

Religious Conversion in the Americas: Meanings, Measures, and Methods

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Religious pluralism has fundamentally altered the social and religious landscape of Latin America and the Caribbean. From Mexico to Chile, millions of Latin Americans have abandoned their traditional Catholic upbringing to embrace new and different religious beliefs and practices. Evangelical Protestants represent approximately 15 percent of the population in the region today. Indigenous and Afro-diasporan religions have also experienced rapid growth. At the same time, significant changes within traditional religious categories have accelerated. Large numbers of Catholics have joined charismatic congregations, while sectors of classic Pentecostal and mainstream Protestant congregations have converted to "health and wealth" neo-Pentecostalism.

Religious conversion is the primary motor driving this larger process of religious change. While the macro-level factors that set the context for religious conversion (changes within the Catholic Church, increased Protestant missionary activity, and changes in state policies on religious freedom) have been studied considerably, far less attention has been paid to questions of exactly which people convert and under what circumstances, how social scientists understand and interpret conversion, and how conversion impacts individual and collective beliefs and actions. This essay seeks to provide some guidelines for the study of conversion gleaned from theoretical and empirical treatments of the subject in the context of Latin America.

Within the social science literature on conversion, there is a general consensus that conversion involves a process of radical personal change in beliefs, values, and, to some degree, change in personal identity and worldview.¹ However, questions about how to measure these changes, which level of analysis to utilize, and the role of personal agency versus external contextual factors remain matters of significant dispute and debate.² Bringing Latin American scholarship and empirical case studies into dialogue with this existing literature helps to establish a set of guidelines for studying conversion that can direct further scholarship and put to rest some of the widely held misconceptions about conversion in the Americas. In particular, I argue that (1) religious conversion must be understood as a process and continuum rather than a single discrete event, (2) conversion is a multiply-determined phenomenon that demands a complex theoretical model and a multifaceted research methodology, and (3) researchers would be well served by reevaluating the categories and concepts we utilize for measuring the political and social effects of religious conversion.

Conversion as Process and Continuum

The study of conversion in Latin America has given rise to multiple and diverse challenges to the "Pauline paradigm" of conversion: the sudden, dramatic, and all-encompassing view that characterized many early studies. A number of authors focusing on Brazil have argued that such traditional (and generally North American) conceptions of conversion do not apply to the Latin American religious field.³ Patricia Birman uses the concept of "passages" between religious groups rather than sudden and dramatic conversion.⁴ According to Birman, as neo-Pentecostal churches move closer to secular norms, their parishioners are able to relax the tensions between the sacred and the secular enough to make conversion a less radical and complete event. Furthermore, some authors argue that Latin American culture is sufficiently syncretic that transit between religious groups is a natural and nondramatic occurrence for many converts.⁵ Taken together, these insights force us to take a closer look at what we mean by conversion in the Latin American context. If conversion is not always characterized by a dramatic change in religious beliefs and values, how can we define and utilize the concept in comparative study?

Henri Gooren brings us part of the way to resolving this dilemma by positing that conversion should be understood as a continuum rather than a single event.⁶ Conceiving of conversion as a continuum allows us to pinpoint passages, multiple affiliations, or even apostasy as levels

within this continuum. In other words, we can adopt what Gooren calls a "conversion careers" approach - that is, looking at levels of conversion, as well as the movement in these levels over time. Understanding the conversion career allows us to differentiate between different stages of conversion and disaffiliation in a coherent and comparative fashion. In particular, Gooren provides us with five categories - preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation - for following the trajectories of individuals over time.⁷ While various authors have provided more complex schémas, Gooren's synthesis establishes a functional model for following and comparing different stages of conversion.

Theories of Conversion in Latin American

Five primary approaches characterize the theoretical literature on conversion in Latin America: attending to historical supply-side and push factors, developing economic models of religious consumers responding to religious markets, focusing on religious preferences, foregrounding networks, and privileging instrumental action and context. A brief discussion and evaluation of these approaches will provide background for a methodological synthesis that offers a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to studying conversion.

Historical supply-side and push factors. The historical supply-side approach to religious change in Latin America takes both internal and external factors into account. Internally, the difficulties faced by the Catholic Church in the recent past (shortages of priests and tensions between lay workers, priests, and the hierarchy) are seen as push factors influencing people to convert, primarily to Protestantism. Externally, the history of missionaries in Latin America sheds some light on the supply-side of the equation. First, in the 1950s and 1960s Asia was closed to missionaries. This factor, along with the "battle with Communism," diverted American missionaries to Latin America in large numbers. North American Protestant missions presented themselves as a response to the Communist threat. Second, divisions began to form between local church leaders and their North American counterparts. Many local leaders broke from their mother churches, in the process abandoning many of the cultural barriers that North American missionaries had constructed around Protestantism. These new churches quickly became popular as local charismatic leaders made their services more culturally relevant and preached in the native languages of their congregations. Third, new strains of Protestantism and Catholicism began to grow in Latin America. Charismatic Pentecostals began to preach a millennial message, stressing the gifts of the Holy Spirit (such as speaking in tongues), faith healing, and personal testimony. Similar elements of religious belief and practice characterized the growth of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.⁸

Because of the large influx of American missionaries and their connections to right-wing organizations in the United States, the notion that conversion was externally imposed in Latin America was prevalent in the early literature about the issue.⁹ This perspective argued that North American missionaries were trying to demobilize people who might instead embrace the more radical liberation theology. These accusations were fueled by well-documented links between missionary organizations, rightwing evangelicals in the United States, and the U.S. government.¹⁰ Reducing conversion to an entirely external imposition, however, ignores the popular and indigenous nature of the movement, denies the agency of individual converts, and questions the validity of individuals' religious experiences. Today most Protestant and charismatic Catholic congregations in Latin America are run by Latin Americans, lending further evidence to the critiques of early reductionist accounts of evangelical conversion.

Religious markets and religious economy. A second broad approach to understanding religious change focuses on the macro-level of religious markets. Proponents of this approach look at religion as a market, potential converts as consumers, and the Catholic Church as a "lazy monopoly" in Latin America.¹¹ Anthony Gill has been the main proponent of this approach, utilizing it to explain Pentecostal growth and to predict the actions of the state and the Catholic Church as a result of market forces.¹² Andrew Chesnut has extended and altered the market approach to explain the recent growth, not only of Pentecostalism, but also of Afro-diasporan religions and the charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church.¹³

The religious-market approach has not been well received by many scholars in the field of religious studies because, in its most extreme forms, it reduces religious institutions to utility-maximizing firms, and converts to consumers. If the "inelastic religious demand" assumption of strict market approaches is relaxed, however, the model can be useful for understanding how local context interacts with religious supply to increase the attractiveness

of new religions to potential converts. In other words, it is logical to assume that demand for religious goods is higher in some areas than in others, which opens the possibility for an evaluation of both sides of the market (supply and demand), of new areas of product specialization and marketing strategies by religious institutions, and of the religious preferences of individuals.¹⁴ Thus, market analyses can provide important insights about conversion without ignoring the agency of individuals or reducing religious institutions to purely "soul maximizing" firms.

Conversion as religious preference. A third approach to explain conversion focuses primarily on demand and individual religious preferences. In this approach, the spiritual, supernatural, experiential, and doctrinal elements of the growing religions in Latin America are seen as the primary factors attracting converts. The assumption is that the religions that are growing most rapidly are those for which Latin Americans have the greatest natural affinity. Harvey Cox argues that Pentecostal Protestantism is essentially a "res tora tionist" religious movement in that it helps people to restore "elemental spirituality" in the form of "primal speech" (speaking in tongues), "primal piety" (healings, trances, and other forms of religious expression), and "primal hope" (in the Utopian and millennial eschatology of Pentecostalism).¹⁵ Daniel Miguez takes a more subtle approach, arguing that the motivation for conversion is "defined by people's needs to find answers to transcendental questions and what they feel are appropriate ways to relate to sacred beings and forces." According to Miguez, the primary change that comes with conversion is religious rather than cultural, economic, or political.¹⁶

The idea that the growing religions in Latin America are experienced more intensely than traditional Catholicism is fundamental to this approach. Central to arguments based on the religious features of conversion is the notion that the complete "religious experience" is more intense within Pentecostal, charismatic Catholic, Afro-Brazilian, or indigenous religious communities than in traditional Catholic and Protestant churches. Conversion, then, is explained in part as a preference for the religious and experiential features of Pentecostalism or other religious options.

Some versions of these arguments have drawn criticism for either reifying cultural primism or ignoring critical differences in local culture.¹⁷ In other words, the pneumatic elements of Pentecostalism may hold very different meanings for indigenous Pentecostals in Chiapas and black Brazilians in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. The fact that Pentecostalism is growing in both places requires a deeper explanation than a broad generalization about cultural affinity. Disaggregating questions of how many people convert from specifically who converts requires that we bring social networks into the analysis.

Networks and conversion . Network theory can help us to understand better the connections between religious supply and demand. For example, religious demand may be very high within a particular community, especially when traditional survival strategies and other support networks begin to fail. In such a community Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs), Pentecostal churches, and charismatic Catholic groups may all gain converts. Which "meaning network" each convert is a part of will influence which group he or she will join. As David Smilde argues, meaning networks are key for understanding who is likely to convert (e.g., if you live away from your family in a house with an evangelical, you are more likely to convert to an evangelical church). In other words, network theory allows us to take the market approach to the micro-level, making it a complementary, rather than a competing, explanation for religious change. Such an approach reintroduces the interaction between agents (individuals making religious choices) and context (networks and contextual pushand-pull factors) in a manner that avoids causal reductionism in either direction.¹⁸

Based on his research in Venezuela, David Smilde argues that the personal problems that Pentecostalism helps converts to address are widespread among Venezuela's popular sectors and thus do not provide a sufficient explanation for conversion. Smilde found instead that networks played an important part. People who were living away from their families or with an evangelical were more likely to convert than those who were not. The presence of nearby Catholic family members acted as a deterrent to conversion, but individuals who moved away from their families were more likely to have the freedom to innovate. Smilde also points out that some people actively construct the network positions that eventually lead to their conversion.¹⁹ In other words, instrumental action on the part of individuals leads them toward or away from conversion.

Instrumental action and context. We come now to a final category of explanations for religious conversion: the broad focus on the interactions between agents and context. Some of the most influential works on conversion in Latin America assert that conversion represents an adaptive response to varying external structures and processes. A relatively large number of authors subscribe to some version of the "anomie" thesis, in which the drastic changes associated with modernization (e.g., urbanization, changing land-tenure patterns, and the loss of traditional community) cause a sense of moral uncertainty and a loss of security in terms of relationships and norms of behavior. People then may turn to Pentecostalism (or other religious options) as a way to adopt capitalist values²⁰ or as a comforting replication of old norms and values.²¹ Some authors from the preparation for capitalism school claim that conversion opens "social spaces" for people who have been dislocated and who associate conversion with development and the promotion of democracy.²² For example, Amy Sherman argues that Guatemalan converts experience changes equivalent to Weber's "Protestant ethic," which "predispose them to capitalist development."²³ Authors from the replication school focus on the otherworldly and millennialist elements of Pentecostal Protestantism and hold a dimmer view of the potential for individual conversions to produce large-scale social change.

While there may be a correlation between upward social mobility and conversion in the context of Latin America, the question of directionality remains open. Virginia Garrard-Burnett addresses this issue, arguing that upward social mobility may be more myth than reality among immigrant converts to neoPentecostalism in Houston.²⁴ According to Garrard-Burnett, while conversion does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility among converts, it can indeed provide them with a set of beliefs, networks, and sense of community that help them to successfully navigate the difficulties of immigrant life in the Houston community. It is precisely this sort of nuanced and pragmatic treatment of conversion that points us toward a potential methodological synthesis.

Toward a Methodological Synthesis

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives summarized here suggest that researchers should beware of reifying the instrumental nature of conversion as a path to resolving life crises. Conversion is not the only avenue explored by people in crisis in Latin America. The pathologies of poverty are much more widespread than conversion. Conceiving of conversion as a process allows us to follow the trajectory of individuals over time; it also serves as a cautionary factor, keeping us from becoming overly deterministic about the variables contributing to conversion. While social conformity, networks, and crises may all condition conversion, these are not the sole determining factors. Purely instrumental approaches, however, may give too much credit to the convert's "other" preferences (financial gain, personal safety, crisis management, or changes in gender relations). That which appears instrumental or purely preference-based to the outside observer may actually have multiple contextual and network determinants that are not immediately evident. One way for researchers to tease out these different levels of analysis is to take a more critical approach to the role of conversion narratives and discourse in the study of conversion.

Conversion is defined, in part, by the new discourse repeated in the conversion narrative. Pitting past against present and future, good against evil, old against new is part of adopting a new religious identity - not only adopting it, but actively reshaping and reembracing it in the retelling. The conversion narrative can thus make conversion appear purely tactical, precisely because the discourse is framed in terms of what was wrong and bad about the past. Conversion almost always has "practical" explanations: fighting addiction, bottoming out, facing a medical crisis, or other "pathologies of poverty." A common factor among conversionist religious groups is that converts must learn to interpret these factors in a manner consistent with the group's norms and discursive style.²⁵

This is not to say that conversion narratives should be discounted as disingenuous or programmed. Rather, researchers must pay attention to the convert's stage in their conversion career, always remaining cognizant of the fact that narratives are socially constructed and retrospectively reinterpreted over time. In other words, conversion accounts may tell us more about current identities, beliefs, and orientations than they do about the past.

Maria Carozzi's study of converts to an Afro-diasporan religious group in Argentina provides an excellent illustration. By speaking with practitioners and analyzing their discourse at various stages of initiation into the group, Carozzi sheds light on the fact that that converts are as much "chosen" by religious authorities as they are "choosers" in their conversion process. Only those who appear to have certain affinities and dedication are invited into the inner circle of the group.²⁶

At the same time, an analysis of conversion narratives demonstrates an ongoing process of continuity and rupture with the former life for converts. Patricia Birman argues that, in the case of Brazilian neo-Pentecostals, the spiritual forces of previous religious practices remain very much alive in the worldviews and narratives of converts, despite the fact that they are now demonized within the neo-Pentecostal dualist ontology.²⁷ In other words, narratives allow converts to keep a place for their former beliefs and spirits in their daily discourse.

These studies provide us with practical methodological lessons for studying conversion. Tracking and measuring religious changes requires a methodology that can capture the multiplicity of causal factors and gradations of conversion. Qualitative interviews and survey data must be complemented with participant observation in order to capture the conversion career of any individual. Nonconverts must be interviewed as well. Without this control group we may be missing half of the story. Overlooking this group has led some researchers to overpredict the causal nature of precipitant events (drug use, stress, and other emotional/psychological crises) in the conversion process.²⁸

Researchers should also approach conversion narratives carefully because, although they are an empirical indicator of conversion, they are socially constructed and influenced by the discourse of the new group to which the convert has affiliated. If the conversion narrative is not considered carefully, we may lose sight of the fundamental tension in conversion discourses between the processes of choosing (individual agency) and of being chosen (either by religious authorities or directly by a deity or spirit).

Political and Economic Effects of Conversion

The debate over the impact of conversion in Latin America has been framed largely in terms of democracy, development, resistance, and accommodation. The results of studies asking questions within that framework have varied widely and have led to inconclusive results, primarily because the wrong questions are being asked. Religious conversion is a personal and religious decision that takes place over time. While individual decisions may add up to a larger process of religious change, the most important political effects of such changes in Latin America have to do with the manner in which new religiously held values enter the public sphere, inform public discourse, and combine to resolve or exacerbate local cultural, social, or familial tensions. These political effects, however, do not fall neatly into categories of democratic /authoritarian, left/ right, or resistance/ accommodation.

Five primary guidelines can assist us in untangling the complicated political and economic impact of conversion in Latin America. First, we must disaggregate and specifically define the religious variables we posit as having political effects. As I have argued elsewhere, the act of conversion or belonging to a given religious affiliation is simply not a good predictor of political attitudes and activities.²⁹ We are much better served by focusing on the specific religious beliefs and practices associated with the religious groups experiencing rapid growth in the region, and how those beliefs and practices interact with specific local and national contexts. For example, strong tendencies toward millennialism and charismaticism (among both Protestants and Catholics) are associated with political quietism in closed and authoritarian political contexts. At the same time, the same set of religious beliefs and practices can have a positive impact on voting frequency if political participation is encouraged as both a right and a duty for citizens.³⁰

Second, sweeping generalizations connecting religious change to claims about democracy and development should be viewed with suspicion. In a region where multiple powerful factors militate against significant progress on either of these fronts, we can hardly expect a series of individual religious choices to add up to a coherent, direct, and sweeping force for economic or political change. As Jeffrey Rubin argued recently, we may better understand the effects of social and religious movements in Latin America if we investigate the manner in which they

introduce alternative rationalities, discourses, and narratives into public spaces, rather than forcing our "square peg" research subject into the "round hole" of classic sociological, anthropological, and political categories.³¹

David Smilde provides us with one such nuanced approach in his study of evangelical political participation in Venezuela. Smilde argues that evangelical "publics" in Venezuela are purposely constructed relational contexts that extend network ties and introduce a "moralized" discourse into the public sphere.³² The same could be argued for television and radio evangelism throughout the region. This discourse and political responses to it (such as Hugo Chavez's adoption of evangelical images and phrases) constitute a rich field for further study. This sort of political participation does not fall neatly into the bounds of traditional political categories, but it remains important and demands careful analysis.

Third, much of the political impact of religious change can be understood only through a lens that includes both the global and the local. Pentecostalism is a globalized religious movement that interacts with local religious beliefs and practices while simultaneously demonizing them. Many Pentecostal (and neo-Pentecostal) churches have international headquarters and business plans, but the staff members of most Pentecostal churches are locals, with social, political, and economic concerns that reflect those of their local community.³³ Thus, although Pentecostalism tends to "look the same" across the variant communities in which it has made significant inroads in Latin America, the political and social effects of Pentecostal growth interact with local contexts to produce very different political effects. The same is true among the "pentecostalized" Catholics in charismatic churches throughout the region.

Fourth, upward social mobility certainly plays some role in conversion, but whether it is an empirical or merely a perceptual reality remains unclear. Certainly arguments that posit an upward swing in "development" on a national scale because of religious conversions should be discounted. At the same time, the stories of individuals and communities who have experienced upward social mobility along with conversion merit careful empirical analysis. As Virginia Garrard-Burnett argues, conversion may not make the convert financially rich, but it can provide a wealth of "spiritual capital" in the form of beliefs, networks, self-meanings, and affirmation that assist people in navigating the difficulties of everyday life.³⁴

Finally, conversion must be compared between the various religious groups in Latin America instead of focusing exclusively on the Catholic-to-Protestant shift. Widening the scope of the study of conversion makes the conversion picture more accurate. This wider scope facilitates our ability to trace people's movement in their conversion careers and compare variables involved in the process of entering and leaving different religious groups. While the growth of other religious groups in Latin America is commonly assumed to come at the expense of the Catholic Church, the reality is that Catholicism has also experienced a major internal revival during the same time period. Catholicism has certainly lost shares as a self-reported percentage of the population throughout the region, but many experts argue that the Catholic Church, though leaner, is more vibrant and healthier than ever before.³⁵

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I argue for a definition of conversion that is more fluid than static. Conversion is a process that takes place over time; interacts with institutional religion, networks, and cultural contexts; and does not necessarily proceed in a linear or chronological fashion. I argue for a reconceptualization not only of conversion but also of the methods used in research and subjects studied as its effects. Evaluating the scholarship on religious change in Latin America can help us to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization, understand the multiple lines of causality involved in conversion, and utilize methods that better capture the complexity of the process of religious change in the region. One can hope that such an approach will help to inform future scholarship and lead to more refined and specific claims about the process and impact of religious conversion in general.

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