

Migration and the Transformation of Latino Religious Identities in the US

Lecture presented

by

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Setting the scene

My presentation today is about *Migration and the Transformation of Latino Religious Identities in the United States*. I will present data that stems from my research project on *Religious Identities of Latin American Immigrants: The Latino Pentecostal Movement and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal*. The project is situated in Chicago; I am currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of Chicagos' Divinity School. In addition, I teach on immigration for DePaul Universities sociology department. In my presentation I will present data on Latino Pentecostalism, although I want to invite you to further discuss the relationship on migration and the CCR after my presentation. You are also very welcome to ask any questions about differences and similarities concerning migration and religion in Europe and the United States. Take my stay here as an opportunity to ask a German legal alien and researcher that is familiar with the situation in Germany, parts of Europe, and the US to ask whatever question you always wanted to ask regarding migration and religion in both continents. I am not sure if I can answer every aspect but I am happy to try.

Structure of the presentation

My presentation this afternoon is divided into three major parts. The first part deals with Latino migration and immigration into the US. This will serve us as an introduction to clarify changing patterns and shifts regarding Latino immigration and migration to the US. In other words, how is the ethnic group „Latino“ actually present in US-society.

The second and main part of my presentation deals with the aspect of transformation of Latino religious identities in the US. Religious transformation I tackle mainly from two aspects. The first one being conversion among first generation Latino – mainly Mexican – immigrants. I consider conversion the central manifestation of how religious transformation in this country is taking place. The second aspect highlights the discourse and religious practices of Latino Pentecostals. For this purpose I brought some DVD clips to illustrate the church service of one congregation where I currently do research. I hope the devil is not in the detail and that there will be no technical problems, to provide this unique window into the life of a Sunday service.

The third part serves as a summary of findings and its theoretical implications.

1. Introduction¹

As indicated before, I will start my presentation by focusing on the changing migration and immigration patterns within the United States.

It is no secret, that Latin Americans – mainly Mexicans – constitute the largest group of immigrants in the United States. According to the 2000 census, Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority in the country, outnumbering for the first time in history African-Americans.

The argument that Latin Americans do not integrate into the United States society and, therefore, pose a threat to the social and economic fabric of the United States is without doubt fueled by high immigration numbers and by high birth rates exceeding that of the general population. According to the 2000 census, the number of Latinos in the United States is about 40 million. Mexicans constitute by far the largest group among Latin Americans who immigrate. The census from the same year estimates their presence at 26,630,000 million.²

In Chicago, Latinos constitute 20% of the city's population.³ Rob Paral and Michael Norkewicz provide a closer look at immigration to the city; according to their 2000 data, the number of foreign born Latinos is 680,416 (8.3% of the total metropolitan area population of 8,091,720). Mexicans number 573,627 (7.0% of the total metropolitan

¹ My thanks and gratitude go to all informants from congregations as well as religious and administrative institutions who shared knowledge and pragmatic critique. Finally, thanks to Debra Erickson from the University of Chicago Divinity School who provided editorial assistance for the final draft.

² <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/ASEC2004/2>.

³ Ready and Brown-Gort 2005:1.

area population). Immigration continues in high numbers. In Chicago alone, estimates are that every year 20,000 new Latino immigrants arrive, again primarily from Mexico.⁴

Are these Latin Americans immigrants or migrants? Technically, the term 'immigration' suggests that an immigrant is someone who intends to reside permanently in another country which is not his or her country of birth. That cannot be applied either to Puerto Ricans who are US citizens nor fully to Mexicans. Mexican immigration clearly has a circular, transnational dimension, related to the geographical proximity of Mexico and the United States. It is thus important to distinguish Mexican immigration from earlier, European immigrant groups, because the '... rapidity, frequency and relative ease with which family members come and go between various points of residence' is part of the Mexican experience'.⁵

The bonds to the home country are, nevertheless, no argument that immigration in a technical sense does not take place. Nationally speaking, the overwhelming majority, nearly three quarters of Latinos, has citizenship: about 60 percent by birth and another 11 percent through naturalization.⁶ In Chicago the percentage is similar; about two-thirds of the 1.6 million Latinos are citizens.⁷ I would suggest therefore that we are confronted actually with two developments taking place at the same time: That of migration (a term that simply indicates the movement of population on a large scale into other countries which is not the migrants place of birth) and that of immigration, hence, the intention of a migrant to settle in another country which is not his or her place of birth.

⁴ Ready and Brown-Gort 2005: *ibid.*

⁵ Hurtig 2000: 32; Roof and Manning 1994: 175.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau February 2007: 11.

⁷ Ready and Brown-Gort 2005: *ibid.*

Second Part: the transformation of Latino religious identities in the US

First of all, the huge influx of Latin Americans into the United States has not led to many studies that cover this phenomenon from a religious perspective. The data that became accessible in recent years offer, nevertheless, some interesting findings. One of this finding indicates that there is a major trend in conversion from Catholicism towards Protestant Evangelical⁸ and especially Pentecostal congregations and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.⁹ This trend clearly shows that although Catholicism is still the predominant religion among Latin American immigrants, it no longer holds a religious monopoly. The following figures describe in more detail the changing contours of the religious profile of Latinos in the United States and in Chicago.

I start with data that deals with the religious profile of Latinos in the U.S., to continue with data from Chicago. I will also present some quantitative figures to give you an idea on the large scale of religious switching that took place over the last decades.

According to Andrew M. Greeley, who used data from the General Social Survey (G.S.S.), the Catholic population in the United States among those of Spanish origin in the early 1970's was 78%. By the mid-1990s that percentage had dropped to 67%. In numbers he estimates that the defection rate is approximately 60,000 people per year.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the G.S.S. does not include large Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God, or the category 'Pentecostal' as a Christian faith tradition in

⁸ Avalos 2004; Balmer 2003: 54; Crane 2003; Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Williams 2004.

⁹ Wellmeier 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Roof and Manning 1994.

¹⁰ Greeley 1998, 1997.

general.¹¹ Another group that has not been effectively included is the undocumented and poor Latino population. This omission, combined with the fact that the literature available reports a major trend in conversion of former Latino Catholics now worshipping in Pentecostal congregations – which has been described as being composed of the poor¹² – leads me to conclude that the number of defections is indeed even higher.

In another report from the Latino Institute, which is located at the University of Notre Dame, the national Latino population in 2002 was divided into 70% Catholic, 23% Protestant, 6% without a religious preference/other, and 1% practicing a world religion other than Christianity. Within Protestantism, the report found that Pentecostals and Evangelicals constitute a vast majority (88% or 6.2 million). The report also counts different currents within the Catholic Church, e.g., Catholics who have had a born-again experience and profess a charismatic type of Christianity. This data is especially interesting because the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Latin America is often viewed as a stepping-stone for converts on their way to a Protestant-Pentecostal church.¹³ The reasons for this assumption cannot fully be explained here, but I want to point to the similarities in doctrine (an emphasis on the Holy Spirit) and type of worship and liturgy. From a national perspective these findings show that in total, there are 12.2 million Latino ‘born-again’ Christians in the United States. ‘In short, 28 percent of all Latinos are Pentecostal or Charismatic’.¹⁴

¹¹ This is in line with a new report published by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, who states that “some evangelically orientated independents do not self-identify as denominationally Protestant” and therefore are not counted in the GSS. (Spirit and Power. A 10 Country Survey of Pentecostals, 90 <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/pentecostals-06.pdf>). Among the general population, the Pew Study counts 5 percent Pentecostals, and 40 percent Charismatics, making a total Renewalists population of 23 %, Spirit and Power. A 10 Country Survey of Pentecostals, 2).

¹² Wilson and Miranda 2002: 717.

¹³ Althoff 2005; Chesnut 2003.

¹⁴ Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2003: 16; Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2005.

In the Chicago area the data on the presence of Latino Pentecostalism and Catholic Charismatic Renewal groups is even more pronounced. The Archdiocese of Chicago published a report in 2006 that estimates the percentage of Protestants at 33% (2,000,522) and Catholics at 39% (2,348,000) of the total population (6,039,000). Except for Islam (10.9%), all other religions do not reach ten percent.¹⁵ Unfortunately, there is no official data from the Archdiocese about the different currents and movements within Catholicism, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Focolare movement, Neocatechumenate Way, Cursillo Movement and others.¹⁶ However, in an interview Father Richard Simon, the former liaison for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Chicago, said that the movement is ‘roaring’ within the Latino community and that there are 85 documented prayer groups composed of thirty to forty and sometimes several hundred participants.¹⁷

The Chicago Latino Congregation Study (CLCS)¹⁸ provides a detailed religious topography of the different Protestant currents within the Latino community, showing the overwhelming presence of Pentecostal churches in Chicago. The data includes a survey of thirty-six out of Chicago’s 60 ZIP Codes. Within the thirty-six ZIP codes, churches were documented street by street by walking those sections of the city. According to the researchers, the largest number – 41% – of Latino Protestant congregations belong to

¹⁵ Archdiocese of Chicago 2006: 9,11.

¹⁶ Hayes 2005.

¹⁷ The new coordinator of the CCR, Mario Estrada, gave a number of 75 prayer groups in the Chicago metropolitan area. Interview Mario Estrada, March 27, 2007. Chicago.

¹⁸ The Chicago Latino Congregation Study (CLCS) examines the impact of Latino churches within the Chicago metropolitan area. Based at the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame, the research is carried out by a team of scholars lead by Dr. Edwin I. Hernández and Dr. Rebecca Burwell. In a presentation in April 2006, they presented quantitative survey data that proves that conversion takes place predominantly in the US (Presentation of the Chicago Latino Congregation Study (CLCS) at CAGSR, 22 April 2006. Chicago: Loyola University).

Pentecostal faith traditions. Adding 8% for the evangelical population that was counted separately, the ‘born-again,’ and ‘Spirit-filled,’ population reaches almost 50%.

Conversion

The next part of my presentation deals more with qualitative data, such as conversion as part of a human, subjective religious experience.

To understand why people convert and to grasp the underlying implications with regard to immigration, it is imperative to consider *where* conversion takes place. While some immigrants bring their faith with them from their home countries, a lively proselytism is taking place in the United States by and among immigrants. Indeed, empirical observation drawn from my own research in Chicago indicates that the number of immigrants who *arrive* as Pentecostals and Catholic Charismatics is small in comparison to those who *convert* once in the United States.¹⁹ This finding is in line with quantitative research done by the Chicago Latino Congregation Project and other authors.²⁰ That conversion of first generation Latino immigration takes place predominantly in the US is especially surprising due to the fact that in Latin America, Protestant-Pentecostalism and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal have made major inroads into the religious landscape.²¹ One would therefore expect a higher number of Latin Americans who bring their Pentecostal affiliation into the United States. This

¹⁹ Statistical data on religious affiliation is poor, due to the fact that official agencies such as the Bureau of the Census, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are not allowed to ask questions about religion.

²⁰ See footnote 9 and 10.

²¹ Althoff 2005; Anderson 2004; Chesnut 2003; Jenkins 2003; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Gooren 2001; Martin 1990, 2001; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2006; Stoll 1990.

aspect contributes to my hypothesis that immigration adds to the attraction of converting to a Pentecostal church in the United States.

There are many other aspects related to conversion. Methodologically speaking, conversion offers deeper insights into the role Pentecostal congregations play in the life of the converts. Conversion marks the start of a process by which the church socialises its new members. At the same time, it can be seen as a strategy adopted by both churches and church members with regard to the local cultural and social environment. Therefore, the term encompasses three dimensions: the social, the cultural, and the ecclesiastical.²² In addition, conversion enables us to take a deeper look at how the immigration process contributes to the attraction of converting to a Latino Pentecostal congregation. To illustrate this I will highlight three aspects that Latino Pentecostals and the North American Christian religious culture share with each other:

1. Conversion is the essence of an individualized version of faith that highlights a personal relationship with God. From my perspective it is this individualized version of faith that enables Latino immigrants to reconcile their Latin American Pentecostal identity with the North American culture. As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad states in the introduction of the volume *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States* ‘... individualism is probably the single most important aspect of American religious culture.’ She contrasts American individualism with the ‘more communal orientation of the traditional societies from which many immigrants come.’

²² I am indebted to André Droogers and his team at the Free University of Amsterdam for their insights on conversion. Professor Droogers and his associates are currently undertaking research on Pentecostalism on four continents. Analysing conversion and the importance of conversion is the principal goal of the study.

2. Looking at the more communal orientation, other common denominators between Latino Pentecostal congregations in the US and North American religious culture in general become apparent. That is for instance the role of conversion and family roles. Conversion, the pastors continuously emphasize in sermons, prayers, and pamphlets, enables the converts to overcome conflicts in their families. Therefore, similar to the situation in Latin America, a Latino husband who is converted and who fulfills the moral and ethical code the Pentecostal doctrine asks for, does not engage in domestic violence, adultery, alcoholism, and gambling and takes responsibility of being the main breadwinner and respectful lover. And once converted, women gain the opportunity to criticise their husbands if they do not live up to the Christian standard. Moreover, in the patriarchal discourse of Latino Pentecostal congregations, men do not necessarily occupy the position of the male hero. In addition, they do not possess special access to the divine, a role that is often found in fundamentalist, legalistic-literalist congregations of the U.S.-American middle class.²³ It is argued here, that in the context of immigration the values attributed to the household and family entail even more importance than they do compared to Latin America. This is because Latina first generation immigrant women are exposed to a new social, economic, political, and cultural environment. This environment is not only different from their home society. It cherishes an extreme individualism – contrary to Latin America – and an exploitation of Latinos and Latinas in the labor market. This exploitation builds upon their lower educational background, and often their illegal status. Household and family values are therefore another realm where Pentecostalism is able to

²³ Ammerman 1987; Riesebrodt and Chong 1999

bridge a divide. These values are found in both cultures, including the evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal scene in the United States, and are deeply entrenched in the Latin American culture in general. In addition, they call for a normative, behavioral pattern of action that contains at least the potential of improved social conditions for their constituency.

3. A third aspect which is not so much related to conversion but underlines common structures between Latino Pentecostal churches and the North American Christian culture is congregationalism. Latino Pentecostal boast with an intense schedule and the congregation is the very heart to live the Christian faith and doctrine. Converts are asked to take part in the activities and I found out that some members of the congregations have hardly any time besides work, school and family that is not related to the congregation. In using the American way of religious organizing, I argue, as others have done, that this is in fact also a way to become “more American”.²⁴

b) Discourse and Religious Practices of Latino Pentecostals

My next argument is build on the discourse of Latino Pentecostals in the light of immigration and migration. My argument is that Latino Pentecostal congregation in the US transform the religious identity of Latin American immigrants, instead of generating a religious identity that is based on cultural continuity, for instance sacramental Catholicism. Conversion is about choosing and creating consciously and voluntarily a new common Christian identity, which, in this case often unites diverse ethnic, cultural,

²⁴ Wind, James P. and James W. Lewis (1994): *American Congregations. Volume 2. New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations.* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London.

and national backgrounds. In fact, many of these congregations operate as transnational agencies by using the universal Christian message of being 'Brothers in the Lord.'

In this sense Latino Pentecostal congregations vary substantially from earlier European immigrant churches, like those established by Irish or Polish immigrants. In comparing the Latino Pentecostals with the European immigration from Ireland and Poland other characteristics become apparent: Polish and Irish Catholic immigrants left their cultural imprint on the religious institutions they founded in the United States, particularly in urban areas such as Chicago, Boston, and New York. The religious orientation and identification focused on the culture where immigrants came from. The aim was imitating what was thought authentically Polish or Irish. Latino Pentecostals are instead, as my data suggests, composed to a large extent of converts who leave their former Catholic identity after arriving in the United States. Their conversions include the creation of a new religious identity that merges their situation of being an immigrant with adapting a new faith. This process of religious identification and adaptation is marked by an orientation towards the United States.

An analysis of sermons of an ethnically mixed Latino Pentecostal congregation where I do research reveals interesting findings in this respect. It demonstrates how the application of religious content gives meaning to the situation of the immigrants, because it explains the immigrants' situation from a religious perspective and offers other than merely social or political means to cope with it. The sermons provide, therefore, a message of empowerment through translating the biblical content into the daily matters of the worshippers. The titles of the sermons illustrate the above mentioned application: "*Debemos ser Vencedores*" ("We Have to Be Victors") and "*Somos Peregrinos*" ("We

Are Pilgrims”). Some biblical quotations from the latter sermon make the power of the biblical words applied to the immigrant context evident. The sermon starts with Heb. 11:8, continuing with Gen. 12:1:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance: and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Without explicitly addressing the immigrants’ personal situations, the pastor could reach the audience as a whole, regardless of their diverse national backgrounds. In the light of immigration, the problem they face is the same: finding their place as strangers in a foreign country. The sermon also makes it explicit that their journey to the United States entails a promise and a meaning. Suffering caused by migration is the key element in this message. Even if they will not benefit from this journey and suffer during their lifetime, the eschatological promise of heaven prevails. Also, their children might benefit from the journey on earth. The religious message is thus able to interweave multiple meanings and to address a multi-ethnic audience of immigrants: it is God’s will that

brought you here and if you have faith he will empower you and your children to become successful in this new country. That promise is the very same promise of the ‘American dream’; in the United States, you can pursue this dream and redeem the promise.

What about the promise that Latino Pentecostals are not only able to bridge diverse national backgrounds but also various racial groups? In a nationwide study about multiracial congregations in the United States, Michael O. Emerson comes to an astonishing conclusion: ‘Within each religious tradition (Catholic, Protestant) U.S.-born Hispanics and Asians are much more likely to be in interracial congregations than are their foreign-born counterparts’.²⁵ Dramatic changes occur, according to Emerson, especially among the second and third generation of Hispanic immigrants. This dramatic change suggests that rapid assimilation, acculturation, or a strong desire to avoid ethnic congregations for the second and subsequent generations of Hispanics make it seem that multiracial congregations will become more common, and that their growth is driven by immigrants, and especially by their children and future generations.²⁶

Conclusion

This presentation focused on Latino Pentecostalism, a movement that has not yet gained scholarly or public attention, even though it is among the most dynamic religious forces in the United States and globally. In describing the origin and doctrines of Latino

²⁵ Emerson 2006: 87.

²⁶ Emerson 2006: *ibid.* Ken R Crane 2003 comes to a similar result in his study on *Latino Churches. Faith, Family and Ethnicity in the Second Generation*. There is “an increasing number of ... congregations in the (Midwest, Michigan) area (that) have become either multicultural or entirely Latino”. (Crane 2003:51). *Latino Churches. Faith, Family and Ethnicity in the Second Generation*. LFB Scholalry Publishing LLC. New York.

Pentecostalism, it has been shown that its appeal for the constituency is closely related to their immigrant background, regardless of generational ties. The process of how the immigrants' situation is addressed through religious doctrine, practice and community is central to explaining why conversion takes place in the United States and not only in Latin America. In bringing together data on the religious content of the discourse this contextualized version of Latino Pentecostal faith in the light of immigration becomes visible. The analysis of the content of sermons showed that by concentrating on the Latin American immigrants, these congregations provide a strong opportunity to strengthen the identity of their constituency in a foreign environment and to create a new Latino Pentecostal identity.

The fact that Latino Pentecostal congregations have much in common with their Christian counterparts in the U.S. seems to further contribute to their success. Similarities hold true especially for their socially conservative discourse and doctrine, in particular their spiritual emphasis on conversion and their conservative patriarchal profile. Latino Pentecostal churches also provide a protected space that stabilises identity because dramatic immigrant experiences can be expressed, which is important for personal and collective identity (especially for women), while at the same time providing a norm and value system similar to the host society.

Interviews with spokespeople of Protestant Pentecostal congregations and other scholars demonstrate that the Latino Pentecostal movement has a life of its own, even when the local congregations operate within the framework of a predominantly Anglo religious body, be it the Catholic Church (and subordinated Catholic Charismatic

Renewal groups) or within an already existing U.S.-based Pentecostal denomination.²⁷ Important to note here is that precisely where there is a Latino or Latina control, congregations flourish. The existence of these religious subgroups is therefore the result of the initiative of the Latin American immigrants who are able to bring in and negotiate their specific religious needs within the broader religious landscape of the United States. There is also evidence that although differences in national origin are often important among Latinos, and sometimes aggravate relationships even within the church, Pentecostal congregations are able to bridge and level diverse national backgrounds with the strong universalistic notion of Pentecostal Christian faith. By describing and analyzing religious activities and self-understandings of immigrant congregations, it is possible to point out the potential they have for spanning diverse national backgrounds and even diverse racial groups, an aspect often missed in the current discussion about religion and immigration.

²⁷ Wilson and Miranda 2002, Clemente Maldonado, Jr., District Superintendent. Assemblies of God. Midwest Latin American District Council. 25 July 2006. Chicago.

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