

# Shopping Around: Questions About Latin American Conversions

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When two noted anthropologists canvassed colonization projects in Bolivia's lowlands, they reached the last house on the new dirt road. The owner heard them coming and ran out of the house yelling as they approached, "Soy católico. Nunca van a convertirme" (I'm Catholic. You're never going to convert me.) He was the last and only Catholic left in the project.

This article focuses on the popular subject of conversion in Latin America, with the difficulties both of terminology and of actually counting the number of converts. At the center of the problem is the issue of how long these conversions last. It appears that, in Latin America at least, it is not prudent to study conversion without also studying dropping out, leaving religion, as well as entering it. Following earlier usage, we may also refer to such leaving as apostasy.

## **Religious Conversions in Latin America**

At times it does seem that the whole of Latin America is converting. Religious conversion is the single greatest social process changing Latin America and the Caribbean in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Conversions from and within religious groups have rocked the region and changed the face of religion. The process has taken place through a series of quiet explosions that are only now becoming clear.

While the mainstream media in the United States and Great Britain has taken notice of this process, coverage has focused mainly on the challenge that Pentecostalism has represented to the dominance of the Catholic Church. Far less attention has been paid to the role conversion and intensified religious practice have played in many other contexts, including the reinvigoration of Indian religions, African religions, and even of the Catholic Church itself. Indeed, the changes within religious denominations are as significant as those between denominations. While many Catholics are becoming Pentecostal, many mainstream Protestants and classic Pentecostals are also converting to "health and wealth" neo-Pentecostal groups. Traditional Catholics have converted to social Christianity by the millions. At the same time, many socially active Christians have joined more otherworldly Catholic and Protestant charismatic groups. Among the indigenous groups of the region, many persons who are officially Catholic now openly embrace Mayan or Andean spirituality.

Many historians and social scientists who have been looking at Latin American religion for the last twenty or thirty years agree, first, that the main religious shift in Latin America has been from Catholicism to evangelical religion, especially Pentecostalism or neo-Pentecostalism. Mainstream Protestants also, however, have suffered losses. While these Protestants have been overshadowed by the fast-growing Pentecostals, in countries like Costa Rica or Argentina they

exercise an influence far beyond their numbers.

Second, the major sector of Catholicism affected by this shift has been that of nominal, indifferent Catholics, who have supplied most of the converts to Pentecostalism. This pool of nominal Catholics was very large. In 1960 probably two-thirds of the Catholic population seldom or never attended church. Starting in the late 1960s two trends occurred: large numbers of Catholics in many countries became active in church, and Protestants in two-thirds of Latin American countries gained large numbers of converts. Empirical studies and the long history of religious conversion have shown that the convinced and the committed are rarely converted to a different faith or group. Rather, it is typically the nominal Catholic or indifferent Protestant who becomes the engaged Pentecostal.

Scholars from various disciplines have begun looking more closely at conversion in Latin America, asking who the converts are and how they became converted. Beside the insight that Pentecostal converts typically come from the large indifferent sector of Catholicism, we have evidence that converts adopt and remain in another religion primarily because of networks of friends, job acquaintances, and neighbors who bring them into the church and help them remain faithful. We have begun to look more systematically at why so many Latin Americans have changed religion, both by studying the social context for change and by listening to the reasons converts give for their new (or renewed) commitment to a religion.

### **Conversion, Switching, and Indifference**

Observers note that the rates of conversion to the new and changing religious groups are far greater in some countries than in others. Geographers studying the patterns of religion show some sections of the same country with much greater religious change than other sections.

Reginald Prandi and other veteran Brazilian observers note that 25 percent of the population of São Paulo, one of the largest cities of the world, have converted to another religion. Respected Argentine researchers have also noted the incursion of both Pentecostalism and African religion into the extremely traditional religious grounds of their country.

For Latin American social scientists this moving between religions seems a new and especially Latin American characteristic. Some give explanations along the lines of switching religions being another Latin fad. Similar observations, however, were made of the United States, as newspapers in the 1990s spoke increasingly of a religious marketplace. The Boston Globe expressed some amazement at the blooming of black Pentecostal church buildings within its Puritan city, claiming that there were more Pentecostal churches in Boston than Catholic ones. Later the paper looked more closely and published another story, again with implied exclamation marks: 25 percent of the people in the Boston area had changed religious affiliation.

Changing religious groups is not a new story in the United States. People have been switching church affiliation for decades. About 40 percent of North Americans belong to a religion different from the one in which they were raised. Some observers have claimed, on the basis of new churches being built, that switching must be more common than it was. This is not true, however, for there has been little, if any, increase above the 40 percent norm. Probably, then,

Latin America lags behind the United States. I attribute this difference to Latin America becoming a more open and diversified society, although lagging behind the United States in the process.

Religious switching raises questions about conversion. When much of the switching has been from denomination to denomination, it does not seem like a true biblical metanoia (repentance, or turning). Does the switching, at least in the United States, represent a trend toward a search for deeper spiritual decision making? Do switchers represent an intensified religious sensibility on the part of persons seeking new (and better) messages and new messengers? Perhaps, but more common reasons for changing religious affiliation include changes in life conditions, such as religiously mixed marriages; moving into new neighborhoods, cities, and regions of the country; searching for social services, such as day care or self-help groups (as for addiction sufferers); and new friendship circles.

Pentecostalism does seem to change the way one looks at religion in Latin America. While it is clear that the main Pentecostal growth in Latin America is not induced from the United States, still Latin American Pentecostalism shares characteristics of religion in the United States. Specifically, it places exceptional emphasis on congregational participation and worship attendance as a measure of religious involvement.

This emphasis is not true of all major and global religions. Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism emphasize ritual and worship at home and with the family to a much greater extent than Latin American Pentecostalism. Nor did Latin American Catholicism give the same weighty emphasis, as in Pentecostalism, to congregational participation and worship attendance. Popular Catholicism was, at least until recently, the religion of most Catholics. From their earliest years, practitioners of popular Catholicism learned from their parents that saints were somehow active in their lives and could be venerated in church, at home, or at strategic places in the city or country. Popular Catholics celebrated feasts, made promises, and prayed for blessings, in and outside of church.

The criterion to be established here for later reference is that indifference, or having no religion, is not measured the same for Pentecostals as it is for popular Catholics. Indifference, being nada (nothing), for Pentecostals means not attending church at least weekly. For cultural Catholics, in contrast, it means not participating in some ritual, in or outside of church, by which God is honored.

### **Conflict over Terminology and Statistics**

The terms used to refer to the various Christian groups are often unsatisfactory. We seem to be stuck with the Spanish term evangélico for a wide range of Protestants, which is the usage of Latin American demographers and also the way many Latin American Protestants refer to themselves. Recent authors dealing with Latin American religion, such as Timothy Steigenga and Kurt Bowen, have used this word broadly to include all non-Catholics who are Protestant, and many professional colleagues seem to have adopted their usage without objection. Steigenga and Bowen also distinguish between historical Protestants and Pentecostal Protestants. This usage may be unfortunate, since classic Pentecostals are uncomfortable being under the same

tent with “health and wealth” neo-Pentecostals. (For that matter, many Pentecostal pastors consider Catholics to be outside the number of true Christians.)

For statistics, recent academic publications continue to cite figures from Patrick Johnstone’s *Operation World: The Day-by-Day Guide to Praying for the World* (1993). A recent example is Anne Hallum’s citation in a key 2003 essay in the *Latin American Research Review*. After some initial hesitation (could I obtain reliable statistics from a prayer book?), I obtained a copy of this book, which was reputed to be the best source available for statistics on religion in Latin America. That might have been true ten years ago, but no longer.

In *Operation World* (1993), Johnstone claimed that 27.9 percent of all Chileans were evangelicals, and 25.4 percent Pentecostal/charismatic. These figures, however, are much higher than those reported in the carefully and rigorously conducted national census of 1992, which showed only 12.4 percent evangélicos. According to preliminary indications, the national census of 2002 will reveal about 16 percent evangélicos. Other systematic surveys of Chilean religion have confirmed the levels of the 1992 census.

The two other Latin American nations cited as the most Pentecostal or most Protestant are Brazil and Guatemala. For Brazil, no one doubts that Pentecostal growth there is impressive; probably half of Latin America’s Pentecostals reside in Brazil. In 1993 Johnstone gave the Protestant population as 21.6 percent of the national population. That stands in contrast with the national census of 2000, conducted by apparently competent demographers, that shows 15.4 percent evangélicos. Evangelicals themselves seem to be happy with the census’s lower figure. The Web site ([www.infobrasil.org](http://www.infobrasil.org)) of Servicio Evangelizadora para América Latina, or SEPAL, an international missionary group in Brazil, provides information based on the national census, not on Johnstone. (Please insert a footnote or endnote with a text similar to this: Hallum and some other authors do not refer to a later (2001) edition of *Operation World* in which authors Johnstone and Mandryk use much lower figures for Chile and Brazil and call attention to the fact that they are doing so.)

### **An End to Evangelical Growth?**

Latinamericanists consistently identify Guatemala as the most Protestant country in Latin America. In Guatemala, however, evangelical growth has leveled off. Some Protestant missionaries within the country are now willing to admit there has been no growth for a decade. Since the early 1990s longtime experts on Guatemalan religion Virginia Garrard Burnett and Bruce Calder have reported their impressions that Protestant growth in Guatemala had leveled off. They observed that Protestant pastors and other observers of religion felt that Guatemalan Protestantism had reached a “kind of natural limit.” “Some people,” one pastor said in resignation, “will always be Catholic.”

Surveys of Guatemalan religion, including those by SEPAL, have found that Protestant growth rates were indeed flat. One might think that this information would be important in mission and academic circles, but missiologists and academics have generally failed to take notice.

Only now is it clear from SEPAL and other sources that the growth of Pentecostalism and Protestantism leveled off in Guatemala some time ago at about 25 percent Protestant in the

Guatemalan total population. The Gallup Organization's group in Guatemala began doing surveys in the country in the 1990s, including questions of religious affiliation. These surveys, repeated at various intervals and by now in the public domain for a number of years, consistently have showed Protestant affiliation to be in the 25 percent range.

One might note that though their number as a proportion of the Guatemalan population has remained constant, the conversion rate for neo-Pentecostals and others counted as evangélicos has continued to increase. How can that be? How can a rising rate of conversions be paired with a stagnant rate of growth? We shall see that conversion is only one part of the story.

### **Nonpractice Among Pentecostals**

An initial observation is that many Pentecostals are not very observant. This is a fact that one would not easily learn, even from persons who conduct valuable studies. Two systematic surveys of Chilean religion were conducted by the Chilean Institute of Public Studies, an institute similar to that of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and having close ties to eminent sociologist Peter Berger of Boston University. In 1991 this Chilean institute published studies that went beyond census data and asked about church attendance. It was quite a surprise to learn that less than half of Chile's Pentecostals attend church once a week, and more than a third hardly attend church at all.

One of the main researchers, Arturo Fontaine Talavera, barely alluded to the significance of nonpractice among Chilean Pentecostals. But this finding was scandalous to Pentecostal pastors, since Pentecostals strongly stress attendance at weekly services and many Pentecostals go to church more than once a week. The results of the surveys were broadcast on Chilean television and threw pastors into a panic.

By and large, Pentecostal pastors took up the challenge of religious nonpractice directly and honestly, searching their souls for reasons for the worrisome dropping out. They wondered whether a contributing factor might be the growing distance between the education and class background of the pastors versus that of the persons in the pews. At the time, 40 percent of Pentecostals were middle class in terms of education, which was a higher percentage than that of pastors.

The same pattern of nonattendance is evident in Mexico. Bowen found that "fewer than half, forty-eight percent, continued to be active evangelicals who attended a church service at least once weekly." The vast majority of the other 52 percent never or almost never attended services.

### **Leaving Protestantism**

A further consideration is that leaving church or religion, dropping out, though seriously understudied in the United States, is even less well researched in Latin America. Recent studies have found that not only is nonpractice widespread but also many Protestants are leaving their churches altogether. Bowen found that 43 percent of those raised in Protestant churches were no longer Protestants as adults. Also, 68 percent of those baptized in Protestant churches in Mexico in the 1980s had left by 1990. Steigenga believes the same rates of leaving may be true in

Guatemala.

As noted above, several Latin American countries exhibit a rather high rate of evangelical conversion, but not much of a rise or none at all in the percentage of Protestants. Retention is thus clearly a factor. In terms of conversion, when 40 percent or so do not continue in their commitment, does the conversion itself have to be doubted? In Latin America, one common response is to say that only God knows. But in social science and missiology, when a religion displays such a high dropout rate, to discuss conversion without also looking at apostasy seems partial and misleading.

One reason researchers have overlooked the significance of church leaving may be that they believed they were looking at nomadismo: people shopping around for religion. In typical patterns, people shifted from indifferent Catholic to Pentecostal, from Pentecostal to neo-Pentecostal, from Catholic to Afro-Brazilian religions. Sometimes they seemed to convert to these religions all in the same day.

### **Why They Leave**

One can learn a lot from delving into church leaving. Here we are discussing mainly Pentecostals who have departed. Not only are Pentecostals the largest non-Catholic group in Latin America, but also, judging by Mexico, they may have the highest dropout rates. But why? The responses are complex, but years of interviewing Pentecostals and of observing Pentecostal churches in most Latin American countries convinces me that living up to the perfectionist character of Pentecostalism is extremely difficult. Over the long haul, most people simply tire of trying to follow the heavy moral and social demands that many Pentecostal churches impose.

Entry into Pentecostalism takes seriously the turning that early Christians thought necessary. Men and women are expected to change their behavior to include not only the familiar rules of no smoking, no drinking, and no dancing and the giving of 10 percent of one's income to the church, but also marital fidelity and a wholehearted embrace of communal life and frequent prayer.

The Assemblies of God churches that flourished in Central America have had pastors who preach observance of the Reglamento local, the stated rules for doctrine and practice by which the communicants are expected to live. Members of Assemblies churches, as classic Pentecostals, have a gritty sense of living counterculturally, an acute awareness of evil in persons and institutions, and a humility born from watching their own and others' minor slips and major failures. Many Central American pastors confided to Everett Wilson, recent president of Bethany College (Scotts Valley, California) and longtime resident in Central America, that over a long period of time only about 15 percent of congregants showed fidelity to the Reglamento local. There is another side to the Pentecostal churches' high dropout rate that needs to be explored, an aspect that few have emphasized. Do Pentecostal churches keep key members and attract many new ones because, directly or indirectly, they effectively cast off their faltering members? After he had walked along Mexican dirt roads and byways for years, listening to Pentecostal pastors and communicants, it occurred to Bowen that Latin American Pentecostal churches actually cast off the less committed among their members so that those more committed might continue

unimpeded in the pursuit of their high goals. Less committed members would tend to pull the more committed down to a common denominator of laxer practice. The churches keep the luster of their religion bright precisely by shedding the nonobservant and the unrepentant.

### **Moving to No Religion**

Until recently, Latin America stood out, at least from Europe and Canada, in having relatively few persons in the category “no religion.” Manuel Marzal, a respected expert in religious research in Latin America, says that this kind of person was hardly representative of Latin Americans. His argument is based not only on forty years of looking at religion in the region but also on a global study of religion in 2000. Marzal’s view is challenged, however, by new evidence that shows a widening pool of “no religion” in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Chile. This new fact lends significance to the question, Where are the church leavers going?

Much anecdotal evidence exists indicating that many Pentecostal dropouts return to the Catholic Church. James Scanlon, a Maryknoll priest, said that he and his activist parish members brought 1,800 persons in his Guatemala City neighborhood back to the Catholic Church. Somewhat similar stories were heard by others in Guatemala. But Steigenga, who conducted surveys in Costa Rica and Guatemala in 1992 and 1993, took a careful look at the persons who said they had no religious affiliation and found evidence that many had practiced, some rather profoundly, evangelical religion. Of this group, 13 percent said they had spoken in tongues, 37 percent said they had experienced a personal conversion, and 57 percent said they experienced a miraculous healing. In general he found that few former evangelicals turned (one cannot say returned, because many were born Protestants) to Catholicism. Polls in Guatemala since 1990 show a group of about 12 percent of the national population that identify themselves as having no religion.

In Mexico Bowen’s grassroots questioning of evangelical pastors and lay Mexicans found that 43 percent of those raised in the second-generation of evangelicals no longer claimed any religious affiliation. Within that group, the rate for Pentecostal dropouts in the second generation was even higher: 48 percent. He found that hardly any of the leavers chose to practice Catholicism or any other faith. In terms of Mexican evangelicalism, they were nada (nothing). This conclusion repeated what Steigenga found in Guatemala and Costa Rica, where leavers from evangelical, mostly Pentecostal backgrounds may be going into a dark pool of “no religion.”

This is a new category, one virtually unknown previously in Guatemala and much of Latin America. But what is it like to be without religion in this hotly religious country? Would one feel relief to be on an island of calm away from the heat of religious passion? Do people who say they have no religion still believe in God? Are they hurting and in need of help? We know almost nothing about this category.

### **In Conclusion**

By looking at both conversion and dropping away, it becomes possible to ask whether evangelicals are destined to remain a small but vibrant minority, or whether they are capable of

embracing sufficient numbers of Latin Americans for Latin American society as a whole to be transformed. It is clear that the capacity of the vibrant community of evangelicals to change the face of Latin American religion is severely curtailed by its inability to retain many of its members. The Mexican churches are losing many new members. The older Chilean churches are also losing members, perhaps third- and fourth-generation ones. It is also clear that there is a growing pool of Latin Americans with no religion. This is no surprise to those who look at the challenge of conversion. We still stand in amazement at Paul, Augustine, and Latin Americans who persevered in their Christian commitment.

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