

Bradford Shin

SOC264 Exploratory Paper

Latinx Religion in the South

Religion is an important marker of social identity for most groups of people within the United States, and the Hispanic/Latinx population is no exception. But given that Latinx people are the fastest-growing population within the United States, the size of their population means that their religious contexts vary widely, even if almost all religious Latinx people believe in Christianity. For instance, the individual and collective experiences of Latinx Catholics and Latinx Protestants differ. However, despite these differences, they all fit within, and respond to, shared contexts surrounding their positions in political and social discourse. This paper aims to elaborate upon the uniqueness of the Latinx religious experience in the American South, by outlining its diversity of beliefs and practices and placing it in discussion with the contemporary social context.

The Latinx population in the South, especially in North Carolina and Georgia, has grown exponentially over the past few decades—so much in fact that Latinx people are no longer just numerous in the southern border states and in major Northeastern and Midwestern cities. The majority of Latinx immigrants in the South originate from Mexico and Central American countries like Guatemala and Honduras. Latinx immigrants in the South do not make up for most of the South's Latinx population: many Latinx people living in the South were born in the United States. The Latinx presence in the South is notable because they overlap with the Bible Belt demographic: white, socially conservative evangelicals traditionally unaccustomed to the

growing influx of non-European immigrant populations. Even though white Southerners and Latinx Southerners both believe in Christianity, there are differences in how they celebrate each of their faiths. Religion among these Latinx immigrants is characterized as maintaining close ties to their places of origin by celebrating their faith just as they would in their countries of origin (Marquardt 2013:136).¹ These styles of worship, which include venerating national patron saints, have not gone unnoticed in the South. Noting the potential this growing population has on their congregation numbers, Catholic and Protestant churches throughout the South have made efforts to accommodate the new Latinx population, which in turn greatly changed how these churches traditionally operated (Marquardt 2006:88). Beginning in the 1960s, the Georgia Baptist Church was one of those churches which sought to provide for the growing Latinx population in the state (Moon Jr. 2002). Other common ways churches try to incorporate Latinx people in their congregations are offering Spanish mass services and teaching ESL classes.

However, it is important to note that there is a timeline to these changes, starting in the early twentieth century. Latinxs in the South are not an entirely new demographic; their numbers are much bigger today with growth starting from the late twentieth century. But the story of religion for the early Latinx population, mostly Catholic, is different from that of today's migrants. The American Catholic Church had not been accommodating of Latinx Catholics in the first half of the twentieth century—it tried to assimilate those migrants into American culture and made little efforts to recognize their cultural values or identities (Odem 2004). Widespread activism among Latinx Catholics in the mid-twentieth century helped prompt the Catholic Church to become more tolerant and inclusive of Latinx congregants. But even today, despite the efforts of the Church, there continue to be cultural and bureaucratic barriers which hinder new

¹ This statement applies to both Catholics and Protestant Latinx people.

Latinx immigrants from settling into local Southern parishes. A lack of an institutionalized voice among Latinx Catholics meant that many of them opted to turn to Protestantism (particularly Pentecostalism) instead (Moon Jr. 2002). But conversion was not a common way for Latinx people to celebrate their religion. Instead, one of the most common ways they celebrate their religion is by establishing their own places of worship distinct from mainstream churches.

These uniquely Latinx churches are designed to make the Latinx community feel at home, meaning create a safe space where they can worship in Spanish and gather together for non-religious purposes. But the importance of these churches is not just symbolic. Latinx churches also aid their congregants with material resources, like social services and access to health care. In a sense, churches are just one of many kinds of community organizations that can provide aid to underserved Latinx people—in Forsyth County, North Carolina, churches are often a place for Latinx people to be aware of these other kinds of services (Cutts et al. 2016). These services are often the most beneficial for undocumented immigrants struggling to navigate through life in a foreign country.

Latinx people did not only carry with them their unique styles of worship, but they also carried with them a distinctly Latin American Christian belief, regardless of if they were Catholic or Protestant—liberation theology. Liberation theology, in short, is a branch of postcolonial Christian belief “that rethink[s] the meaning and purpose of human existence, social life, faith, and religious thought and practice by paying attention to those ignored by history—that is, those who have generally been denied voice, positive identity, and an adequate material standard of living” (Valentín 2010:98). In other words, liberation theology revolves fundamental Christian beliefs around the stories of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. Whether Latinx churches openly preach liberation theology or not, aspects of liberation theology have been

applied to the current situation of Latinx people in the United States today. The identity of Latinx churches is about cultural resilience and community-building in a society where Latinx people are not part of the mainstream, let alone the Southern culture. Carrying on the legacy of liberation theology, Latinx churches are aware of the fact that their congregants are affected by conversations surrounding them in today's climate, like immigration and economic standing. They use Biblical stories to provide an analogy for their situations as minorities. The implications of following the liberation theology tradition include being more politically active and giving a greater voice to those who need it.

Important for any minority group in the United States is a strong sense of community, and distinctly Latinx churches serve an important role in fostering the Latinx community, especially in places like the South where their presence contrasts the traditional Bible Belt demographics. The growing Latinx population in the South had a noticeable impact on the religious landscape in the South, prompting Southern churches to notice the Latinx presence and adapt to it. But the presence and establishment of distinctly Latinx churches are what makes up religion among Latinx people in the South. Religion to them serves a larger purpose beyond bringing together Latinx people of shared faith: it helps protect the legally vulnerable and gives a voice to Latinx people seeking more equal representation in the country. Latinx churches in the South are largely influenced by liberation theology from Latin America, a belief largely applicable to Latinx people experiencing marginalization, poverty, and uncertain legal status. For example, churches help provide social services and access to other forms of community aid, often most beneficial for undocumented immigrants. Religion is just one of many examples of Latinx people in the South adjusting to their new climate and finding ways to thrive in it without losing cultural or community ties.

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