

Secularization with *Salsa*

by

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

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Secularization, as a process, was first used to describe *the confiscation by state authority of property belonging to churches*. Buildings such as churches, hospitals and schools as well as convents and monasteries were the first targets of secularization. The properties were transferred from the control of religious authority and given over to secular officials. By analogy, secularization has come to mean *not just the transfer of buildings, but also the functions appropriate to those buildings*. Thus, for instance, not only is the control of the hospital building transferred from church to state, but the church contribution to hospital care is also given over to the state in the act of secularization.

Although secularization is now considered to be the general expectation, we should recognize that secularization has a painful and conflicted history. During the Protestant Reformation, for instance, sympathetic rulers aided the spread of the religion by the confiscation of Catholic institutions and properties. Thus, there was a polemical edge to secularization, establishing the state as antagonistic to one or other religion. The most devastating forms of secularization, however, came with opposition to *all* religion. Starting with the French Revolution in 1789 and repeated throughout most of the 1800s, secular liberals used secularization as a means of promoting non-religious, even atheistic, social goals. Instead of channeling tax money through the churches for services such as schools and orphanages, governments now held the money themselves and substituted state agencies for religious ones in dispensing charity, education, and healing. Today, most services previously within the direct sphere of religious institutions are commonly considered the obligation of the state. Thus, the secular mindset about public services has become the established view and the concept of faith-based institutions controlling such functions is something “new.”

Some have argued that taking schools, orphanages, cemeteries, and such away from the churches ultimately benefited society, since the facilities now served everyone, regardless of religious affiliation. In the separation of church and state, the minority religion usually benefits because its members can enjoy services on a claim of equality as citizens. Thus, in the drive for social equality up to the middle of the 20th century Jews and Catholics in the US often joined forces to support forms of secularization that limited Protestant hegemony. One example was opposition to prayer in the public schools. Most Protestants felt comfortable with certain biblical wording for common consumption: Jews and Catholics, on the other hand, did not want to use forms of prayer that were offensive to their beliefs. They often preferred *no prayer at all* in the public schools to offensive prayer. In such cases, the advocates of secularization – meaning non-denominational expression – were spurred by religious motivations. I would point out that secularization has been directed not only against the Catholic Church, but has also against privileges once afforded the Church of England or the Lutheran Church, for example. An understanding of secularization, therefore, must recognize the majority-minority status of religious groups. For that reason, secularization in Latin America and among Latinos and Latinas differs from secularization in the United States.

Protestants in Latin America, whom I will call “*evangélicos*” without equating them to the Evangelicals in the US, assumed a similar critical social role of critique against the Catholic majority in those countries. Just like Catholics in the US sought in secularization a protection from domination by a majority from another denomination, Hispanic Protestants did the same in Latin America. Puerto Rico may be the best

example of how a Protestant minority worked for separation to church and state – secularization -- in order to benefit religion.

In most Latin American countries, Protestantism was not a major political force until most recently. Historically, secularization in Latin America was promoted by completely secular groups, the *pensadores liberales*, who opposed *all* religion. Frequently, these liberal elites caricatured religion as the result of superstition and ignorance. Adopting the philosophy of Positivism, they viewed themselves as educated elites defending modernity from traditional believers. Many were anti-clerical because unlike the Protestant establishment in the US, these Latin American leaders fostered secularization not to limit conflicts between believers of different faiths, but as a prelude to forms of atheism. Thus, the anti-clerical liberals introduced a strain of secularism that differed from prejudice in the US, which in most cases was against Catholics or Jews and not religion in general. Ironically, many of these Latin American *liberales* also belonged to Spiritist circles. At the very time they ridiculed Christian believers for putting faith in Jesus, they gathered in Masonic lodges to communicate with the dead, moaning and swooning in dark, unlighted rooms.

This short jaunt through history helps us establish certain basic points about what looks like secularization among Latinos and Latinas, but has significant characteristics. **First**, people of faith might actually find benefit in secularization because it eliminates unnecessary conflicts among the denominations in the pursuit of civic services. **Second**, anti-clericalism has been particularly influential in Latin America, but despite some similarities, anti-clericalism is different from secularization. **Third**, when considering people of Latin American heritage, we should be careful not to impose an understanding

of secularization that fails to reflect the unique history of Latinos and Latinas. We Latinos and Latinas enjoy a secularization with salsa.

These points may help illuminate secularization in light of what the ARIS/PARAL Report tells us about Latinos and Latinas. I believe there are three major issues wherein our survey results challenge popular impressions: Pentecostalization, Popular Religiosity, and Spirituality.

Pentecostalization

The media has celebrated the spread of Pentecostalism throughout the world and particularly in Latin America. Writers who made a living praising secularization, like Harvard's Harvey Cox, have flip-flopped to predict a wave of Pentecostalism that will displace Catholicism and the historical Protestant denominations. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm often lacks a solid empirical base. The ARIS/PARAL Report shows that for Latinos and Latinas, secularization is a trend: Pentecostalization, on the other hand, is a media-driven hypothesis.

My reasons for going against the grain of popular perception is based on arithmetic. Surely, those espousing Pentecostalization in Latin America cite rising numbers of adherents. However, one needs to measure the increase in the number of Pentecostals by the corresponding increase in the general population. In other words, if the general population increases 25%, a 25% increase in the number of Pentecostals only keeps pace with the general society and does not indicate growth in the *percentage* of Pentecostals for society. Against this measure, only six of Latin America's 21 countries have a statistically significant increase in the percentage of *evangélicos*.¹ In a word, not

only is the Pentecostalization of Latin America a suspect conclusion, it is not applicable to Latinos and Latinas in the United States.

The ARIS/PARAL Report shows that in ten years (1990-2001), Pentecostals increased only marginally *in percentage* of all Latinos and Latinas: from a little more than 3% to a little less than 4%. This does not mean they did not grow in numbers, for in fact they did. But their numerical increase has to be measured against a 54% demographic increase for all Latinos and Latinas. In other words, to find out how much more they have grown than the rest of the population, we first have to subtract a 54% increase.

Nonetheless, the *perception* of Pentecostalization is hard to dismiss. I would suggest that other parts of the PARAL Study offer explanations of why people believe the Pentecostal growth is larger than the facts would bear. Pentecostal and Evangelical churches are small, the majority with fewer than 100 members. Catholic parishes, on the other hand, average 1000 or more *families*. A 54% increase in 4 Pentecostal churches over the decade from 1990 would mean 6 churches, while one Catholic parish might report only more pews being filled at the Spanish-language mass. The increase in the number of Pentecostal churches also creates what I will call “critical mass.” Our hypothetical six churches can now support a bible school, a summer camp, a council of ministers, etc. while previously when there were only 4 churches, the *evangélicos* lacked sufficient members to add these ancillary activities.

In a sense, such growth in critical mass is perhaps more significant than increase of numbers alone. Catholics are likely to respond that their most significant growth comes with the influx of active members of movements such as Marriage Encounters, the

Cursillo and the Charismatic Movement. Thus, critical mass explains dynamism and energy within Latino religion and — given the relative stagnation of Pentecostal growth — may in fact be as vital within Catholicism as among *evangélicos*.

This is not to deny that there are fewer Latinos and Latinas willing to identify themselves as Catholics in 2001 than in 1991. In fact, the 9% drop from 66% in 1990 to 57% in 2001 for Latinos and Latinas professing Catholicism is matched by a 7% rise for those professing “no religion.” It seems likely the Catholic loss is to this non-denominational category rather than to Pentecostal or Protestant churches. Contrary to the interpretations of writers like Father Andrew Greeley, there is no zero-sum game in which dropping out of the Catholic Church means dropping in on a Pentecostal one.

Another version of the Pentecostalization hypothesis can be found in a national study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Catholic Charismatics, it was claimed, are really Pentecostals, as are those *evangélicos* who are Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists and (even) Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Parsing the Pew logic, we discover that such Pentecostalization is not based on theological belief: Catholic Charismatics continue to espouse the real presence, the intercession of Mary and the saints, and the efficacy of seven sacraments, while members of the historical denominations continue to uphold the teachings of Wesley, Luther and Calvin. Despite divergent theologies, the Pew study made these believers “Pentecostal” whenever they report a “born-again” experience or use in worship hymns that took origin in the Pentecostal experience. In other words, if you shed a tear in repenting of your sins, clap your hands in church or sing “Amazing Grace” you are classified as a Pentecostal. As a heuristic device, this may be perfectly legitimate, of course, but it should be clear that in this sense Pentecostalization concerns

only a mode of prayer and does not imply conversion or defection from Catholicism by stealth.

Popular Religiosity

“Popular Religiosity” has become a constituent element of Latino religion in the US today and one with unique characteristics when compared to other religious expressions. The term here is used with a different meaning from “popular religion” or “folk religion,” notions which reflect the Enlightenment bias towards rationality. From such a modern perspective “popular” means “vulgar” religion, distinguishable from tightly disciplined orthodoxy. In a post-modern world, however, “popular religiosity” has come to be viewed more favorably as a form of resistance to control by establishment elites. In contrast with these black-and-white divisions, Ana María Díaz-Stevens has developed the thought of theologians such as Virgilio Elizondo to show that in much of the Latino Catholic experience, popular religiosity operates as a complement to, rather than in opposition against, church orthodoxy. Analyzing the effects of the Council of Trent in Latin America after 1563, I have advanced elsewhere the notion that the complementarity of popular religiosity and orthodoxy was intentional and has shaped Baroque Latin American Catholicism as a badge of multiple identities. While this is not the place to expound upon these theories, I ask you to accept as a result of these processes that “Catholic” in Latin America has become as much a nationalistic and cultural identity as a theological one.

Secularization has been affected because it is increasingly common to find Latinos who cut the Catholic religious-nationalistic-cultural knot into its constituent parts and choose only the nationalistic or cultural strands. It is in this way that *evangélicos*

will seek a *quinceañera* ceremony, hang a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe in their home, or participate in the *Via Crucis* on Good Friday. While *theologically* each of the above derives from Catholic practice, they are seen as expressions of Latino popular religiosity and examples of culture and nationalism. Just as the singing of “Alabaré, alabaré” doesn’t make a Latino Catholic into a Pentecostal, the borrowing (dare we say “syncretism”?) with Catholic expressions does not mean that an *evangélico* has submitted to Romanism.

We need also to recognize that 69% of Latino *evangélicos* were born into Protestantism and never converted from Catholicism. Might we expect that two or three generations of Latinos and Latinas living within Protestantism have contributed towards a new form of Latino popular religiosity? This will likely become a US type of religiosity, since 76% of *evangélicos* in the US are born here. One suspects that people born into a religion have less sharp reactions to different faiths and since they grow up in the US culture will adopt many features of US civil religious tolerance for Protestant, Catholic and Jew.

It is my experience that Latino Protestants born into their faith are far more ecumenical than the generation that rejected Catholicism. Moreover, pragmatism also rounds off rough edges. I remember conversing with the saintly New York City prison chaplain, the Reverend José Caraballo, about his adoption of clerical clothing including a Roman collar and his acceptance of being called “Padre” by the prisoners. Although a strict interpretation of the Pentecostalism in which he had been formed would have reacted viscerally to such accretions from Catholicism, Reverend Caraballo

accommodated to a form of popular religiosity that blurred the boundaries between denominations.

We need to pay more attention to these emerging forms of Latino popular religiosity among *evangélicos*, I think, because a growing majority of Latinos and Latinas are not immigrants, but second, third and fourth generation Americans. Moreover, the ARIS/PARAL report shows that conversion affected only 16% of Latinos and Latinas in 2001. In other words, 5 out of 6 Latinos and Latinas have remained with the religion of their birth.² Although among those born in the US, the numbers drop to 81% or 4 out of 5 Latinos and Latinas.

What we don't know is how to measure the frequent switching among Protestants from one denomination to another. *Evangélicos* move from Methodist to Baptist to Reform and back again with apparent ease. In fact, such switching may represent a hemorrhaging of Pentecostalism, since so many contemporary Latino and Latina Protestants were born into Pentecostalism rather than into their present denominations. I would ask also if such movement from Fundamentalism into the historical denominations represents a form of secularization. After all, a more rationalistic world view and theology is accepted by such denominational switching, and while not the full-fledged secularization described in my opening comments, may represent an intermediate stage that sociologist Max Weber called "differentiation."

Spirituality

I can make my final point with greater brevity than with the first two. The ARIS/PARAL Report shows that those professing "no-religion" among Latinos and Latinas have strong belief in God (85%), in miracles (76%), and God's personal help to

them (72%). This is not a profile for an irreligious people. I would suggest that these Latinos and Latinas are not “secular” in the sense that they have substituted rationality and science for belief and faith. Rather, it would seem that they are believers in God who do not believe in an established church – most especially in Catholicism.

A single category is probably not large enough to represent the variety of such religious non-joiners. Some may come from the anti-clerical, Spiritist tradition; others may profess an African religion such as Santería, but no longer feel obliged to “hide” such practices under the mantle of Catholicism. Some may continue profession in the popular aspects of Catholicism, focused on a non-institutional set of home practices. As I argued in an article that appeared in *America Magazine*, some may have been turned away from Catholicism by the policy of “deferred Baptism” that refuses the *ex opere operato* nature of the sacraments and requires a commitment to Catholic practice before conferring Baptism on a child. We need also to pay attention to those who prefer spirituality to religion. Often in an eclectic pattern, such persons fashion a religion suited to their own needs with bits and pieces from Catholicism, popular religiosity, Latino culture, nationalism as well as African, indigenous and interfaith notions taken from Buddhism, Sufism, Kabbala, Yoga or all of them together.

Like our New York-invented music with strands of Afro-Cuban *guarachas*, Puerto Rican *plenas*, Dominican *merengues*, Afro-American blues and jazz and Jamaican reggae, ours is a special form of secularization: secularization with salsa.

END NOTES

¹ The most dramatic increase has come in Guatemala. But Guatemala has undergone a dictatorship by a right-wing, US-anointed, evangelical, General Rios Mont. He persecuted Catholics during his regime, executing members of *comunidades de base* as Communists and making it unsafe for 3 bishops to reside in their dioceses. His “bible-or-bullets” policy increased the number of *evangélicos* in Guatemala, but one suspects that such conversions do not represent a major new religious movement.

² Catholics are more likely to become Protestant or to profess no-religion than Protestants to become Catholics – but this comparison is complicated because there are so many more Catholics than *evangélicos*.