Response to Religious Identities

Author: Peter Versteeg (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 06-09-06 15:24

Migration flows change the social and cultural configurations of societies, but also stir up the cultural and religious repertoires of the immigrant groups involved. This is very well demonstrated in the paper by Andrea Althoff about the changing religious identities of Latin American immigrants in Chicago. Althoff’s essay is an example of the growing scholarly attention to the relation between migration and religious change, in particular in the field of Pentecostalism. The impact of this type of religiosity of American origin on the U.S. religious landscape makes it rather different from, for example, the Western European situation, where Pentecostalism has been a marginal religious option for a century. However, in both regions, Pentecostalism seems to become increasingly a religion of the “South,” an immigrant religion, travelling to the “North.”

Althoff’s case indicates that the nature of this religious change may be less straightforward than the idea of a religion which is simply waiting to be unpacked from the luggage of the new immigrant. One of Althoff’s striking findings is that most Latin American Pentecostal immigrants convert to Pentecostalism after coming to the United States. She notes that one would expect the number of Pentecostal immigrants to be higher, due to the fact that Pentecostalism is booming in Latin America. This indeed suggests an interesting link between migration and Pentecostal conversion, but it also makes one curious how conversion is possibly related to Pentecostal influences before migration.

Several explanations for the high conversion rates of Latino immigrants are mentioned, showing that Pentecostal churches in general are better equipped to deal with problems of cultural identification and are better able to give people access to social and spiritual resources, in comparison to Catholic parishes. Important as these factors are, they are circumstantial. Althoff, however, does not settle for a reductionistic explanation of Pentecostal growth, but looks more closely at the attraction of Pentecostalism’s spiritual dimension. But what exactly is this spiritual dimension in Pentecostalism? Is it the attraction of the Holy Spirit and his gifts? Is it the individualist ethos? It seems to me that what is spiritual in Pentecostalism has many aspects and social consequences. Several of these things are highlighted but I feel that the author could give a more differentiated picture of the spiritual dimension.

One of the most interesting points in the essay is where Althoff shows how the conversion experience is in fact a process, which can become personally appropriated, rescripting it into a narrative of trauma. This seems to me very crucial in understanding the appeal of Pentecostalism to immigrants. But it also raises questions concerning the way in which narratives are moulded in a dynamic relation between discourse and personal experience. This brings us, on the one hand, to the question of the immigrant’s agency in conversion, but, on the other hand, to the disciplining of the subject through a discourse that actively constructs possibilities of experience and therapeutic narrative.

The focus on conversion as a process is interesting and relevant but the research could gain more when attention is given to the structure of the conversion process itself. Important here is to move away from the idea...
of conversion as switching from one religious group to another. In a Pentecostal context in particular, conversion refers foremost to an individual experience of receiving a new life and finding a new way. Conversion is in the first place changing to another perspective on life, the self and the world. Subsequently, a more layered research perspective becomes an option, in which different aspects of religious affiliation can become visible. In this respect it would be good to look at other research being done on Pentecostal conversion (for example, the research group Conversion Careers and Culture Politics in Global Pentecostalism), where the different phases of religious careers are taken into account in relation to specific local social-cultural events and processes.

The “conversion careers” model can also be fruitful when comparing between Latin Americans’ involvement in Pentecostal churches and in the Catholic Charismatic movement, as Althoff intends to do. I definitely look forward to reading more from her stimulating research.

Peter Versteeg
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Re: Response to Religious Identities

Author: Brett Hendrickson (---.dhcp.asu.edu)
Date: 07-05-06 13:26

Prof. Versteeg writes: "Several explanations for the high conversion rates of Latino immigrants are mentioned, showing that Pentecostal churches in general are better equipped to deal with problems of cultural identification and are better able to give people access to social and spiritual resources, in comparison to Catholic parishes. Important as these factors are, they are circumstantial."

From my point of view, these factors are important precisely because they are circumstantial. Pentecostal worship services that focus on healing, integration, acceptance, and personal relationships rooted in interpretation of biblical texts (such as the ones Dr. Althoff cites) clearly speak to the circumstance of the new immigrant from Latin America. The malleable nature of Pentecostal worship, in contrast to the Catholic liturgy, certainly does seem to be better equipped to deal with the immigrant's need to self-fashion quickly to cope with her new setting.

Of course, as Prof. Warner notes in his response, Catholic clergy both in Chicago and nationwide are catching up, i.e., they are creating institutional forms and events in which the traditionally strong Catholic response to immigrant needs is better--and more successfully--expressed.

Brett Hendrickson
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Re: Response to Religious Identities

Author: Deric Shaw (---.i pt.aol.com)
Date: 07-20-06 19:36

It was a little surprising to me to find out that Catholicism is not, or starting not to be the dominate religion for Latinos, and that Pentecostalism is starting to attract more Latinos than it had before. I do think from the paper and from the posts on this page that Pentecostal churches is finding ways to meet the spiritual needs of Latinos better than Catholic churches. There must be some attraction to the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal worship services, whatever exactly that may be. Why could this be happening. Are the spiritual needs of those Latinos coming into the country nowadays different than the needs in the past?

It was good to read some research about religious identification and immigration. I have not seen this done before, and I have not read like it before. This type of research can be taken in many other directions with other nationalities.

Deric Shaw
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Response to Andrea Althoff

Author: R. Stephen Warner (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 06-08-06 16:47

Response to “Religious Identities of Latin American Immigrants in Chicago: Preliminary Findings from Field Research,” by Andrea Althoff

I was delighted to learn last fall that Dr. Althoff had taken up residence at the Martin Marty center to conduct research among Chicago-area Latinos involved in Pentecostal churches and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Religion among Latinos, whether Catholic or Protestant, remains an under-researched topic. Pentecostal/Charismatic currents have deeply influenced American religion across the board, and the possible overlap and linkage between such movements across historically hostile denominational boundaries, especially among such a huge and growing population segment as Latinos, is very worthy of investigation. With her linguistic skills, her background doing similar research in Guatemala, her immersion in the literature, and the obvious energy and drive already manifested in this early report, Dr. Althoff is well equipped to undertake this research and she proposes worthwhile hypotheses.

I would suggest, however, more caution with respect to the rate of conversion to Pentecostalism among Chicago’s Hispanics/Latinos (hereafter H/L).

1. Many Latinos, particularly those from Puerto Rico and Guatemala, two groups that are well represented in Chicago, bring their Pentecostalism from their home countries.

2. Chicago’s Hispanic/Latino population is predominantly and increasingly made up of Mexican-origin people, many of them recently arrived from Mexico. Mexican Americans, according to the data collected by the project on Hispanic Churches in American Public Life, reported by HCAPL Project Manager Gaston Espinosa and cited by Dr. Althoff, are the least likely of the H/L groups in the U.S. to be Protestant (a category that includes Pentecostals and Evangelicals). Among H/L groups, Cubans and especially Puerto Ricans are much more likely to be Protestant.

3. Protestant identity, according to the same data, is correlated with descending immigrant generation. In other words, first generation H/L individuals are least likely to be Protestant, those of the second generation (who were born in the U.S.) are somewhat more likely to be Protestant, and the third generation still more likely (between a quarter and a third). Given that Chicago’s H/L population is heavily made up of first-generation immigrants, we should expect that the overwhelming majority of them will be Catholic.

4. Chicago’s recent Mexican immigrants derive predominantly from states in Central Mexico, such as Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Zacatecas, where Catholic identity is robust, not from the more secularized north or weakly evangelized south (e.g., Chiapas, where Protestantism flourishes).

For these reasons, Chicago’s H/L population consists disproportionately of recent immigrants from religiously
conservative regions of Mexico; we should expect that there will be fewer Protestants, including Pentecostals, among them than overall figures drawn from nationwide H/L data (e.g., Fr. Greeley’s) would indicate.

These cautions should not be construed as counseling complacency to Catholic leaders. Indeed, since receiving warnings (from Fr. Greeley, among others) of defection to Protestantism, the Catholic Church has responded with vigorous attempts to earn the loyalty of its growing, at least nominal, Catholic constituency. For example, no one can be ordained a priest in the Los Angeles diocese who does not speak Spanish. One result of these relatively recent efforts is the fact, as I see it, that the Catholic churches in Chicago most likely to be filled to capacity, and more, for Sunday mass are those that serve Mexican Americans (I recommend the book by Fr. Charles Dahm that Dr. Althoff cites in note 11.) The role of Church leaders in the recent immigrant rights mobilization is an example of such effort. On the occasion of the “burial” service at the conclusion of Pilsen’s Good Friday (Via Crucis) observance this year, I heard Cardinal George speak (in English and Spanish) for the rights of the undocumented from the pulpit of St. Adalbert Church. My students informed me that their churches (in Pilsen, Little Village, and Melrose Park) had chartered scores of buses to bring their parishioners to the March 10 and May 1 demonstrations.

The fruit of such mobilization was seen, I believe, in the turnout for the huge May 1 march. On the basis of a survey conducted by a UIC-based research team with a randomized sample of 410 participants in the May 1 mobilization (the interviews were done during the march itself), we can say that 78% of those surveyed identified as Latino, and of the foreign-born (58%), about 81% were Mexican, with 10% from other Latin American countries. On this evidence, the marchers were overwhelmingly Latino and specifically of Mexican-origin. In religious affiliation, 68% identified as Catholic and only 10% as Protestant. Far from being only nominally religious, 62% reported that they attend church at least every other week, and the majority (54%) said that their participation in the march was “strongly encouraged” by their church leaders. The picture that emerges from these data is that those Chicago Mexican Americans who were motivated and mobilized to participate in this protest march were strongly Catholic and the Catholic Church supports their political goals. These efforts might possibly slow the rate of defection that so many years of previous neglect and abuse have spurred.

These cautions about the rate of conversion of Latinos to Catholicism should also not be construed to discourage Dr. Althoff’s work with the significant Guatemalan Pentecostal community in Chicago, which is grievously under-researched. As she reports, there are many H/L Pentecostal congregations in Chicago, most of them tiny, but in aggregate adding up to a significant constituency. (If as little as 10% of Chicago’s H/L population is Protestant, that’s still a hundred thousand people.) The results of Dr. Althoff’s research with these Pentecostal congregations and their leaders are a valuable increment to the literature. My cautions about rates of conversion to Pentecostalism are instead meant to counsel Dr. Althoff to move soon to extend her research, as she proposes, to charismatic phenomena among Chicago’s H/L Catholics.

R.S. Warner
Let me introduce this Web Forum response with a personal word. Because I returned to the classroom at the University of Chicago this spring, I checked in at the Martin Marty Center, and had two occasions to converse with the Senior Research Fellow who wrote this paper, Andrea Althoff. Background: I “read around in” her dissertation in German and gained respect for her understanding of Central American Pentecostalism in its contexts. I was not prepared to see how situated, “at home,” she has quickly become in the Latin American immigrant community in Chicago, in which (as a foster parent to children from it) I have long had interest. I ask your pardon for my use of this much of cyberspace for such a background statement, but I have a bit of compulsion to explain why I feel competent at all to address the topic. Now to the topic:

Dr. Althoff could hardly have chosen a more relevant topic, given the debates over “illegal immigrants” and Latin American migrants and citizens that have aroused the U.S. these seasons. What we have lacked are close-ups, and hers is one such. I tested the thesis on her: the move of hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans, most of them at least “cultural Catholics” into Pentecostal and other evangelical-type religious orbits strikes me as anomalous, certainly rare. To this day if we hear Scottish names we may think Presbyterian, Scandinavian connotes Lutheran, Greek ones likely point to Orthodoxy, Poland to Catholicism, and, fifty years ago, Latin America to Catholicism.

No longer. One can walk the streets of Guatemala City and hear from store front after store front, chapel after chapel, the sounds of “tongues speaking,” or sighing hymns or beating drums: The Pentecostals are coming! The Pentecostals are coming! Such sounds signal, to us Chicagoans and citizens of other metropolises: here they are! They merit the attention that European scholars like Dr. Althoff are giving, and should inspire more attention by U.S. scholars of religion.

Those of us unsettled or offended by Samuel P. Huntington’s “civilizational” argument will find cogent response here. I do not need to detail it, but signal it, hoping that other readers will pick up on it and continue Forum comment beyond what I am capable of doing. Right-wing radio hosts and Democratic and Republican politicians who do not know quite where to position themselves on debates over integration into U.S. society might well speak more cautiously after consulting the Althoff evidence. The author has a fine ironic sense, as when she shows how by turning Protestant and adopting many of the values Huntington associates with “white” Protestants of old stock, they give the lie to the death-of-‘our’-culture folks.

These are rich pages; I only want to help set the stage and turn the first couple of pages. As a Chicagoan, I will look at my city and its stock with fresh eyes, and hope that others will reexamine their presuppositions in the light of what Althoff presents.

Martin E. Marty