20 April 2005.

20. Albert Sanschagrín, "The Influence in Bolivia of Canadian Protestants," *La Press* 4 April 1956. Translation provided by Canadian Catholic Conference, Ottawa; held in CBA.
21. "Rev. Norman Dabbs – Christian Martyr," *Canadian Baptist*, 15 September 1949, 3.
22. Norman Dabbs, "The Devil's Last Fling [sermon]," 31 January 1946, CBA.
23. Dabbs, "The Devil's Last Fling [sermon]."
24. Mgr. Roger Aubry, *La mission: siguiendo a Jesus por los caminos de America Latina* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Guadalupe, 1990), 106-07; quoted in J. Samuel Escobar, "The Bolivian Baptist Story: Context and Meaning in Latin America," in *Bridging Cultures and Hemispheres: The Legacy of Archibald Reekie and Canadian Baptists in Bolivia*, ed. William H. Brackney (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 120.
25. The Peniel Hall Farm is a Baptist experiment in agrarian and social reform. Natives were given back land to farm in a cooperative setting. See Arturo Nacho L., "Agrarian Reform in Huatajata: The Peniel Hall Experience," in Brackney, *Bridging Cultures*, 55-65.
26. Dabbs, *Dawn Over the Bolivian Hills*, 213.
27. Jones, *Greatness*, 76-77.
28. June Nash, "The Devil in Bolivia's Nationalized Tin Mines," *Science and Society* 36, no. 2 (1972): 226.
29. See Earl C. Merrick, *Bolivia* (Toronto: Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, c. 1959), 72.
30. Harold Osborne, *Bolivia: A Land Divided* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 120.
31. Barrios de Chungara, "Let Me Speak!" *Monthly Review* 30, no. 9 (1979): 42-54.
32. Bert Unseem, "The Workers' Movement and the Bolivian Revolution," *Politics and Society* 9, no. 4, (1980): 454-55.
33. Gordon R. Turner letter from Sucre, Bolivia as reported in *Echoes of service*, LXXVI no. 2139 (March, 1948), 33, in David B. Phillips, "Protestantism in Bolivia to 1952" (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1968), 175-76.
34. Sabino Quiroga to H.S. Hillyer, 31 August 1950, transcript in CBA.
35. See Phillips, "Protestantism," 193ff.

36. In a typewritten report, dated 18 August 1949, Merrick refers to a report of “Toribios and Manuel Choque confirmed the references of the sub-prefect.” The report opens with Merrick telling of his visits with the sub-prefect investigating the crime. The original report is held in CBA.
37. Merrick, *Bolivia*, 71.
38. Lorna Dabbs to Dr. Bingham, 19 September 1949, transcript in CBA.
39. “Intolerance,” *La Razon* as translated by W.F. Chandler and appeared in *The Link and Visitor* (November 1949): 321.