

Latino-ization of the Church in the United States

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In anticipation of his plenary address at ADME's 2019 conference, we are reprinting a portion of a chapter by Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J. on the influence of Latino migration on the church in the United States. Fr. Deck is the Charles S. Casassa Chair of Catholic Social Values and professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. He previously served as the executive director of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He was a founder and first president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States as well as of the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry. This excerpt is used by permission from [Christianities in Migration: The Global Perspective \(Christianities of the World\)](#) by Peter C. Phan and Elaine Padilla (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The Pew Research Center summarized its findings about Latinos and the transformation of American religion saying that "understanding religious faith among Latinos is essential to understanding the future of this population as well as the evolving nature of religion in the United States." This chapter provides a necessary overview for a neuralgic topic as US society, religions, and religious movements experience Latinoization as a result of migration, relatively high Latino birthrates, and considerable exogamy.² What is happening in the political realignment of the nation echoes a change as well with regard to society and religion.³

First, we sketch centuries of Latino migrations, especially those of the past one hundred years. Second, we profile Latino religion from its remote origins keeping in mind the diverse elements of that rich religious heritage. Third, we consider some of the ways that Latino religion contributes to the transformation of Christianity in the United States today. Finally, we highlight some of the major observations. In addition to the pioneering work of the Pew Hispanic Research Center already noted, these reflections owe much to the scholarship of Gaston Espinosa, Timothy Matovina, and Richard R. Trevino whose works provide a resourceful entry into the complex world of US Latino religion today.⁴

Latino Migration to the United States: The Oldest and the Newest

Herbert Eugene Bolton, the father of borderlands history, reminded us more than a century ago that the movement of civilization, religion, commerce, and culture north from Mexico and the Caribbean is one of the greatest yet unacknowledged dynamics of US history. He reminded us that this northward movement was *prior to* the frontier movement of Anglo Americans and other European immigrants westward from the Atlantic seaboard. An adequate appreciation of the presence of Latino cultures and religion in the wake of this northward movement has been eclipsed by the Frontier Thesis, a narrative based upon a narrow historical interpretation of US history that ignores Latino contributions. Catholic Church histories as well have tended to reflect the same regrettable Anglo-American bias that makes little of the deep Latino roots of US Catholic Christianity.¹⁴

Compounding this blindness is a long-standing prejudice in the Western world against things Hispanic, which Philip Wayne Powell identified decades ago in *The Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting United States Relations with the Hispanic World*. This prejudice has tended to work against the acceptance of Latinos as a "successful" immigrant group, and this despite the fact that Latinos are actually the oldest group of migrants to have stepped foot on what is now US soil.¹⁵ In the majority today's Latinos were actually born in the United States and are therefore not immigrants. Significant numbers of them, moreover, have experienced upward socioeconomic mobility. Even though there are many generations of Latinos whose presence goes back much farther than many European Americans, Latinos remain strangely alien. Over the past one hundred years the constant replenishment of Latinos by relatives coming from Mexico, together with the homeland's geographic proximity, has contributed to a unique situation in which Latinos continue to be judged by the general public more as foreigners than as Americans.¹⁶

Latino migrations in North America began early in the 1500s, one century before England's colonial explorations of the region. John Tutino demonstrates how the Latino presence has been a formative factor and how it certainly has continued as such throughout the origins, foundations, and ongoing trajectory of the nation—an immense movement of peoples, goods, ideas, religion, ways of life, and culture from Latin America. The Latino presence, which includes a strong religious identity, consequently, is a constitutive element in the very making of the nation.¹⁷

The geographic territory that eventually became the United States was more in the hands of Spain than of Great Britain. At least a third of the continental United States, moreover, was taken from Mexico in a war in 1848. This constituted half of Mexico's national territory. In addition, the earliest settlement of non-native people in the United States is St. Augustine, Florida, followed by Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Spanish established military presidios, missions, and pueblos in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California. After indigenous peoples, the first settlers in all these regions were Latinos who from the beginning were made up of Spaniards and their children (criollos), mulattos, mestizos, native people, and enslaved or freed Africans. This extraordinary amalgamation of races and ethnicities, moreover, continues to be the pattern of Latino immigration five hundred years later.¹⁸

On the western and southern flanks of the United States Tutino notes the powerful influence of the "expansive ways of Spanish North America," which played an essential role in developing the economy of the West. The first wealth of this region was the result of mining, irrigated cultivation, and commercial grazing. These seminal economic activities originated in the central Mexican states of Queretaro and Zacatecas. The silver economy flourished for almost three centuries and was the principal source of funding for capitalist expansion throughout North America. The slave economy of the early United States was always second to the diversified economy of Mexico. Spanish North America became a zone of considerable commercial and capitalist expansion that unquestionably "helped shape the histories of both Mexico and the United States."¹⁹

Latino migration was relatively sparse in earlier centuries before the Mexican American War of 1846. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Latino presence in the United States was made up principally of Mexican citizens who found themselves suddenly in the United States as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the war with Mexico. This was a time of considerable economic expansion for Mexico after having undergone 50 years of political instability in the first decades of

independence from Spain. Emigration to the United States was minimal during this period, but the movement of laborers northward eventually spilled over into the United States.²⁰

In the first decade of the twentieth-century, conditions leading to emigration arose in Mexico as a result of sociopolitical conflicts. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 initiated an exodus of refugees and economic immigrants to the United States that has continued more or less unabated for one hundred years. It began with the arrival of Mexicans working on the railroads and mines. World War II, moreover, created new opportunities for Mexican labor as local manpower dropped on farms and factories due to military recruitment. The 1930s brought a hiatus in the form of abrupt and legally questionable deportations of Mexican nationals in the wake of the Great Depression. In 1942, however, the flow northward resumed as the first Bracero Agreement between the United States and Mexico was signed.

The Bracero program lasted for more than 20 years and inaugurated a stream of legal and illegal migration that has continued to the present day despite sporadic efforts to arrest it.²¹

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Mexico experienced considerable economic improvement that certainly played a role in arresting the movement northward. This is part of a general economic advance made by Latin America, not just Mexico, which fared relatively well during the worldwide economic downturn after 2008. In 2012, for example, the Mexican government reported that the middle class had grown by 17 percent. Salaries rose and access to education improved. Mexican migration to the United States as reported by the Pew Research Center declined markedly after 2009. These developments suggest that something is indeed occurring in regard to the historic one-hundred-year movement of Latinos of Mexican origin northward.²² Nevertheless, the prospects of a more flexible immigration law, one that provides for guest workers and a process for gaining regularization for the 11 million undocumented of whom more than half are Mexicans, may mean an increase of movement of Mexicans northward, at least for family members seeking to be reunited.

Significant numbers of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Central and South Americans have swelled the ranks of US Latinos in the second half of the twentieth century particularly as a result of war and/or economic hardship in those nations. In the majority these immigrants identify as Roman Catholic, but there is significant movement to other faiths, not only to evangelicalism and Pentecostalism but also to Mormonism and the Jehovah Witnesses.²³ Surveys, however, range between 70 and 65 percent Roman Catholic among immigrants of Mexican origin, and it declines to around 55 percent by the third generation. Interestingly enough, only 50 percent of Puerto Ricans identify as Roman Catholic. Puerto Ricans and Central Americans have moved in significant numbers toward evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, somewhat in contrast to the Mexicans. Juan Francisco Martinez notes that of all Latino cohorts, the Latinos of Mexican origin are the least likely to move on to faiths other than Roman Catholicism.²⁴

The Latino Religious Legacy

Understanding the current appeal of religion to Latinos requires an appreciation of its roots. Three powerful religious currents converge in the origins of what was to become today's Latino Christianity: the pre-Columbian, the Spanish medieval and baroque, and the African. Two geographical areas stand out in particular as locations for the centuries-old process of religious

gestation in the Americas: Meso-America and the Andean region. An Enlightenment mindset and the Black Legend about Spanish Catholic backwardness

by missionaries under Spanish colonial rule. What stands out, however, is the remarkable way in which three religious currents mingled to produce one of the largest cohorts of Christians in the world today. Latin American or Latino Catholicism accounts for approximately one-half of worldwide Catholicism, and Latinos are now a major presence within evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity.²⁹

The words "syncretism" and "hybrid" capture the spirit of the missionary methods used in the world that the Spaniards brought to the Americas. Emerging from the *Reconquista*, eight centuries of intense cultural and religious encounters among Christians, Jews, and Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula brought to the Americas an analogical, Mediterranean imagination that allowed them to accommodate some of the features of the native peoples and African slaves they encountered in the Americas. Thus was forged a brilliant, distinctive popular religion, a basically orthodox Catholicism that stresses material signs that connect people with the transcendent: sacraments and symbols, devotions, local and home-based rituals, and imaginative narratives. This together with a Catholic emphasis on inclusivity implicit in the doctrine of catholicity, that is, the Church's mandate to engage, relate to, and respect the universal Spirit of God in others, created at times an atmosphere that allowed the religious ways of the non-Catholic others to add their ways to the panoply of practices that flourished under the big tent of Roman Catholicism.

Medieval Spanish Catholicism was characterized by a high regard for local religion as it took root in remote villages and valleys of the rugged Iberian Peninsula. Despite engaging in sporadic wars to reclaim the land for Christians, this Catholicism often found ways for living together in peace with "others," what in Spanish is called *convivencia*. The *Reconquista* was not only a time of war but also a time of rich intercultural and interreligious encounters among Christians, Muslims, and Jews that made Spain and Portugal unique among European peoples of the time.³⁰ The strong analogical imagination of the Catholic Mediterranean world allowed the Iberian colonizers of Latin America to integrate cultural and religious differences by means of the substitution of symbols.

The gods of both the pre-Columbian and African peoples were demoted but found a place by analogy in the Catholic Communion of Saints. The powerful role of feminine deities among the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the Africans found resonance in the central role of the Virgin Mary in Spanish Catholicism. The affirmation of miracles, healing, and good and evil spirits (angels and demons) was common in medieval Spanish Catholicism as well as in the indigenous and African worlds. The ritual, liturgical practices of Catholicism provided a venue for the addition of indigenous and African practices, music, and dancing. Moreover, for centuries Spanish Catholicism remained in the Americas a hothouse for exercising the baroque style in religious art, architecture, liturgy, and public *fiestas*.³¹ Huge numbers of African slaves and the emerging mestizo and mulatto masses embraced Catholicism and found the drama, movement, color, and pageantry of the baroque style pioneered by the Jesuits particularly attractive. The baroque style was deeply congenial and resonated well with the culture, religion, and ethos of the indigenous and African neophytes.

Popular Latino religion emphasizes affectivity and the embodiment of faith in performance. The community's beliefs assume *bodily* expression through ritual, gesture, and dance. Affectivity and performance remain influential factors in the acculturation of Latino popular religion in the new, dynamic circumstances of the postmodern world whether in Latin America or the United States.

These two qualities serve popular religion very well to the sense that they offer something distinctive that contrasts with the relatively staid rationality and dogmatism of mainstream Catholicism and traditional religion in the middle-class European American world. Latino contributions to religion in the postmodern era appear to fill a deep void for vitality over against the Western world's tendency to view religion as propositional and focused on fidelity to stated beliefs. Latino Catholicism does not dismiss nor oppose doctrines and orthodoxy. It simply stresses something else: *religion as life* and all the ways that the world of the divinity and spirits can be engaged existentially in community.³²

In connection with Latino religion's stress on affectivity, this is the place to mention the extraordinary role of Latinos in contemporary Christian renewalism in the form of Pentecostalism and its Catholic counterpart the Charismatic Renewal. Remarkably, the largest single group of Pentecostals and charismatics is found among peoples of Latin American origin. The Pentecostal movement is arguably the most meaningful development in worldwide Christianity of the past one hundred years. Along with evangelicalism the renewalist movement has transformed modern Protestantism and made significant inroads in Catholicism.³³ The historic, mainline Protestant churches that stand apart from Pentecostalism, as has been widely noted, are in precipitous decline. In Catholicism, moreover, there is a growing recognition of the role of movements like the Charismatic Renewal and a corresponding openness to some of the elements of lay participation and leadership, music, affectivity and general vitality that the Renewal provides.³⁴

The domestic, laity-oriented character of Latino popular Catholicism may also be relevant here. Having been nurtured for centuries at home by mothers and grandmothers, popular Catholicism is somewhat impervious or resistant to clericalism, the monopolization of leadership by the clergy. Once again, at the popular level it is not a question of the opposition of clergy to laity or a denial of the ordained clergy's unique role; rather, it is about placing the family and the broader community in a role of leadership that assures continuity in practices and values. This may involve benignly ignoring the clergy not opposing them. Writers like Orlando Espin have highlighted how Popular Catholicism is a form of *resistance* to the impositions of the powers of church and/or state.³⁵ Granted that in the chaotic world of migrations and modernization, this historic role for local communities and households, especially for woman, has evolved but not disappeared.

The power of an idiosyncratic popular religious orientation of the masses in Latin America survives and reaches down through the ages. Certainly it has evolved and declined in the context of urbanization and modernization. Originally rooted in the rural hinterlands, popular Catholicism today has experienced a decline in influence due to rising anonymity and autonomy in the patterns of life and work in urban, industrialized societies. Decades ago Segundo Galilea proposed the category "urban popular religion" for this mutation and studied it in his native Chile. Galilea noted the persistence of significant patterns of popular Catholic devotion in urban contexts, some of the same ones noted in parishes throughout the United States.³⁶ In urban centers, for example, parishes and clergy are more accessible than in rural areas. This means that popular religion encounters official religion with more regularity. As a result, celebrations that previously were conducted at home are sometimes transferred to the parish, and paraliturgical practices around death are now led not by mother, grandmother, or a lay prayer leader, but by the parish priest or the deacon.

Medieval Spanish Catholicism provided a framework for what has become a stunningly hybrid form of Catholicism in the Americas. Realistically, however, it has been observed that the *reverse* can and does occur, namely, Christian symbols are transformed by native, African, mestizo, and mulatto ones. Consequently, the word "interculturation" more adequately captures the mutuality of this encounter.³⁷ Moreover, the process is ongoing, and today in the context of Latino migration one may speak of new encounters with the cultures of modernity and post modernity.

The encounter of Latino popular Catholicism with a standardized European American Catholicism continues in full force. The growing Latino presence in the US Catholic Church in virtually every corner of the nation has served to create alternative styles of prayer and community as well as distinctive devotions to the Virgin Mary and the saints, along with practices like processions and paraliturgical dance. The process of introducing and in some cases transferring Latino practices and spirituality, emphases on affectivity, spontaneity, and family orientation to—the dominant European American context, has created a bifurcated church caught between diverging cultural and social class worlds. But it has also created a new style of being Catholic. US Catholicism is richer and more universal as a result of the Latino presence. It now shares in some of the same qualities found in developing nations globally, what missiologist Lamin Sanneh calls "frontier Catholicism."³⁸

The influence, however, has not been in one direction only. Latino Christianity is being influenced by the European American drive for organization, standardization, professionalization, and coherence, tendencies more typical of the US Catholic Church than of the sister churches of Latin America. One may speak, therefore, of a new *mestizaje*, the encounter with Anglo-American contemporary culture and religiousness, a new chapter in the ongoing give and take among cultures that have engaged Latinos over centuries and explain their way of life and being in church and society.³⁹

Expressions of Latino popular Catholicism have also affected Protestant, especially evangelical and Pentecostal congregations, in the form of practices around the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe as well as other Latino Marian devotions. The *quinceagera*, the fifteenth birthday celebration for girls, has become quite popular among some Latino Protestants. The widespread use of sharing popular hymns of a charismatic nature, moreover, can be detected in contemporary Catholic and Protestant worship in both Spanish and English.^o

The process of interculturation provides a context for appreciating the continuum of religious and spiritual practices characteristic of Latinos. These practices move from orthodox, standard Catholicism to various New Age and marginal practices like astrology and the horoscope. One of the qualities of Latino religion is its openness to religious expressions of all sorts, whatever their origin. For instance, the Spiritism of Alan Kardec continues to have some currency especially among some Caribbean Latinos. Spiritism dates back to nineteenth-century France. It offers adherents the prospect of communicating with the spirits of deceased loved ones. The world of the spirits was quite vivid among the pre-Columbian and African ancestors of today's Latinos, and it seems that there is still openness to this collective concern.

Spiritism has sometimes blended with *Santería*, an Afro-Cuban religion with a growing following among Caribbean Latinos in the United States.' With some variations in Brazil this lively religion of African origin goes by various names— *Condomble*, *Shango*, *Ubanda*, for example—and is

practiced by millions of Brazilians who simultaneously profess the Catholic faith. Voodoo is the name given this fascinating hybrid religion in Haiti. Having been the religion of slaves, Santeria in its various manifestations is adept at surviving underground, on the margins of society and of official religion.

One might speculate that in the milieu of today's postdenominational-ism, when growing numbers of Christians do not strongly identify with any denomination but move from one to another, there may be synergy derived from the Latino openness to religion in all its forms. The growth of Latino Catholic charismatics and Latino Protestant Pentecostals suggests that a new form of ecumenism may be in gestation, one in which the search for God and the transcendent, unity among believers, and engagement of cultures with matters of faith does not center so much on doctrine but rather on common values, beauty, life, and nonpropositional truths expressed in action.⁴²

Another popular form of religion among Latinos that has gained attention in the social sciences is *curanderismo*. Since time immemorial in the Americas local religious/community leaders have exhibited special powers in the area of healing. This includes expertise in the area of herbal medicines and ritual practices associated with physical, psychological, and spiritual healing. These healers may be men or women. Often they are of the same social class and level of education as the rest of the community. They are usually but not always esteemed at faithful Catholics. The practice of *curanderos* dates back beyond the evangelization of the sixteenth century when it was an integral element of the native American religions. Curiously, it has survived and even flourished in many parts of the United States wherever rural and urban working-class Latinos are found.⁴³

The practice of faith healers like this is sustained and enhanced by *botanicas*, local religious goods stores, found in strip malls within or close to barrios in almost every major city in the United States today. These *botanicas* provide the herbs recommended by the curanderos along with other religious objects such as images, holy water, prayer aids, and so forth. The inventory of such stores is a graphic example of the stunning hybridity of Latino religion today. Even a casual review of the objects found in *botanicas* shows that the religious orientation of Latinos is amazingly eclectic. It points to a persistent fascination with religion and even the occult, a supernaturalism and religious expressivity for which the initial Catholic evangelization continues to provide a workable framework. Yet today that fascination must engage an infinitely more complex pluralism than the one encountered centuries ago by the Spaniards. It must also continue to find its way in tension with official religion's discomfort with ambiguity and drive toward normativity.

Latino Religion and the Future of US Christianity

The preceding lines provide only the beginnings of an adequate framework for discussing the impact of Latino religion on US Christianity. In the final section of this chapter four areas of church life that reveal the direction of the Latino contributions specifically to US Catholicism today can be singled out as particularly revelatory. They flow from the rich if limited portrayal of migrations and religious roots discussed earlier: (1) the liturgy, (2) spiritual renewal, (3) faith and justice, and (4) the revitalization of ecclesial life."

Prayer and Worship

Timothy Matovina contrasts the orientation of mainstream liturgical leaders in the United States as well as in the Vatican itself to what Latinos have actually accomplished in the more than 4,800 parishes throughout the country where liturgy is celebrated in Spanish or bilingually.⁴⁵ In a period when emphasis was put on "clarity of symbols" leading to a reduction of imagery and a limiting of rituals and signs, Latinos actually did the opposite. Wherever they are found, Latinos tend to provide *additional* creative, idiosyncratic approaches rooted in their popular Catholicism. These approaches involve imagery itself, whether of the saints, of Christian mysteries, of the passion of Christ, and of the Virgin Mary's life and apparitions. Emblematic of the Latino influence on US Catholicism is the fact that the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is not a holy day of obligation, has completely eclipsed the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is a holy day of obligation when the faithful are obliged to attend Mass. The Guadalupe celebration attracts the largest number of faithful—and not just Latinos—to church of any Marian feast in the United States.⁴⁶ The faithful "vote with their feet," as it were. This exemplifies the power of the community's practices to produce unexpected results that go beyond the plans of official leadership.

In general, the Latino presence has provided for continuity between Catholic practices regarding the Virgin Mary from the period before the Second Vatican Council with what occurred in the council's aftermath. Mainstream US Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary suffered a sharp decline after Vatican II. Arguably one might make the point that Marian devotion would be notably diminished had not Latinos and other traditional Catholic immigrants revitalized it. This is not a peripheral concern for Catholics, moreover, since the figure of Mary is central to a Catholic understanding of Christ and the Church.

Along with the emphasis on Mary and the saints, the Latino presence has influenced prayer and worship in the form of spontaneity and affectivity in language, gesture, and ritual practices. Popular seasonal practices like the *posadas* that combine biblical narrative with music, drama, and celebration before Christmas or the *via crucis*, the way of the cross, during Holy Week add a powerful, performative dimension to the Church's official worship. The many faith expressions of Latino Catholicism have a much deeper significance. According to Matovina, they "mediate a communitarian understanding of the human person that shapes their lives, faith, and modes of participation in the eucharist." In the face of emphases on the autonomous individual in modern cultures, Matovina also notes "the tendency of Latino devotees to accentuate relationships like those between Jesus and Mary presents an alternative vision of what fundamentally constitutes our humanity."⁴⁷ The emphasis on relationships, human and divine, and a communally shared sacramental world that characterize the prayer and worship of Latinos constitute an alternative to the myth and image of the autonomous individual so influential in mainstream US culture.

Spiritual Renewal

Much of the discourse regarding spirituality reflects the classic expressions of it in Catholicism, traditions linked to the charisms of religious founders or reformers. In contrast, Latino spirituality rooted in popular culture and outside the purview of official interpreters has seldom been given a great deal of attention. Yet in the period after Vatican II Latinos have been the main source for what has arguably been the spiritual development that has most touched the lives and spiritualities of ordinary people, namely, hugely popular movements like the *Cursillo*, Marriage Encounter, base ecclesial communities, and the Charismatic Renewal.

Some of these movements such as the *Cursillo* began in Spain but quickly flourished in Latin America and among US Latinos. Its methodology was enthusiastically adapted all over the globe: the *Cursillo's* emphasis on facilitating a Personal encounter of the individual with Christ, its stress on shared affectivity and on creating a communal context for follow-up through small community faith-sharing dynamics. This methodology often dovetailed with the practices of the base ecclesial communities and with charismatic/Pentecostal renewalism, which has had a powerful, sustained impact on religion among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The debt that this contemporary, religious and spiritual ferment owes to initiatives taken decades ago in Spain, Latin America and among US Latinos has seldom been acknowledged."

Faith and Justice

In the churches and in society in general the presence of Latinos in the United States has had the effect of fostering a renewed awareness of poverty and injustice. In the case of the Catholic Church, for instance, the rise in socioeconomic status among Catholics after World War II made them more middle class and affluent than ever in their history. Just as that was occurring, however, the sustained movement of working-class Latinos guaranteed the Catholic Church would or could not forget its migrant, working-class roots. The growing reality of inequality, discrimination, and racism affecting Latinos and other immigrant Catholics led to plans and programs fostered by the US Catholic bishops, such as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). Since its founding in the 1970s the CCHD has been one of the principal supporters of faith-based community organizing in the tradition of Saul Alinsky.⁴⁹ Influential networks like the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) have formed leadership particularly in Latino urban centers that have gone on to tackle larger regional, state, and national issues such as access to education, better housing, medical care, and immigration reform.

The long-term effects of leadership formation on Latinos in the style of faith-based community organizing relate to its emphasis on active citizenship rather than ad hoc engagement in charitable activities. Community organization stresses the difference among charity, advocacy, and empowerment. While all three are important, the most critical and strategic response to social needs and injustice must address issues of structure, power, and participation.

The connection of US Latinos, moreover, with their relatives in Latin America has helped maintain a broader awareness in the United States regarding the struggles for human rights and dignity taking place in Latin America. This was certainly the case in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of civil wars in Central America. Today the Latino presence continues to invite the churches to focus their attention more broadly on the Americas. The Synod of the Americas produced a document signed by Pope John Paul II that proposed to the bishops of North and South America and the Caribbean that the future of Catholicism was wrapped up in the reality of interdependent relationships based on geography, history, economics, culture, and politics.⁵⁰ The Latino presence in the United States consequently is a powerful incentive for a growing international awareness and collaboration.

Revitalization of the Church

The Latino presence in the United States is the source of new life for churches in many respects. The churches become more youthful, for example, six out of every ten Catholics under the age of 35 are Latinos.⁵¹ Some implications of this demographic sea change for Catholicism and other denominations

have already been noted. Beyond that, however, one perceives a significant yet underreported Latino contribution to US Catholicism's *modus operandi* in what is called the *eneuentro* process. Beginning in the early 1970s the Catholic hierarchy hosted a series of events that convened Latino leaders for the purpose of reflecting on pastoral realities and proposing a richer, theologically grounded way forward in the area of Hispanic ministry. Three *encuentros* were held over a period of 16 years from 1971 to 1987. Few other ecclesial events in the United States have reflected the letter and spirit of the Second Vatican Council as well as the *encuentros*. They led to a series of directives from the Catholic bishops and marked a period of continuous growth in pastoral care and social concerns focused on Latinos in parishes, dioceses, and organizations throughout the country.⁵² One would have to look hard, moreover, for a better conduit for the reception of Latin American contributions to the implementation of the second Vatican Council than the *encuentros*. This occurred in terms of small ecclesial communities, social justice awareness, the option for the poor, and heightened regard for popular religion in US Catholicism.

The *encuentros* represent a national process of pastoral visioning unprecedented in the history of US Catholicism from the point of view of their theological and methodological groundings. Inspired by the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on an inductive pastoral method, pastoral planning accordingly begins with lived experience. Serious pastoral planning for the entire church community not just Latinos was encouraged by this exemplary process. It was so successful that the US bishops decided to convene a national celebration of the New Millennium in Los Angeles in 2000. Tellingly, they asked the Latino Catholic leadership to host *Encuentro 2000*, a national gathering for all US Catholic leaders not just Latinos. The historic event attracted five thousand participants and highlighted the changing demographics, rising diversity, and prominence of Latinos as basic "signs of the times" for the Church of the Third Millennium.⁵³

Conclusion

Since time immemorial, migrations have played a central role in the spread and transformation of religions. The ongoing movement of Latin Americans north into what is the United States today signals a sea change of mounting significance. Some of the consequences are quite visible, for example, the change in the spirit and tone of worship among many congregations, Catholic and Protestant; second, a newfound interest in the church or congregation as community in which human relationships and expressivity are central rather than organization and efficiency; and, third, a renewed social location for US religion and churches among the poor and working class. Latino Christianity, moreover, relates to the Christian message in terms of practices and experience in a performative manner, rather than in the intellectualizing, propositional way of Western culture. A distinctive orientation to God as mystery and beauty along with a fascination with the world of the spirits, miracles, and healing have been constants in the popular religion of the Latin American masses over the centuries.⁵⁴

One may speculate that Latino religion's orientation toward lived experience may blend with what is perceived as a movement toward nondenominationalism among mainline Protestant churches, which involves a blurring of differences among the various churches. As noted earlier, Latino religion in Americas may also be part of a new stage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, one that moves away from basing the pursuit of Christian unity on clarity and agreement about doctrines to one based on the power of shared experiences and lives. Latinos have an abiding interest in religion in its many

forms as attested to the successful outreach of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists to them.⁵⁵ Latinos tend not to draw sharp lines of denominational identity. There is more than a residue of generosity among Latinos in respecting religion in almost any form. The fact that a growing number of Latinos no longer identify with Catholicism, Pentecostalism, or evangelicalism as reported does not mean that now they are absorbed into religious secularism.⁵⁶ Historically, Latinos have always been negotiating their way through a variety of religious orientations and have often settled for an *additive* approach, that is, religious identity is not a zero sum game, but an exploration that develops as life goes on. Consequently, religion is bigger than any one tradition and culture because the mystery of God is precisely that, something that goes beyond the human desire to limit, categorize, contain, and control. The deeper current of Latino religion suggests that Latinos tend to be searching for any manifestations of that mystery from whatever quarter it may come. Churches and various religions need to consider the implications of this Latino orientation to religious openness rather than to modernity's doubt, lest they react to this openness with attempts to define and circumscribe it by means of an ineffective denominationalism or dogmatism.

Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy may find this Latino penchant for religious inclusivity troublesome and identify it with relativism and/or anti-intellectualism. For Catholic and Orthodox theology, on the one hand, the challenge will be how to affirm the bridge-building religious openness of Latinos with the requirements of fidelity to Christian identity as proposed by reason and official church teaching. For the academy, on the other hand, the rise of Latino religious presence means going beyond a persistent Enlightenment bias that brackets religion as a purely private affair thus separating belief from life and action. Latino religion and spiritualities deserve more thoughtful attention in all their varieties, as these pages have tried to suggest. They can only continue to play a major, transformative role in the life of US society, culture, and religions as Latinos become a third of all Americans by the mid-twenty-first century.⁵⁷

Notes

1. *Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2007), 5.
2. *2010 Census Briefs*, Hispanic Population: 2010 (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 2011), S. Regarding exogamy, see Henry G. Gonzalez and John Rosales, eds., *Latinos and the Nation's Future* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2009), 62.
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