

# López Michelsen pumps drug legalization . . . once again

by Carlos Méndez

The justification of usury by Protestantism constituted a revolution “similar to that which would occur in our time if [drug] money laundering were legalized,” declared former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, in a presentation entitled “Religion and Ethics in the Discovery,” given last June during a symposium organized by the Universidad Externado de Colombia.

Put simply, López Michelsen’s speech, published in mid-June by the Bogotá daily *El Tiempo*, constitutes an explicit defense of Protestantism—and in particular, of Calvinism—for having legitimized the practice of usury, and for laying the basis for legalizing the drug trade.

López Michelsen begins by positing that, for him, the fundamental aspect of the fifth centenary of the evangelization of America is not whether the *conquistadores* were good and brought civilization to the New World, but rather, it is “the question of whether we would have been more fortunate had we been colonized by the Anglo-Saxons, instead of by Spain.”

After stating that “Christopher Columbus might well have awakened Queen Isabella’s greed, in order to win his bid, with the economic flattery of discovering the shortest route to the Spice Islands,” López Michelsen goes on to lament that “religious culture soon frustrated the conquest inspired by the lust for booty, converting it instead to the evangelization of the brown Indians of the West Indies. From that moment onward, the glory of the conquest has more of the religious than the economic.”

## Usury and the Black Legend

López Michelsen argues that the underdevelopment of Ibero-America is tied to the fact that its culture is Catholic, and not Protestant, a lie which in its essence can be found underlying the entire “Black Legend” allegation against the Catholic Church. This fallacy was first offered by French historian and Protestant politician François Guizot (1787-1874), in his *History of Civilization in Europe and in France*, and popularized in our time by Max Weber. It was adopted as well by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, and by the Rockefellers.

It is worth noting that a great-great-granddaughter of Guizot, the multi-millionaire Madame de Menil (Dominique Schlumberger, widow of Jean de Menil) is a notorious pro-terrorist advocate, which is not strange given that the Schlumberger family, together with the French-Swiss financier families Mallet and de Neufville, backed Rousseau, Voltaire, and Robespierre’s Jacobins in the French Revolution.

López Michelsen’s lie is two-edged. On the one hand, it is an attack on Catholicism and its values, and on the other, it hides the essential cause of Ibero-America’s economic backwardness: free trade and usury in all its forms, today disguised as high interest rates and the economic policies advanced by institutions like the International Monetary Fund. In particular, López Michelsen hides the fact that it is free trade which, starting with the wars of independence, looted Ibero-America and sank it into backwardness. López also conveniently forgets that it was not the Catholics who introduced free trade to the Americas, but the Freemasons and liberals, of whom López Michelsen is a leading example today.

But López Michelsen hides other things as well: for example, that the British made their fortunes through free trade and usury, from slavery and from drug trafficking. The Opium Wars that the British launched against China, to enforce the concept of “free trade” and protect their source of loot, have since been replicated elsewhere.

He also hides the fact that the United States made its greatest progress in terms of its physical economy at precisely the point that it broke with British free trade and its usurious practices, directing its economy instead toward agro-industrial development, investment in infrastructure, high wages, and cheap credit. This was done at the end of the 18th century under the government of George Washington, who applied the program of his treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton; again in the mid-19th century under the government of Abraham Lincoln, who applied the proposals of Henry Carey; and, to a more limited extent, during the government of the assassinated John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

## In defense of usury and drugs

Dropping all his sophistries for the moment, López Michelsen goes to the heart of the matter and says that the crucial problem is that the Spanish and Portuguese colonies adopted “a dirigist economy, inspired by canonic conceptions . . . and if the price of products was not a matter for official intervention, Christian morality as interpreted by St. Thomas [Aquinas] denounced as the sin of usury not only excessively high interest rates, but any profit derived from violation of what was considered to be a ‘just price.’ ”

According to López Michelsen, “while adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon political system presented major stumbling blocks in Latin America, the same did not hold true for the economic systems.” Free trade was eventually imposed, which, he says, “corresponds to the victory of the bourgeoisie over the European nobility and, among ourselves, to the defeat of canonic norms regarding ‘just price’ and their replacement by permissiveness in the search for personal profit. There is nothing more illustrative regarding these two ethics, from the religious standpoint, than the discredit into which poverty fell, and the prestige which wealth acquired.

“While St. Francis of Assisi, with his rough garb, was considered virtue itself . . . the exterior signs of wealth were considered in the Calvinist community, in light of the dogma of predestination, the unequivocal sign of God’s favor for those who practiced saving and worked untiringly for the accumulation of huge fortunes.”

After letting us glimpse his marked cards, López Michelsen lays out his whole hand: “Many European and U.S. essayists mention in their studies the case of Jacques Coeur, the first Christian granted permission to conduct business like the Jews. The practice [of usury] became generalized over the next few years among the bourgeoisie, and the stigma that until then had dishonored the Jews dissipated. Something similar to that would occur in our time if [drug] money laundering were legalized. Thus occurred the transition from the Catholic ethic to the Protestant ethic, from canonic interventionism to savage capitalism, from moral restrictions on enrichment to a new level of permissiveness in business transactions.”

## Against St. Thomas

López Michelsen’s attack on St. Thomas Aquinas is not accidental. Although Christianity and the Catholic Church have always condemned usury in all its forms, St. Thomas was the first to systematically establish the basis for condemning usury in both moral and economic terms. In Chapter XXII of his *Treaty on Justice*, entitled “On the Sin of Usury Committed in Lending,” St. Thomas demonstrates that money as such is sterile, and that “receiving usury from lent money is in itself unjust, because one is selling what does not exist.”

Ever since St. Thomas (1225-74), all Catholic students of canon law who take up the issue of usury have based

themselves on his writings. In his work *Social Morality. Moral Behavior. III*, Marciano Vidal notes that “the doctrine of the Fathers, of the medieval theologians, of the Councils and of the Popes . . . was explicitly negative and condemnatory with respect to the lending of money at interest. Based on the axiom of the sterility of money, the Christian authors came to recognize the injustice of charging any interest from the simple lending of money. For them, the value of money stemmed exclusively from trade.”

Until the beginnings of the 17th century, usury was morally proscribed in Christian Europe and in the civil laws of various nations. It was the Lutheran schism and the Protestant Reformation (1520), in particular the Calvinist branch, which opened the door to giving usury the legal standing which López Michelsen would like to see the drug trade gain today. Although Max Weber shamelessly lies in his *General Economic History* about the role of the Catholic Church in opposing usury, he does recognize that “in northern Europe, the prohibition against usury disappeared with Protestantism, although not immediately. . . . It was Claudio Salmasio, Calvinist champion of classical philosophy in the 17th century, who with his writing *De Usuris* (1638) and a large number of subsequent treatises, overturned the theoretical foundations for the prohibition of interest.”

What Weber does not say is that neither Salmasio nor any of the apologists for usury have ever attempted to demonstrate that the practice is either morally or economically legitimate. All depart—as drug-legalization advocate López Michelsen does today—from the premise of *separating* morality from economics. Once you have eliminated the concept of a universal moral principle, anything is permitted.

## Sympathy for the drug trade

Although López Michelsen ends his presentation with the proviso that “I reserve my own opinion on the cult of economic success,” the truth is that he has been an advocate of the Calvinist ethic for years. In his autobiographical novel *Los Elegidos (The Chosen)*, López Michelsen writes that “he who prospers does so because he is virtuous, while he who fails does so because he is a sinner. In this way, wealth becomes a kind of reward that God grants in this world to the chosen ones, as recompense for their virtue.”

In his book *Chronicle of an Emirate and a Dynasty*, (Ediciones Tercer Mundo, fourth edition, 1985), Colombian writer J.J. García writes that López Michelsen’s sympathy for the drug trade stems from the rigorous Calvinist education he received in his youth. García adds that “the best ‘Calvinist’ justification of recent Colombian history is contained in the interviews granted by drug traffickers Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Carlos Lehder to Cadena Radial Caracol on the eve of the Colombian drug trade’s takeoff. Dr. López Michelsen cannot complain about how the philosophical precepts of his teacher Calvin have spread among the most prominent drug lords.”