

Are U.S. Latino Society & Culture Undergoing Secularization?

Response to PARAL/ARIS Study of Religious Identification Among Hispanics

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March 7, 2006

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Introduction: My Perspective

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this topic of secularization in the Latino community. However, I come to this topic not as a sociologist or demographer, but a New Testament scholar who grew up as a Hispanic Pentecostal and now serves as lay leader and preacher in a Latino United Church of Christ for about fifteen years now. I am a Puerto Rican, born and raised in New York City. Over the years, I have preached and taught a significant amount in many Hispanic Protestant churches of all types and sizes, as well as Anglo churches of all denominations. Thus, my comments on the PARAL/ARIS Study of Religious Identification among Hispanics and the question of increasing secularization of the Latino community emerges from a life-long experience of Hispanic Pentecostalism, Hispanic Protestantism and a twenty-year career in theological education, including the theological education of Hispanics.

Some Observations from the Study Relative to the Question of Secularism

Reading the study as an informed observer rather than a sociologist or demographer, I was struck by the category of “no religion.” The other options close to this category included “atheist,” “agnostic,” “humanist,” “secular” or “having no

religion.” Given these options, I wondered how limiting these were for those Latinos and Latinas responding, especially for those who for whatever reasons were going through transitions in their religious affiliation. Perhaps they understood the other categories as too pejorative because they did have some sense of spirituality, but did not necessarily want to identify themselves as either atheist, agnostic, humanist or secular. However, the term “religion” often refers to “organized religion” and thus seemed an easier fit for those Latinos and Latinas rejecting a form of organized religion in favor of their own kind of informal “spirituality.” Perhaps what we are also seeing in these numbers is a rejection of the religion of the parents of many, especially younger Hispanics, and not outright “secularism” or “no religion.”

The increase of persons identifying themselves as “Christians” and decrease in those who identified themselves as “Protestants” may be telling in this regard. If we put these two categories – increase in those with “no religion” and those identifying themselves as “Christians” rather than “Protestants” – it may indicate transition and flux, rather than outright rejection of religion. Further, the fact that the largest group of no-religion Hispanics are younger makes me wonder how many of these are second and third generation Latinos and Latinas moving away from the religion of their parents. Yet, the fact that educational attainment was not a factor, that there are equal numbers of high educational attainment among Roman Catholic, Protestant and “no religion” Hispanics, was surprising. Younger and more educated Hispanics among those identifying themselves as having no religion would support the idea that second and third generation Latinos and Latinas want to “escape” from the religion of their parents. That does not seem to be the case. However, the factor of immigration may be more significant in this

respect. Younger and more recent immigrants, mostly men, also tended to identify themselves as having no religion. Given their tremendous state of transition, one can understand their refusal or inability to identify any religious affiliation, perhaps even more so than second and third generation Hispanics rejecting or transitioning from their parents' religious affiliation. In another presentation, Carleen Basler of Amherst College demonstrated how in her study of young immigrant men, many undocumented, some refused to identify themselves as Roman Catholics for fear of anti-Hispanic/anti-Catholic immigrant reprisals.

Employment and religious identification presents some additional interesting factors. In terms of absolute numbers, there is more employment among those who declare themselves as having no religion. Now, this could be a factor of their relative youth as well, i.e., more unemployed and retired persons among older Hispanics. Yet, at the same time, according to the study, respondents with no religion live in households with lower income level than those who identify themselves with an established religion. Thus it is true that people who identify themselves as having no religion tend to be employed more than those that don't, but their jobs pay lower salaries. This too could be tied to the presence of more recent immigrants in this category of those having no religion. Moreover, it seems that the more established households, those with incomes of between \$50,000 and \$75,000, are more established in religion as well. The latter tend to identify themselves as Roman Catholics and Protestants. Those with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$39,000 have the highest numbers of those who identify themselves as having no religion.

Geographic Issues

I was surprised by the lower numbers of Catholic Hispanics in New England compared to other regions. Just 40% of Hispanics in New England, a very Catholic area, identified themselves as Roman Catholic. Perhaps those numbers are skewed by a more traditional, formal, and therefore less accessible to Hispanics, Roman Catholic expression in such places as Boston compared to New York and even Hartford, where there tend to be more participatory expressions of religion, including among Roman Catholic parishes. We can say something more precise, I think, with regard to Hispanics in other regions, namely, there are more Latinos and Latinas who identify themselves as having no religion in places where there are fewer Hispanics. Any region with historically less Hispanics, usually means there are fewer Latino churches with which to affiliate and, therefore, more recent arrivals tend to designate themselves as having no religion. Thus, places like Minnesota (mid north central region) and Kentucky (west south central region) have more Latinos and Latinas stating they have no religion. As Hispanics spread out more to these previously “un-latinized” regions, less numbers and less amenable religions yield more “no-religionists.” And this is true in general for those foreign-born newcomers with less familiar churches available to them. In our own city of Hartford, for example, the oldest and largest Latino Protestant church, House of Restoration Church has an 8am service in Spanish, which has an increasing number of Central and South American immigrants attending. It’s more traditional 11 AM service, now conducted in English, caters more to the descendants of the church founders – Puerto Ricans – who are now in their second and third generation, still Latino/a in culture, worship style and theology, but they function better in the English language.

Geographic regions that do not adapt themselves to the presence of Hispanic immigrants who need services, including religious services, in Spanish and attuned to Latino culture, will have an increasing number of religiously unaffiliated Hispanics.

Thus I find myself agreeing with this statement in the PARAL study on religious identification with regard to religious switching: “This [tendency toward religious switching] may reflect the multi-generational nature of Americanization of U.S. Hispanics, whereby religious switching is another way of adaptation into American culture and society” (p.16). When Latinos and Latinas migrant or immigrate to regions in which Hispanics are sparse, they may switch from Roman Catholicism or Protestantism to “no religion” because there is no amenable organized religion there to receive them. Are they, therefore, more “secular”? Not necessarily, just less tied to organized religion.

Religious Attitudes and Beliefs

That “no religion” may not necessarily mean “more secular” is attested by the responses to questions about religious attitudes, behaviors and beliefs on pages 16 to 20 of the PARAL study. For example, when those who profess no religion are asked about household religious affiliation, 19% said at least someone in the household belonged to a church. So there is some religious influence there, from a parent or a spouse most likely. More to the point, statistics about belief in God, belief in miracles and seeking help from God, are all surprisingly strong among those with no religious affiliation – 85%, 76% and 72%, respectively, say they strongly or somewhat strongly hold these beliefs and attitudes. Such statistics point more to an outlook that is increasingly rejecting established religion more so than adopting a secular outlook. Perhaps we should apply

the popular ascription of being “spiritual not religious” to these religiously unaffiliated Latinos and Latinas. Christian Smith in his large study of American teenagers – *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* – has shown this to be the case about that group of young Americans. Perhaps a similar tendency – rejecting organized religion in favor of personal spirituality – is reflected in the PARAL study of religious identification among Hispanics. Certainly, the phenomenon of “popular religiosity” among Hispanic Catholics in particular is an example of this tendency to pursue a “home religion” and family religious practices like the family altar, community festivals, and personal piety, either in conjunction with going to the mass or in opposition to organized services. Anthony Stevens-Arroyo in his commentary at the end of the Study (“Commentary: The Intersection of the ARIS/PARAL Report with Pastoral Concerns”) attests to this possibility when he writes, for example, “There is reason to interpret the no religion category as ‘believers without an institution’” (p.5). Institutional ties to religion may be weakening among Hispanics, but their spiritual outlook on life and the world remains strong.

Conclusion – A Personal Testimony

My parents came from Puerto Rico to New York City in the early 1950s. They had no close ties to their Roman Catholic religious heritage and these became less binding in the mostly Irish and Italian parishes of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism of 1950s New York. In a moment of personal and family crisis, however, my mother turned to a small storefront Pentecostal church for solace and community, and it was in that religious expression that she reared her three children in the 1960s and 1970s. Each of us was

motivated by our parents and the church to pursue higher education and as I did so, I was exposed to a larger and broader religious landscape at each level – undergraduate liberal arts in New York, while working with the youth in my church, evangelical seminary in suburban Boston and progressive theology in graduate school. During those years my religious affiliation changed from Pentecostal to Hispanic Evangelical to Hispanic mainline Protestant. Now my children – the third generation of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. – want to explore their own spirituality as teenagers and young adults, and it has less and less to do with institutional religion. If asked, would they say they have “no religion”? Maybe, if they understand the word “religion” as “organized religion.” Would they say they have a “secular” outlook on life? If that means to leave God out of the picture, I think they might say, “No, I’m not religious, but I am spiritual.”

Is U.S. Latino culture and society undergoing secularization? I think it’s too early to tell, but I agree with Tony Stevens-Arroyo that the category of “no religionism needs to be analyzed as an important new religious identity among Latinos/as” (*Commentary*, p.6). It may be equivalent to the notion that my kids are expounding, along with many others, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” And religious organizations, churches and denominations that serve Latinos and Latinas across this nation need to wake up to this growing phenomenon that is not limited to American teenagers, but to persons of faith of all races and creeds, including a growing number of Hispanics.