



## The Religious Scene in Latino Los Angeles 2012

**To be a Latino Christian is fundamentally to believe that the God who continues to interact with humanity will continue to do so in the future. It is a willingness to question and to challenge the “innocent” reading of the history of Los Angeles (and the U.S.), calling the country to address its corporate sins, that it can continue to grow toward a greater *mañana*.**

### Executive Summary

Los Angeles is often described as a city with no ethnic majorities. But one ethnic group predominates, though its numbers are not reflected in the civic infrastructure. In some ways Latinos\* inhabit a parallel universe; they are 50 percent of the population of the city, but have relatively little political, social or economic power. Even in the religious realm usually exist at the fringe of the power structures.

Yet even as Latinas are shaped by their experience in Los Angeles, they are also reshaping the city. Because of their religious commitments, Latinos are important players in the changing religious landscape too. Latino Pentecostals are influencing Protestants and even the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church continues to grow because of the Latino presence, but it is struggling with the implications of that growth.

This paper will describe the religious impact of the Latina population by looking at religious and ethnic identities among Latinos, the connection between politics and religion, what Latino churches are like, the relations among the major Christian groups and how Latinos might contribute to the future of the Los Angeles. The city was founded by Spaniards and settled by their Mexican descendants. From the very beginning religion has always played an important role in the life of Latino Angelinos. As new generations of Latinos impact Los Angeles they will change religious structures, even as they are changed by them.

*\* Because Latino has gender in Spanish there is a need to account for the fact that the term is masculine. Of the many “solutions” proposed, I have opted for using Latina and Latino interchangeably to refer to all members of the community. Unless the context clearly refers to only one gender Latina and Latino should be taken to refer to both males and females.*



## By the numbers

Latinos became the largest minority group in the United States during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Latino presence is even more pronounced in Los Angeles since they represent 50 percent of the population of the city and 48 percent of the county. Yet this demographic heft is not reflected in political, social, or economic influence. And even in the religious sphere, where Latinos have a higher Christian commitment than the population at large, their role is limited, at best.

According to a 2007 Pew study of Latino religious tendencies,\* 68 percent of Latinos are Catholics, 20 percent are Protestants, three percent are other types of Christians (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Orthodox), one percent are adherents of other religions and eight percent define themselves as secular (though some of those in this category might define themselves as spiritual). This means that in L.A. County there are currently about 3.3 million Latino Catholics, over 970,000 Latino Protestants, about 146,000 Latinos who are part of other Christian groups, and about 390,000 that are secular and 48,000 that are part of other religions. About 75 percent of the Protestants are part of evangelical or Pentecostal churches, and 25 percent belong to mainline denominations.

Among Latinos nationally, 68 percent of Catholics, 55 percent of evangelicals/Pentecostals and 35 percent of mainline Protestants were born in Latin America. The Pew study charts similar trends in Spanish language usage in worship, though the tendency, at least for Catholics, is to continue worshiping in Spanish, even among English-speaking populations.

It is also worth noting that according to the Pew study 54 percent of Latina Catholics identify themselves as charismatic and 28 percent identify themselves as being born again. So, though the vast majority of Latinos are Catholics, many of them also identify with religious practices that are more commonly identified with evangelicals and Pentecostals. The percentage of Latinos who identify themselves as Catholic is decreasing, and a growing number of Catholics identify with "Protestant" religious

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\**Changing Faiths Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion*. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Hispanic Center, 2007.

practices. Protestants and other non-Catholic groups account for an increasing percentage of religious (or nonreligious) practice in the community.

Latinas also reflect the growing number of Christians who identify with independent churches or who downplay or reject traditional denominational labels. But these differences are not uniform among all Latinos. There are clear differences depending on national background and on how Latinas interact with the dominant culture. Generational shifts, migration flows, education and many of the other diversities in the Latino community are also important factors.

The religious background of Latinos in Los Angeles roughly parallels the national profile of the Latino population at large with one major exception: the percentage of Protestants from Mexican and Central American backgrounds. In L.A. County 75 percent of the Latina population is of Mexican background and 14 percent is of Central American descent. Yet among Latino Protestants the Mexican percentage (16 percent) is lower and the Central American percentage is higher (25 percent) than among the Latino population at large. (These numbers are much more pronounced among people from Puerto Rico who are 36 percent Protestant.) Most likely, this is because a larger percentage of the population of Central America is Protestant than in Mexico. This means that Mexican immigrants are much more likely to be Roman Catholic when they come to Los Angeles and that they are most likely to remain Catholic once they are here. Given that Mexicans continue to identify with Catholicism more strongly than any other nationality in Latin America, it seems likely that people of Mexican descent will continue to be overrepresented among Latino Catholics and underrepresented among Protestants, as a total of the Latino population in Los Angeles.

The growth of Latino Catholicism is slowly making a difference among Catholics in Los Angeles. For the first time in the U.S. history of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, a Mexican, José Gómez, has been named archbishop. Since Latinos comprise over 70 percent of the parishioners in the Archdiocese, why did it not happen before? Will this new archbishop be able to recruit more Latinos for the priesthood? Will he encourage the accredited Catholic schools in the diocese to develop Spanish language theological programs to train Latina lay leaders?

Latinos do not have the same type of representation in most Protestant denominations, though even there one sees a change. For example, Latinos now constitute about 25 percent of the Assemblies of God (AG) nationally, and close to 50 percent in Southern California. In 2011, the "Latino" district of Southern California (Southern Pacific) planted the most churches of all AG districts in the United States. The current superintendent of the traditionally "Anglo" Los Angeles district is a Latino formed in a Latino church. Are the Assemblies of God harbingers of the future? Latinos are a growing percentage of believers in most Pentecostal and evangelical churches. In contrast, the churches in Los Angeles that are dying (mostly those associated with mainline denominations) are those where Latinas have a very limited role.

But these numbers do not take into account the growing number of Latinos who attend non-Latino Protestant churches, because many of them seem invisible in those churches. Sometimes churches are very happy to have them there as long as they remain under the radar. Some of these churches act as if Los Angeles were never a Mexican city and that half of the population is not Latino.

Another group that is often not taken into account is the growing number of Latin American or Latino-based Pentecostal groups in Los Angeles. Some, like the Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus, were born in the Los Angeles area almost a century ago. But many are much more recent, including some of the largest Latino churches in the Los Angeles area, like Elim, Ministerios Restauración and Llamada Final.

Of course, Latinos are also diversifying their religious tendencies. Mormon and Jehovah's Witness communities have been relatively popular among Latinos for many years, as can be seen by the number of "Kingdom Halls" that have prominent signs in Spanish on the outside. One can also find a small but growing number of Latino Muslims in Los Angeles. If one looks carefully, one can even find Spanish language Islamic literature in the city.

To summarize the demographic profile of Latino religion in Los Angeles:

- The number of Latino Catholics in Los Angeles is growing because of continuing migration. Latinos will be a growing percentage of the Catholic population, though Catholicism will continue to shrink as a percentage of the Latino population.
- Latino Pentecostalism is growing and influencing Latino Protestantism and even Latino Catholicism.
- Modern Pentecostalism was born in Los Angeles, but new movements from Latin America (and other places) are bringing new forms of Pentecostalism back to Los Angeles.
- Groups like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to grow among Latinos.
- Being in Los Angeles creates more religious diversification. Second and third generation Latinos are more likely to be Protestants, Muslims or secularized than the immigrant population.
- Central Americans and Puerto Ricans will tend to be "over-represented" among Protestants. People of Mexican descent will tend to be more Catholic.

**Latinos as % of population in L.A. County**

Race and Ethnicity	1990	2000	2010
Total Population (count)	8,863,164	9,519,338	9,818,605
White	57%	49%	50%
African American	11%	10	9
Asian	11%	12	14
Other Race	21%	24	27
Hispanic Origin of any race	38%	45	48

\*Source: U.S. Census Bureau ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) accessed 12/6/2010; updated 11/19/2011

**Latino Religious Affiliations**

Catholic	68%
Protestant	20%
Other Christian	3%
Other Religion	1%
Secular	8%

**Charismatic/Pentecostal**

Percent of Latino **Catholics** who identify as charismatic or Pentecostal 54%

Percent of Latino **Protestants** who identify as charismatic or Pentecostal 57%

**Religion and Nativity**

	Native Born	Foreign Born
All Latinos	38%	62%
Catholic	32%	68%
Evangelical	46%	55%
Mainline Protestant	65%	35%
Other Christian	43%	57%
Secular	49%	51%

\*Source: "Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion." *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Hispanic Center, 2007* (<http://pewforum.org/Changing-Faiths-Latinos-and-the-Transformation-of-American-Religion.aspx>)

**1. Religious and ethnic identity: is there a link?**



There does seem to be a relationship between religious practices and ethnic identity in Los Angeles. Traditionally it has been assumed that there was a relationship between Catholicism and Latino ethnic identity. But the large Pentecostal Latino churches and the large Latino presence in "non-Latino" churches seem to indicate that "pentecostalized" religious practices also support ethnic identity maintenance. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue or if cultural adaptation to the dominant U.S. culture or secularization will erase Latino ethnic identity.

This creates an interesting tension for Latinos. Is Americanization an inevitable influence that needs to be addressed but cannot be changed? Or should Latinos encourage a strong Latino identity among their children as a way of helping them maintain a strong religious identity (or vice versa)? Can Latinos better contribute to U.S. society, if they resist the negative aspects of Americanization?

When people think about Latino religious experience they usually only focus on what happens north of the border, though the Pew study recognizes that

The houses of worship most frequented by Latinos have distinctively ethnic characteristics. . . . The growth of the Hispanic population is leading to the emergence of Latino-oriented churches in all the major religious traditions across the country. . . . Foreign-born Latinos are most likely to attend Hispanic-oriented churches and to comprise the largest share of Latinos who worship at such churches. . . . large shares of native-born Latinos as well as those who speak little or no Spanish also report attending churches with ethnic characteristics. . . . Latino-oriented churches, then, are not exclusively a product of either immigration or of residential settlement patterns. . . . the Hispanic population is creating its own distinct forms of religious practice as well as its own religious institutions.

*Changing Faiths Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion.* The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Hispanic Center, 2007.

“religious affiliation in Latin America is very relevant to any examination of Hispanics in the United States.” But globalization, legal and undocumented migration, and transnationalism are also factors that are changing the U.S. Latina religious landscape. It is important to think about the impact of this movement on religious practices and affiliation both in Latin America and among U.S. Latinas.

There is continued religious devotion among Mexican-Americans to patron saints and virgins of Mexico, particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe. How does this movement reinforce Catholic religious identity even beyond the immigrant generation? How do the people moving in both directions take their faith with them? Do converts remain Protestant if and when they return to Latin America?

Popular preachers and religious musicians from Latin America are also very popular among Latino Protestants, reinforcing religious practices from the south. Earlier generations of Latino converts from Los Angeles became informal missionaries among their relatives and friends when they returned to Latin America. Now the movement is in both directions. To what extent are religious tendencies among Latinos in Los Angeles a function of life in the United States and to what extent are they similar to what is happening in Latin America?

The Latina experience in Los Angeles is an ongoing story. Several factors keep the experience from becoming a thing of the past, like the immigrant histories of groups from Europe. The fact that the United States shares a border and a globally unique “borderlands” relationship with Mexico supports ethnic identity maintenance.

Continued migration—north and south, both legal and undocumented—has also created a significant mass media in Spanish, largely financed by multinational media interests in Latin America (and the U.S.). Because of the continual need for new workers from Latin America the Latino population will continue to be influenced by the south. All of this makes it unlikely that the Latino experience will ever become exactly like that of the European immigrants of the nineteenth century.

Given that Los Angeles has experimented with several potential ways of bringing together peoples from many backgrounds, it is not surprising that Latinos reflect the gamut of possibilities. Some Latinas have structurally assimilated into an Anglo conformity model. Others celebrate the contribution they bring to the melting pot. And still others reflect on various versions of cultural pluralism and how Latinos are creating something that is American and Latino. Should they develop and maintain their own institutions or should they be part of existing structures? This question is closely linked to the religious question, particularly for Protestants. Should Latino Protestants join existing churches in the United States or form their own? How do one’s views of what “should” happen in the United States parallel or differ from one’s views about what churches should look like?

From the time of the U.S. takeover of the southwest both Catholics and Protestants had Americanization as one of their goals for ministry among the new Spanish-speaking citizens. The U.S. Catholic Church assigned non-Latinos to Latino majority parishes, often removing Mexican priests, and Protestants linked Americanization to their evangelization. Both established schools to encourage Latino children to learn English.

During the early years, language was a clear barrier between Latino and Euro-American Christians, and it continued to be with each new wave of immigrants. But as U.S.-born generations learned English this was no longer a barrier. Racial and class barriers still existed, but they were not as clearly marked for Latinos as they were for African Americans. Many Latinos could “pass” if they wanted to and some chose to do so. But leaving the barrio or the rural Latino community also represented the opportunity for success in the United States. The cost of success for most young Latinos was leaving behind a strong ethnic identity. Young Latinos often found that once they went to school and developed a profession they often no longer fit in their former churches. The class difference also meant that they often felt somewhat more comfortable in English-language congregations, though they were not always easily welcomed.

The issue usually becomes complicated with the “second generations,” either literally the children of immigrants, or merely children who are struggling with their own issues of identity. On top of all the other issues related to adolescence in a globalized world, Latina young people also have to deal with the social pressure to leave their “Latineness” behind. Latino churches have struggled with this issue and have come to different conclusions. Some have assumed that the church should be a place for ethnic identity maintenance. Churches that have taken this perspective are intentional about making sure that programs are in Spanish and that children and young people learn about Latino culture. Others go in the opposite direction, assuming that their children will fully assimilate. They do not directly offer programs for their children and youth, but link those programs to an existing majority-culture sister congregation. A third option is that of adjusting programs depending on the tendencies of the adolescents themselves.

Upward social mobility is also a factor in the religious changes of some Latinos. For some in Los Angeles success is about living in suburbia. A sign of economic success is the ability to purchase a home, usually in a new area. Because they moved for economic benefits they often weaken their social networks, making it easier to think about going to church outside of the Latino community.

The idea that Catholicism is a crucial component in maintaining a strong Latino identity continues to be an object of study and debate. Obviously, Latina Protestants have demonstrated that one can be Latina and Protestant. But Catholicism has been a key component in the development of the Spanish language as well as Latin American and Latino culture. This raises several important questions. How linked are Spanish and Catholicism? Are they so deeply connected that anyone who speaks Spanish is reflecting a Catholic worldview, even if they are Protestants? A related question is whether one preserves any real links to *latinidad* if one is neither a Catholic nor speaks Spanish. What would be the core of a Latino Protestant identity that entails neither Catholicism nor the Spanish language?



## 2.

### Religion, politics, and national participation, Latino style



Religiously oriented Latinos, Catholic and Protestant, tend to create tensions for the traditional political categories in Los Angeles and the U.S. On issues like abortion, same sex marriage or religious influence in politics, most Latinos, particularly evangelicals/Pentecostals, identify with conservative positions. But when addressing issues like immigration, government guaranteed health insurance, or a willingness to pay higher taxes for broader government services, most Latinos identify with positions normally considered liberal. This tension was apparent in 2008 when most Latinos, including Pentecostals and evangelicals, voted both for President Obama and for Proposition 8, the California measure that defined marriage as being between a man and a woman.

Spanish Catholics founded Los Angeles, and there have been Latino Protestants in the region since the 1880s, but Latino political influence has been relatively limited throughout the history of the city. That did not begin to change significantly until the 1960s. On the religious front, a few Latino religious leaders, principally priests or mainline pastors, began to participate more actively in the political sphere in the late 1960s. A few Latino priests from Los Angeles became a part of PADRES (*Padres Asociados para Derechos Religiosos, Educativos, y Sociales*) and their 1971 convention was held in Los Angeles. An occasional priest or pastor was seen at political events or working with local government officials on issues related to the Latino community. But mostly they participated as part of larger community or ecumenical organizations.

In this ecumenical spirit many mainline Protestant pastors and leaders encouraged Latinos to remain in the Catholic Church. Some also adopted popular Catholic symbols, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, as part of their support of Latino causes.

But though mainline churches became more involved in the Latino community, this did not translate into Latino growth in their congregations, nor were most Latino Protestants a part of these efforts. One can apply a common maxim about Liberation theology and Pentecostals in Latin America to this situation: mainline churches opted for Latino civil rights, but Latinos opted for Pentecostalism.

Historically, most Latino Protestant leaders followed the Latin American Protestant model

and assumed that they should be apolitical. This began to change both in Latin America and in the United States as the community grew and attracted the attention of political parties looking for new constituents. Assemblies of God leader Jesse Miranda formed AMEN (*Alianza Ministerial Evangélica Nacional*) in southern California during the 1990s. Both Democrats and Republicans rediscovered Latino religious leaders in the 1990s and attempted to recruit them to their respective causes.

Though most of the “buzz” happened on the East Coast, particularly with Esperanza USA (Rev. Luis Cortés) and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (Rev. Sammy Rodríguez), political leaders, particularly conservative ones, worked to get Latino religious leaders to support socially conservative issues. Several Latino religious leaders worked to limit abortion and oppose same sex marriage.

The election of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa seemed to offer a new opportunity for Latino religious leaders. Yet one did not see a significant change during the first few years. Mayor Villaraigosa could be seen with Euro-American, African-American or Asian-American pastors or priests. He also participated in meetings with other religious leaders. But Latino religious leaders continued to have a limited role in local politics, and many Latino Protestants continued with an apolitical perspective.

This situation changed for many Latino Protestant leaders after December 2005 when Congressman James Sensenbrenner proposed the *Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005* (HR4437). This bill would have made it a felony to help the undocumented once they are in the United States, directly affecting pastors, social workers, medical personnel, and others who regularly interact with the undocumented.

Since most Latino pastors and priests regularly serve the undocumented, this caused many to decide that they needed to work toward fair and comprehensive immigration reform that included a path for the legalization of the undocumented. This put them at odds with the politically conservative leadership of many Protestant denominations. It has also forced many theologically conservative Latino leaders to rethink their understanding of pastoral ministry. Organizations like *La Red de Pastores y Lideres del Sur de California* (LA RED) brought

together many Latino Protestant leaders who had never been politically active before, working together toward immigration reform and the protection of the undocumented.

The large pro-immigration marches and the elections of 2008 have served as catalysts for Latino Christian leaders to become more involved in local political and social issues. A growing number of Latino leaders are also participating in community initiatives such as dealing with youth violence. Seeing an expanding number of Latino and African-American religious leaders working together points to a possible change in Latino religious participation as do meetings between Latino and Korean-American Christian leaders. But it remains to be seen whether: 1) Latino Protestants will “stay in the game” or retreat to a more “apolitical” stance; 2) Latino Catholics and Protestants will work together on issues affecting the community; and 3) Blacks and Browns will be able to come together through their common religious faith, since they have often been in competition in the political arena of Los Angeles. This last issue may be particularly complex as African-Americans lose political influence to Latinos, the new players in town.



### 3. Latinos and their churches. Who is in charge?



Historically, Latinos have been in charge of very few institutions in Los Angeles. Until recently, Latinos were even on the margins of Catholicism in the region. The only major exception has been Latino Pentecostal churches.

Most Latino Protestant congregations are small and many have part-time pastors. Those linked to mainline or evangelical denominations might be dependent on their denominations for financial support and some churches have ministries among poor and immigrant Latinos, though the churches are not led by Latinos themselves.

But Latino Pentecostal churches led and funded by Latinos themselves are thriving throughout the city. Some feel as transitory as some of their members. They often have to move to new locations when they lose their leases. But these congregations are also growing. All of the largest Latino Protestant churches in the city are Pentecostal.

Women are key players in these congregations, often making up 70 percent or more of the active membership. A small but growing number of women are becoming pastors of these churches. The Latino Bible Institutes and the local seminaries preparing Latino leaders are both seeing a growing number of women students. Most Pentecostal churches, and some other denominations, affirm women in leadership. But it is this generation that is making room for women to take pastoral leadership.

Pentecostal and evangelical growth has created an interesting situation in Los Angeles. Even though there are more than four times as many Latino Catholics as Latino Pentecostals there are many more Latino Pentecostal pastors than Latino priests. Part of the difference has to do with ordination requirements; becoming a priest is much more complicated and demands a much higher commitment than becoming a Pentecostal preacher. But it also has to do with the fact that most Latino Protestant churches have Latino pastors, something that is not nearly as common among Roman Catholics. They provide spaces for otherwise marginalized people to learn and practice leadership. People who have a sense of calling can become pastors, even if they have not had access to formal theological education or cannot qualify because they do not have enough formal education, they cannot study in English, or

are undocumented. Because the churches depend on lay leadership, many working-class people have the opportunity to develop leadership skills even though they might never have an opportunity in other settings. In many churches the pastoral leadership is literally a person from among the people.

It also has to do with how Latino Catholics and Protestants express their faith. On any given Sunday morning in Los Angeles you are likely to find more Latino Protestants in church than Latino Catholics. The local church or parish plays a very different role among Latino Protestants and Catholics. For many Latino Catholics Sunday mass is the place for "official" expressions of the faith, while for most Latino Protestants church services are about connecting the community of believers. Latino Catholics participate in religious festivals and in many popular expressions of their faith. But weekly mass is not necessarily considered a crucial expression of religious commitment.

Clearly, Catholics and Pentecostals have very different views of the church. How is that difference affecting Christian expressions in the Latino community? Pentecostalism is growing rapidly in the Latino community and drawing people from other Christian expressions. Since Pentecostal theology makes room for church communities led by Latinos, will Pentecostalism play a crucial role in ethnic identity maintenance? What are the advantages and disadvantages for the Latino community of having churches led by lay people or people with limited theological education? Will the Catholic Church be able to recruit enough Latino priests at least to approach the ratio of Latino Catholics in the diocese of Los Angeles? If the diocese cannot recruit enough priests will it make more room for lay leaders at the parish level?



## 4. Protestant and Catholic relations in Latino Los Angeles



After the Southwest was taken over by the United States, the “Mexican” communities of the region felt under siege in many areas, including their religious practices. Maintaining a strong Mexican (often popular) Catholic identity became a way of defending their culture. Roman Catholicism had been the only legally allowed religion before the arrival of the Americans. The American takeover brought religious freedom to the region, though Mexican communities continued to try to enforce the previous understanding of religious practice in the areas where they were the majority. Religious persecution of Latino Protestants within the Latino community was not as pronounced as in Latin America, but it did create long-standing tensions.

Latino Protestants found themselves a doubly marginalized community. Because they were Latinos they were marginalized within U.S. society. But because they were Protestants they were also marginalized in Latino communities. Majority-culture Protestants were not ready to accept them into their churches or communities, even though they were Protestant converts. This situation continued well into the twentieth century both in Los Angeles and elsewhere.

Religious persecution of Protestants in Latin America by the Catholic majority defined how Protestants saw themselves and how they perceived Catholicism. Because Catholicism was the official religion of many countries in Latin America throughout most of the 20th century, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants developed very differently in Latin America than in the U.S. Latino Protestants found themselves between these very different experiences. Most Protestant immigrants assumed that U.S. Catholicism should be understood in the same light as their counterparts in Latin America. U.S. born Latinos varied in their understanding depending on their specific experiences.

After Vatican II many Catholics in the U.S. acted as if they were part of one more denomination in this country. The civil rights movement and ecumenical efforts brought Catholics into relationships with mainline Protestants, while the charismatic movement brought a different set of Catholics into contact with Pentecostals and charismatics.

But it was not as easy to adopt to these changes in much of the Latino community. Relationships between Catholic and Protestant Latinos often looked more like the situation in Latin America, where Protestants were still ostracized well into the latter part of the twentieth century. And it continued to look the same when Pentecostals began to grow and increasingly were seen as a threat by the Catholic leadership in Latin America.

For example, the official Catholic stance toward Protestants since Vatican II is that they are “separated brethren.” This is the common term used in ecumenical settings. But in Latin America most Pentecostals are seen as a threat to the Catholic Church and are referred to as “sects.” Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI used this term when in Latin America, in reference to Pentecostals and the growing Protestant churches.

The relationship between U.S. Latino Protestants and Catholics is complex because it is influenced by the changing relationship between Catholics and Protestants in the United States, but also by the more conflictive history in Latin America. But the issue also has some unique aspects in the Latino experience.

U.S. Latina Catholics are often also in a complex relationship with the Catholic Church. When the United States took over the Southwest and the U.S. Catholic Church took responsibility for the existing Mexican Catholic churches in the Southwest, many of the new religious leaders looked down on popular Mexican Catholic practices and removed many existing Mexican priests. Latinos continue to be underrepresented among priests and bishops.

Many Latina Catholics also feel some of the same “threats” that some Latin American Catholics feel when they see Latinos leaving the Catholic Church and becoming Protestants. Some of the literature on ministry to Latino Catholics warns priests and lay workers to beware of the efforts of some of the Protestants.

Nonetheless, things tend to bring Latina Protestantes and Católicos together. On the one hand, the commonality of experience of most Latinos in Los Angeles has meant that both religious groups need to address many of the same issues. But the other reason is often much more personal: during times of celebration or crisis Protestants and Catholics are often part of the same extended family. This means that priests and pastors often



find themselves needing to work together when pastoral care is needed.

Yet as Latinos continue to grow in Los Angeles, they will need to find common cause particularly between evangelicals/Pentecostals and Catholics. Immigration reform, the rights of minority peoples, and the place of Latinos in the political and social structures are obvious places where both need to find ways to work together. But these two groups share a common concern about values and ethics and the role of faith both privately and in larger society.

Latino leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, also find themselves in the midst of the challenges of globalization, because many have transnational ministries. Their networks of service cross national borders and challenge modern understanding of the nation-state. Latin Americans/Latinos are crossing all types of borders and they are taking their faith with them. The familial and social networks of which they are a part cross the Protestant-Catholic divide. Latino Christian leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, have to find ways to support them as they walk toward the future.

Will relational and missional ecumenism break through the mistrust and historical tensions? Traditionally, Latino Catholic priests and Protestant pastors in Los Angeles have seldom participated in formal ecumenical efforts. Will the official structures encourage, or at least allow, relational ecumenism to develop, or will they continue to insist on trying to limit interaction to the formal types of ecumenism in which Latinos have traditionally not participated?

## 5. A new Catholicism in Los Angeles?



As stated earlier, Latino Catholicism in Los Angeles is growing numerically, even as the percentage of Catholics in the Latino community is going down. Catholicism in Los Angeles is already a predominantly Latino and immigrant faith. Most of the anticipated growth will continue to be Latino into the foreseeable future, with other minority groups, like Filipinos and Vietnamese, also adding to that growth.

But Latino/Latin American Catholicism has a different history than the European Catholicism that has predominated in the United States. This form of Catholicism developed strong popular practices, but they have often been informal practices that stand on the fringe of the official Church. There is a long history, coming from medieval Spain, of people identifying as Catholics, but following religious devotion not always sanctioned by the Church. Catholicism among U.S. Latinos and in Latin America also developed in situations where there were often few priests, so lay leaders have been a crucial part of maintaining Catholic faith and practice among Latino faithful.

Latino Catholics practice their religious devotion both within and on the fringe of the official Church. One of the most obvious practices is the devotion to the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe. Some of the practices around Guadalupe are linked to official church practices, but Guadalupe is also a popular symbol that goes far beyond the teaching of the Catholic Church. Guadalupe has served Chicanos as a banner under which to rally, as a symbol for Latina feminists and in many other ways. Other saints and virgin apparitions from Mexico are also venerated, though many of them are linked to local shrines in Mexico or parts of the Southwest. The Church recognizes some of these saints, but many are not “official” saints. The faithful travel to the shrines regularly and help maintain the sanctuaries.

An important Salvadoran devotion is the Divino Salvador del Mundo. This is the patron of the country and has been made into an important statue in San Salvador. Members of the local Salvadoran community venerate this apparition and the church statue has been brought to Los Angeles, another immigrant among the Salvadoran community.

Some of the other common religious practices include Church approved ones like quinceñeras. But many Latino Catholics also seek out curanderos and various types of yerberos.\* They also practice devotion to unofficial saints and have practices that are not officially recognized by the Catholic hierarchy.

Women lead many of these popular and marginal religious practices. Latinas are at the forefront of familial piety and keep the practices alive. Even as men exclusively lead official Catholicism, popular devotion is the domain of women. And as in Protestant churches it is the women who do most of the work in predominantly Latino parishes.

Church-based practices that are very popular among Latino Catholics include some that “feel” Protestant. Many Latino Catholics participate in Charismatic prayer meetings. There are also many who join in Bible studies or cursillos.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles has a shortage of priests, like most dioceses. But it has a particularly acute shortage of Latino and other Spanish-speaking priests. The number of Latino priests is growing and the diocesan seminary, St. John’s, requires its graduates to have a ministry language, usually Spanish. But because of the shortage of parish priests, the diocese has allowed lay people to take many responsibilities in local parishes. Cardinal Mahony allowed lay leaders to become Pastoral Life Directors (PLD), practically lay pastors. Under his leadership a Latina was named a PLD. Though this is considered a “temporary” position, will the diocese make room for women to take on more parish leadership responsibilities? Will the new Archbishop Gomez, who is part of a more traditional movement, Opus Dei, encourage the naming of more PLDs or other lay leaders in the parishes? Or will he seek to take Los Angeles toward more traditional practices?

Catholicism in Los Angeles is clearly becoming a religion of Latinos and other minorities. Will the official structures change to reflect the demographic realities? Will Mexican and Latin American Catholic devotions and practices find a more prominent role in Angelino Catholicism?



\*Curanderos and yerberos are popular healers who know about natural cures, but who often also appeal to popular religious practices. These practices often have tenuous links to official Catholic devotion and some are linked to ancestral indigenous practices.



## 6. Varieties of Latino Pentecostals, and other Protestants, in Los Angeles



The greater Los Angeles area serves as an excellent location to look at how Pentecostalism has developed among Latinos. Modern Pentecostalism began in Los Angeles, but now new generations of adherents are bringing Pentecostalism back to Los Angeles in various new forms.

The most common forms of Latino Pentecostalism in Los Angeles are the churches tied to American Pentecostal churches. All of the U.S. Pentecostal denominations have Latino churches in Los Angeles, including traditionally African American denominations like the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). But there are also many churches from Latino Pentecostal denominations, such as the Apostolic Assembly, Concilio Latino Americano de Iglesias Cristianas (CLADIC), El Concilio Latinoamericano Internacional de la Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal de Nueva York (CLANY) or the Asamblea de Iglesias Cristianas. There are also Latino churches linked to denominations that emerged from the charismatic renewal movement, such as Vineyard and Calvary Chapel.

In Los Angeles one can also find various forms of immigrant-based Latino Pentecostal movements. A variation on this transnational theme is when a church, such as Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, brings someone like Dante Gebel to pastor its Spanish-language congregation. There are many Latin American pastors, conference speakers, and musicians who are regularly in the Los Angeles area. Cross-fertilization of influences also occurs because many Latino pastors travel to Latin America to preach and give conferences on a regular basis.

The growth of Latino Pentecostalism in Southern California is also creating new types of relationships between churches in the area and within the various denominations. There are now at least ten Latino Pentecostal churches in the region with over 1,000 members, including megachurches like Iglesia en el Camino/Church on the Way where the Spanish-language congregation is now larger than the English one that gave it birth, and many of those who attend the English-language congregation are Latinos.

Of course, most Latino congregations are small. Some attempt to imitate the larger churches, while others see the large churches as threats. Networks of small churches sometimes affiliate themselves with one of the large churches. Others complain that large churches grow at the expense of the smaller

congregations in the area. Some of the small churches see themselves as alternative congregations, while others would like to grow into megachurches.

In addition, a number of congregations are on the edges of the Latino Pentecostal community, such as Victory Outreach. Many of these churches do not openly identify themselves as Latina, though the vast majority of their members are Latinos and their services often have a Latino cultural flavor. Related to these churches are the growing numbers of non-Latino churches that have a growing Latina presence.

Popular Pentecostalism challenges the official religious order, not by directly confronting the religious powers, but by offering a counter-narrative that is more compelling and that allows people to be active participants in God's work in the world. This issue raises the question of acculturation in a different way. Are subversive Pentecostals an invitation to a new way of thinking about the church and its role in the world, or "merely" a counter-narrative that is discarded if those who are excluded find a way into the structures of power? Can the tendency to become a "church" in the sociological sense be avoided?

These churches grow among Latinas because they speak to a lived experience of God. Most Latinos experience God as one who walks with them in the journey of life. That experience is lived out in Pentecostal worship and church life. These congregations are one of the few places where Latinas can express their faith in their own way and lead their own congregations. For many immigrants these churches also become their new extended families. Because of these characteristics Latino Pentecostal congregations are increasingly attractive, and many non-Pentecostal churches are imitating their styles.

Almost all non-Pentecostal Protestant denominations and churches in Los Angeles also have a Latino presence. Most have churches or parishes that focus on the Latino community or at least offer services in Spanish. There are also many Latinos in "non-Latino" churches. None of them have a presence as large as that of the Pentecostal groups, but several of the denominations—such as the American Baptists, Nazarenes, Adventists, Southern Baptists and Methodists—all have a substantial number of Latino churches and also many Latinos in traditionally Euro-American congregations.



To be Latina and Protestant is to be at a number of crossroads and points of encounter: between Euro American North America and Latin America, between Euro American Protestantism and Latin American Catholicism, between the First World and the majority world, between a dying Christendom and the vital new Christian expressions of the global south, between changing notions of the nation-state and the new transnational reality of migrant peoples, and between old racialized understandings of life together in the United States and the new multicultural and intercultural relationships that are developing. Yet the category "Latino Protestant" is so diverse that there are often at least a few Latina Protestants on both sides of all these encounters.

Latino Protestants often seem no more united than the diversity reflected in the terms *Latino* and *Protestant*. Yet there is a common thread of history and a common understanding of a personal encounter with God. It is that divine encounter that continues to provide meaning to many who live at these crossroads.



Some of the distinctive characteristics of Latino Protestantism include:

1. **Believers' Church Perspective**

For the vast majority of Latina Protestants, infant baptism harkens back to their personal Roman Catholic past in which they were identified as Christians because they were born into a Catholic family and baptized. Their faith became real in their own lives when they made a personal commitment and sought baptism.

2. **Pentecostal Influence on Protestantism**

Latino Protestants are much more likely to be part of Pentecostal/charismatic churches than the U.S. Protestant population at large. Latina evangelical, mainline and Catholic churches are also more likely to have been influenced by Pentecostal or charismatic worship styles than their counterparts in non-Latino churches. In most Latino churches worship has a distinct Pentecostal or charismatic flavor to it, which reflects a worldview in which God and spiritual beings are very much a part of human existence.

3. **Evangélico Self-Identity**

Most Latina Protestants use evangélico as the self-designation that they share with other Protestants, including those of different theological traditions. This usage has its roots in Latino Protestant history and reflects how the terms are used in Latin America, but often creates confusion in the U.S. setting. Evangélico is not synonymous with evangelical.

4. **Belief in the Power of Prayer**

Prayer and the belief in God's intervention in daily life is part of the Latino Protestant experience. People pray expecting God to intervene.

5. **Conversion-Oriented Faith Commitment**

Most Latino Protestants have had a clearly defined conversion experience. They can tell others about when they "accepted Jesus," when they were baptized and, if they are Pentecostals, when they "received the Holy Spirit."

6. **A People of the Book**

The Bible has always been a key part of Protestantism. The people's access to the book and the belief that individuals could understand its meaning, through the power of the Holy Spirit, were key parts of the Protestant Reformation.

7. **Evangelism as Part of Being a Christian**

Because a high percentage of Latino Protestants are converts or from conversion-oriented and believers' church denominations, evangelism and witness tend to be more crucial for them than for the Protestant population at large. One of the reasons for the growth of Latina Protestantism in Los Angeles has been the evangelism born from the commitment of the converted.

8. **Importance of the Local Church Community**

Latino Protestants in Los Angeles go to church more often than their Euro American counterparts or than Latino Catholics. Most Latino Protestants assume that the church is their place of primary allegiance; God comes first. They tend to understand their faith as linked to a concrete community of people. The local church is also the primary social network for many.



## 7. Where are we going in Los Angeles?



The word *mañana* has many connotations. Though it literally means “tomorrow,” in common parlance it usually just means “not today.” For some *mañana* carries the negative connotation of putting things off indefinitely. Latino theologian Justo González also recognizes that *mañana* has sometimes become the “discouraged response” of those who have worked to bring change, only to see that their efforts never seem to become reality. But *mañana* is also the “radical questioning” of today, a belief that God is yet at work in the world creating something new. To be a Latino Christian is fundamentally to believe that the God who continues to interact with humanity will continue to do so in the future. It is a willingness to question and to challenge the “innocent” reading of the history of Los Angeles (and the U.S.), calling the country to address its corporate sins, that it can continue to grow toward a greater *mañana*.

Currently the most controversial issue affecting Latinos’ *mañana* is immigration reform. The combination of a weakened economy and the overall changing demographics of the country have created an “anti-Latino” environment in some parts of the country that expands to Los Angeles. The fairly constant legal as well as undocumented migration from Latin America has created complex issues related to national identity, how to deal with a broken immigration system, relations between the United States and Latin America, transnationality and the place of minority communities in this country.

In practical terms this means that for many people in Los Angeles practically all Latinos are assumed to be undocumented, particularly if they are speaking Spanish. But it also creates dilemmas within the community. How does one confront policies that for many Latinos seems like “legalized” racism (such as SB1070 in Arizona), but that enjoys the support of the majority of people in the United States, even if they might result in racial profiling? Many Latinas have undocumented relatives, friends or fellow employees. How does one walk with them? How does one deal with the federal immigration system, which sometimes accepts and sometimes rejects the undocumented—and sometimes rejects those who have a legal right to be here?

Migration patterns also create ministry opportunities and responsibilities for Latina churches. The existing legal flow means that churches need to be constantly aware of new immigrants and how to best serve them. But the undocumented community presents a different set of challenges. Most of them have become part of the national social fabric, yet have no way to influence decisions made about them. Most of them are part of Latino parishes or churches. What does pastoral care and support mean in relationship to these people and their U.S.-born children? Will Latino Christians choose to seek acceptance among those who are anti-immigrant, or will they take the risk of standing with those who have no voice?

Spanish has now surpassed English as the second most spoken “first” language in the world, behind Mandarin, and the United States is one of the largest Spanish-speaking countries in the world. Even though a significant percentage of Latinos do not speak Spanish, the number of Spanish-speakers in this country continues to grow.

In Los Angeles this means that Univisión competes with English-language networks for market share. El Piolín and El Cucuy compete with each other for the number one position in the radio market, with English-language disc jockeys behind them. Though Latinos have not demonstrated a strong commitment to the language after two to three generations, the role of Spanish in the public arena continues to increase. It currently seems likely that the number of Spanish speakers in Los Angeles will continue to grow, though the total will be only a percentage of the Latina community.

All of the census projections assume that the largest area of future growth in the Latino community will be among U.S.-born Latinos. They are the majority and a growing percentage of the Latino population. Latina young people are going to be the single largest area of demographic growth in various parts of the United States. In California, Latino children are already the largest group starting school. Clearly Latina youth represent all of the diversity related to Latino ethnic identity maintenance.

Latino youth are culture creators. In the midst of their experimentation they are drawing from many sources and developing subcultures that will impact how they define themselves in the future. They are fleeing, returning, forming and reforming the culture they received from their parents, mixed with the cultural influences of others. Many are choosing to marry outside of the Latino community, though the vast majority marry other Latinas. But since Latinos are the single largest group in Los Angeles it is fairer to say that others are marrying into the Latino community.

These young people will shape the future of the Latina community. Many of them will be the pastors and priests of Latina churches that will shape the future of Latino religion in the city. They will clearly shape *mañana*.



## 8. Contributing to the religious strength of the city



Because of their unique history and location, Latinos have the opportunity to make a significant impact on religious life in Los Angeles today. Their spiritual vibrancy is contributing to the growth of many parishes and churches in the city and county. But they also bring a unique perspective that can contribute to Christian faith and practice so that it can respond to the challenges of a post-Christian world.

Locally, Latino Christians are helping churches and parishes in transitional neighborhoods by working alongside the existing majority congregations that are struggling, even as they develop new Latino sister congregations. The religious commitment in the Latina community can provide the basis for new spiritual vitality that can have a positive impact in faith communities and throughout the city.

Los Angeles constantly reinvents itself to “wash away” its past. The growing Latina Christian presence may be an opportunity for the city to make peace with its past. Angelinos as a whole need to develop a “non-innocent” reading of Los Angeles so that they can address the painful aspects of its history. Because most Latinos know that history is never innocent, either because of their experiences in Latin America or because of their lives in Los Angeles, they can be helpful in the process of truth-telling about the past. This would be a crucial part of a reconciliation process among all the communities who call Los Angeles home.

The transnational experiences of Latina Christians can help other Christians in the city connect to the church outside of the U.S. The church is vibrant and growing in Latin America. Many churches in Los Angeles need to connect to the embodied spirituality lived by Latinos, but also with a truly global church. The vibrancy of the church in the majority world can help churches in Los Angeles find spiritual renewal. Latinos can serve as key facilitators in that process.

Because Latinos are mestizos—a combination of peoples from many countries in Latin America—they can also model a new way to construct interethnic relations in the city. Most Latino churches are already multicultural and multi-ethnic. Many of these congregations also already have working relationships with majority culture congregations as part of multi-congregational churches or because they share church buildings. Latinos already live an increasingly multicultural reality. Because of that they model some of the ways Angelenos can move forward in this diverse city.

## Where might we be going?

### *Defining the future*

As Latinos seek to define the future, the temptation will be to assume that “my” experience is the definitive experience. Those who have taken the path of structural assimilation can easily assume that all Latinos will “eventually” look like them and seek to have ministry decisions shaped accordingly. Those who have fought hard to maintain Latino religious structures may be tempted to assume that all Latinos should care about what they have accomplished and continue to support them.

Yet if current and historical trends are any indication, the Latina community will continue to diversify. A significant percentage of Latinas will marry outside of the ethnic community, though this will not always mean that the person will be structurally assimilating; some will bring their spouses into the Latino community.

Because of the likelihood of increasing labor needs as baby boomers retire, it is extremely probable that there will also continue to be new temporary as well as permanent migrants from Latin America. All of this movement will enrich and further diversify the people who are grouped under the “Latina” umbrella.

Current majority culture religious structures will continue into the foreseeable future, and many in Los Angeles will continue to see them as representative of the state of Christianity in the city. But even as many become shells of their former selves, new churches and movements will continue to give spiritual vitality to Christian faith. While some churches reflect the increasing secularization of our society, and others lament it, Latino churches will likely be key players in a spiritual renewal in the city, alongside other minority churches.

A key question yet unanswered is whether Christian faith will be the engine for reconciliation and new relationships between the various minority communities in the city. There are deep hurts, and there are many who prefer that Latinos and African-Americans continue to work at cross-purposes. But both communities confess a common faith and assert the importance of that faith to how they live in the city. Might the small efforts at Black-Brown conversations among pastors from both communities be the beginning of a significant change in how these communities relate to each other?

Los Angeles began as a Latin American town, and in many ways it is a Latin American city today. It is also a key crossroads of the Pacific Rim. If the city can draw from its Latinoness it will have tools to envision a new, more intentionally multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual future.

The relationship between Latino and Euro American Christians has a tortured history in Los Angeles, and it is likely that there will still be a lot of pain before a good new model of working together completely emerges. Latinos have gone through many negative experiences, and many might be unsure about the value of working toward a joint future. Mañana might always feel like it is another step away. Yet believing in mañana is to believe that God continues to work.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juan Martínez is associate provost for diversity and international programs, the academic director of the Hispanic Center and associate professor of Hispanic studies and pastoral leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is an ordained Mennonite Brethren pastor. His academic work focuses on Latino Protestantism in the United States. He is particularly interested in Latino Protestant identity in the midst of acculturation and how that impacts Protestant understandings of church and pastoral ministry. He is also researching how poor transnational Latinos are involved in unique forms of Christian mission.

Most recently Martínez published the books: *Los Protestantes An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (2011); *Churches, Cultures & Leadership A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (with Mark Lau Branson, 2011); and *Walk with the People Latino Ministry in the United States/Caminando entre el pueblo Ministerio latino en los Estados Unidos* (2008). He co-edited *Los Evangélicos Portraits of Latino Protestantism in the United States* (with Lindy Scott, 2009 English, 2004 Spanish); and *Vivir y servir desde el exilio* (with Jorge Maldonado, 2008). He was also a regional editor of IVP's *Global Dictionary of Theology* (2008).

Martínez has published articles in many journals in both English and Spanish, including the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, *Kairos*, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, *New Mexico Historical Review*, *Esperanza en Camino*, *Apuntes*, and *Direction*.

#### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RELIGION AND CIVIC CULTURE

The Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC was founded in 1996 to create, translate, and disseminate scholarship on the civic role of religion in a globalizing world. CRCC engages scholars and builds communities in Los Angeles and around the globe. Its innovative partnerships link academics and the faith community to empower emerging leaders through programs like the Passing the Mantle Clergy and Lay Leadership Institute, for African American church leaders, and the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute. The Center also launched the USC Cecil Murray Center for Community Engagement, which strengthens the capacity of faith-based organizations and develops community leadership skills. Since its inception, the Center has managed over \$25 million in grant-funded research from corporations, foundations, and government agencies. In 2002, CRCC was recognized as a Pew Center of Excellence, one of ten university-based research centers. Currently, the Center's work is organized around eight areas of expertise, including international scholarship; non-governmental organizations and civil society; religion and generations; religion in Southern California; religion, diversity, and pluralism; scholarly resource development; and visual documentation of religion. CRCC houses more than 20 research initiatives on topics such as Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, the transmission of religious values across generations, faith-based non-governmental organizations, and the connection between spirituality and social transformation. The Center for Religion and Civic Culture is a research unit of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences.



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