

Latinoamérica Religiosa: Approaching Modern Latin America through the Study of Religion

Matthew Casey-Pariseault

Abstract

Academics and policy makers often take Latin America for granted as a clearly defined and culturally coherent region of the world. For many, this stems from the economic, political, and cultural ties that date back to the Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonial periods. But the concept of Latin America is a modern one that emerged from nineteenth-century debates over statecraft and was modeled on old world divisions between Anglo/Teutonic Europe on the one hand and Latin Europe on the other. In many ways, this imposition fit quite poorly in the Americas. With its astounding diversity (ethnic, geographical, economic, political, and otherwise), Latin America defies easy generalizations. So, what is it that makes this category useful today? In this essay, I draw on a multilingual and multidisciplinary body of scholarly literature to argue that the study of religion is one of our best tools for understanding the echoes, parallels, and divergences that have defined the history of modern Latin America. Additionally, I hope to show that a broad, interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion has much to offer the fields of inquiry we call area studies.

Is Latin America a coherent region? If so, what characteristics define this geographical space and its peoples? Not language, which ranges from Portuguese to French and Spanish, alongside hundreds of native languages and blended dialects. It isn't geography or climate, with the Bolivian Andes about as different from the beaches of the Dominican Republic as two settings can possibly be. Race and ethnicity, too, fail as unifying factors. The ethnic makeup of Uruguay and Haiti, for example, are little alike. European colonization is one clear historically unifying factor,

but one that was interrupted by national independence movements. And while the nations that make up this region today all transitioned from their colonial status to independent states, they did so within a wide timespan between 1804 and 1902. In each case, however, Catholicism maintained its privileged status well after independence. And at the same time, non-Catholic traditions existed and even thrived, often in the shadow of dominant Catholicism. Between 1857 and 1991, each country in the region officially separated the Catholic Church from the state. And religious diversity, especially in the case of African-descended, Indigenous, and Protestant traditions, has boomed.

I argue that the history of religion can help us understand the coherence and limitations of modern Latin America. While scholars of Latin America have given us a rich and layered understanding of the role of religion, a comprehensive perspective remains elusive due to linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. In this article, I provide a critical synthesis of the scholarship on religion across disciplines (primarily history, sociology, anthropology) and languages (English, Spanish, and Portuguese), to shed light on some of the outlines and shadows of what makes Latin America a coherent category. This essay is a tour of post-independence Latin America through the lens of religion ranging from the revolutionary movements of the early nineteenth-century to the social and political shifts of the present day. I hope that this kind of regional approach to the role of religion will be useful in the critical re-imagining of other geopolitical areas as well.

In some ways, the history of Latin America is a history of Catholicisms.¹ The development of national communities from Costa Rica to Chile unfolded alongside the powerful presence of the Catholic Church, both as an institution and as a faith community. At the same time, laypeople, and even some members of the church hierarchy, have regularly turned to Catholic beliefs and practices to create popular resistance movements, challenging both church and state authority alike. Any group's struggle for rights has had to confront Catholicism as their country's most enduring and widely trusted institution. As Fortunato Mallimaci has argued in the case of

¹ I use the plural "Catholicisms" here to evoke the complex and multivocal nature of the faith tradition's impact on Latin America, past and present.



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Argentina, Catholicism ‘has impacted and continues to profoundly impact society...regardless of the religion, conviction, belief, or non-belief of the individual.’² From education, legislation, and economics, to land ownership, the influence and legacy of Catholicism is omnipresent, even in the more secularized nations of Latin America.

And yet, scholars have continuously shown that people’s religious experiences are much more complex and diverse than can be captured by the category of ‘Catholic.’ In the words of Brendan Jamal Thornton, ‘Diversity, heterodoxy, and pluralism have always been more useful descriptors of religion in Latin America than orthodoxy or homogeneity, despite the ostensible ubiquity of Catholic identity.’³ This was true in the colonial period and remained the case throughout the republican era. While social scientists began to pay more attention to religious pluralism and diversity in the late twentieth century with the so called ‘Pentecostal boom,’ recent trends have brought scholarly attention to the fact that the people of Latin America were never quite as ‘Catholic’ as they appeared, and that Latin American Catholicism has always drawn influences from Native, African, and other traditions. These are stories of ritual practice and supernatural belief. But they are also stories of political activism, policy debates, and military decision-making. Approaching religion as a nexus between the major historical turning points in Latin American history and the lived experiences of everyday people, we can interrogate the patterns and trends that make Latin America a useful category of analysis.

People, Church, and Government in the Early Republics (1800-1870)

After new nations throughout the Americas gained independence from Spain, Portugal, and France between 1804 and 1824, religion became embedded in the political and economic struggles that marked this early national period. These years saw the founding of national Catholic churches, which attempted to regain political, social, and economic dominance as the state spread its control throughout the new

² Fortunato Mallimaci, *El mito de la Argentina laica: catolicismo, política y estado* (Capital Intellectual, 2015), 16.

³ Brendan Jamal Thornton, “Changing Landscapes of Faith: Latin American Religions in the Twenty-First Century,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 4 (2018): 857-862, 857.

national territories. From the outset, politicians and their followers found themselves caught up in struggles between liberal secular visions of the nation and more traditional, Catholic concepts of nationhood. Still, historians have shown that even the most liberal of reformers agreed that Catholicism would continue to play an essential role in the new republics. What exactly that role would be was a matter of intense debate, even bloodshed. While in most cases, the liberal ideology won out during the first several decades after independence, the religious question remained at the core of the throughout the geopolitical region that was emerging as Latin America.

Devout Catholics found themselves on both sides of the independence struggles in what Pamela Voekel calls a 'transatlantic Catholic civil war.'⁴ In Mexico, for example, Father Miguel Hidalgo used Our Lady of Guadalupe to rouse popular, indigenous support while New Spain's Viceroy Xavier Venegas appealed to the Virgen de los Remedios as the symbolic general of the royalist troops.⁵ Though many priests (especially those born in the Americas) supported the independence movements from Buenos Aires to Mexico City, the institutional church stood firmly in favor of the colonial powers. Pope Pius VII's 1816 apostolic brief, *Etsi longissimo terrarum*, called the independence movements of Spanish America 'riots and seditions,' arguing that they were inspired by the devil.⁶

Yet the revolutionaries were not the godless anti-Catholics that royalists often portrayed them to be. South America's two liberators were keenly aware of the importance of religion in their cause and in the formation of new nations. While Simón Bolívar promoted religious liberty and secular education, he knew that the new nations he helped establish (Gran Colombia, Peru, Bolivia) would not survive without

⁴ Pamela Voekel, *For God and Liberty: Catholicism and Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1790-1861* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 1.

⁵ J. Lloyd Meacham, *Church and State: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 43.

⁶ Pio Papa VII, *Etsi longissimo terrarium*, Wikisource. Accessed February 11, 2024.
https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Etsi_longissimo_terrarum

the support of the Catholic hierarchy.⁷ The liberator of Argentina and Chile, José de San Martín featured Catholic devotions in his military campaigns. A colonel who marched on San Martín's famous 1817 trek across the Andes recalled that 'when there was not a church or adequate house, an altar was improvised in the fields, located on high so that everyone could see the officiant.'⁸ On the whole, the free-thinking liberalism of the independence generation was deeply intertwined within the Catholic milieu. This generation's authoritative Spanish translation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* notably suppressed the anti-religious sentiments of the original text.⁹ The leaders behind the new nation of the Dominican Republic, where independence came in 1844 after a protracted struggle with neighboring Haiti, joined forces in what they called the Secret Society of the Trinity, named after the Catholic trinitarian doctrine. The group's founding member, Juan Pablo Duarte, captured the religious sentiments of the new American nationalisms when he proclaimed that 'The white cross that our flag will carry will say to the world that the Dominican people, upon entering into the life of liberty, proclaim the union of all races through the bonds of civilization and Christianity.'¹⁰

These new states aimed to implement the liberal protections of citizenship rights while continuing to provide a privileged place for the Catholic Church. And so, the Catholic Church became the official religion of the Latin American nations, creating what Sol Serrano calls the 'Catholic republic.'¹¹ The Catholic hierarchy in the former colonies quickly got on board with the new national projects. A major impulse for this was the hard turn towards liberal anticlericalism in both Spain and Portugal during the early 1820s, which pushed formerly loyalist priests in the Americas

⁷ José Bellido Nina, "La República católica y la República constitucional: apuntes sobre la relación Iglesia-Estado en José Sebastián de Goyeneche y Simón Bolívar (1812-1826)" *Allpanchis* 47, no. 85 (2020): 67-97.

⁸ Coronel Manuel Alejandro Pueyrredón, cited in Roberto Colimodio, "San Martín: ¿Católico o masón?" *Clarín*, June 19, 2019.

⁹ The translator was Buenos Aires lawyer and politician named Mariano Moreno. See: Mallimaci, *El mito de la Argentina laica*, 22.

¹⁰ Pedro Troncoso Sánchez, *Episodios duartianos, vol II* (Gráfica Willian, C. por A.: 2010), 49.

¹¹ Sol Serrano, *¿Qué hacer con Dios en la República? Política y secularización en Chile (1845-1888)* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008).

towards the lesser evil of the new American governments. Priest-politicians were the norm in these early years. Argentine priest Manuel Alberti was a member of the famous 1810 Río de la Plata Junta and in Peru, and Father Francisco Xavier Luna Pizarro was president of Peru’s first three Constitutional Congresses (1822, 1828, 1834).

Latin America’s struggle over the religious question varied from nation to nation. In the region’s most violent nineteenth-century war over religion, Mexico’s *Guerra de la Reforma* (1857-1861), the victorious liberals showed ‘as much if not more religious passion than did the conservative forces.’¹² In Mexico, the balance of pro-clerical and anticlerical forces was fairly even.¹³ This was also the case in Colombia, where the liberal-conservative struggle was perhaps the next most violent.¹⁴ Peru’s multiple civil wars between liberals and conservatives during this period led to some secularizing policies (the elimination of the *diezmo* tax for example) but did not dramatically reduce the church’s power there.¹⁵ In other states, like Argentina and Imperial Brazil, where the national governments were far stronger than the Catholic Church, violence and struggle between clericals and anticlericals was more subdued. Paraguay was controlled by a string of anticlerical regimes beginning with the dictatorship of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840).¹⁶ On the other end of the spectrum was Ecuador, where the Church enjoyed significant power and the support of President Gabriel García Moreno (1861-1865, 1869-1875).¹⁷

¹² Voekel, *For God and Liberty*, 224.

¹³ Alan Knight, *Bandits and Liberals: Latin America since Independence* (Universidad of Nebraska Press, 2022), 100.

¹⁴ Helen Delpar, *Red Against Blue: The Liberal Party in Colombian Politics, 1863–1899* (University of Alabama Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Jorge Basadre, *Historia de la República del Perú (1822-1933): La falaz prosperidad del guano (1842-1866)* (El Comercio, 2010), 253-254.

¹⁶ Herib Caballero Campos, “Libre y absuelta de toda obediencia: la Iglesia Católica en el Paraguay (1813-1842),” *Historia constitucional* no. 25 (2024): 803-825.

¹⁷ Peter V. N. Henderson, *Gabriel García Moreno and Conservative State Formation in the Andes* (University of Texas Press, 2008).

Native religiosity flourished during the early republican period. In the words of Alan Knight, ‘the biggest challenge to the religious supremacy of (orthodox) Catholicism, came from the survival of pre-Conquest Indian religions.’¹⁸ In countries with large indigenous populations, religious practices rooted in the colonial category of ‘Indian,’ could be found ‘popping up, hydra-like to the dismay of many liberals.’¹⁹ For example, after Guatemalan independence, a popular sacred crucifix named El Cristo Negro de Esquipulas began to change along with the lives of its Native devotees. ‘The image’s color now reflected the darkened skin tone of the people of eastern Guatemala,’ writes Douglass Sullivan-González. It was ‘a religious artifact carved by European hands and ecclesiastical impulses but now hued by time and temperament to appear more like the people who worshipped it.’²⁰ A major factor in these local religious innovations was a shortage of Catholic priests. Many parishes and bishoprics in the new republics remained unfilled while the Vatican and the national governments hashed out their new relationship.²¹ In rural communities ‘[n]o greater issue touched the hearts of the everyday faithful in the emerging Republic than the availability of competent priests to administer the holy rites of the church.’²²

African-descended religious traditions left a major impact on the development of national identities in many of the new nations. During the nineteenth century, these traditions underwent a re-institutionalization process, by which individual healers pieced together what Luis Nicolau Parés calls ‘fragments of religious culture’ to build communities with a following that reached beyond the family circles and local

¹⁸ Knight, *Bandits and Liberals*, 94.

¹⁹ Matthew D. O’Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857* (Duke University Press, 2010), 223.

²⁰ Douglass Sullivan-González, *The Black Christ of Esquipulas: Religion and Identity in Guatemala* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 54.

²¹ John Lynch, *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* (Yale University Press, 2012); 127; Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *The Catholic Church in Peru 1821-1985: A Social History* (Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 45.

²² Douglass Creed Sullivan-González, “The Carrera Years: Conservative Politics and the Church in Guatemala,” In *On Earth as it is In Heaven: Religion in Modern Latin America*, ed. Virginia Garrard-Burnett (Scholarly Resources Inc, 2000), 5.

communities that had carried them through the colonial period.²³ Meanwhile, elites tended to react with rejection and fear in the face of Afro-descended religiosities. In many cases, as Walter Mignolo shows, Afro religious traditions took Christian influence and turned them into 'something that Christians could not recognize,' something that they feared and rejected.²⁴

While slavery was outlawed in most of the new republics by mid-century, the institution played a central role in the debates around religion up until the late century in the Brazilian Empire and Spain's remaining American colonial holdings (Cuba and Puerto Rico). One notable example comes from the northeast of Brazil in 1835, where enslaved and free black rebels drew on the Arabic language and Muslim symbolism to carry out a massive and nearly successful rebellion.²⁵ In Spanish Cuba, the slaveholding elites found ready allies in the island's creole-dominated Catholic hierarchy, whose 'ideological and cultural labor' was key in the 'defense and reproduction of the established order.'²⁶ Beginning with the Spanish Courts of Cádiz in 1810, however, successive waves of liberal reforms curtailed church power. Reformers eliminated the *diezmo* (tithe) and the *fuero eclesiástico* (clerical immunity), while at the same time excluding Cuba's slaveholding elites from representation in the Spanish government.²⁷ Although this offensive was followed by a renewed embrace of church-state ties in Spain, Cuba's disenfranchised creole elite went on to lead three independence struggles, beginning in 1868.²⁸ Slavery itself was not fully abolished on the island until 1886, just over a decade before Cuba won its independence.

²³ Luis Nicolau Parés, *The Formation of Candomblé: Vodun History and Ritual in Brazil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013.), 84.

²⁴ Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 92.

²⁵ João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

²⁶ Rigoberto Segre Ricardo, *Iglesia y nación en cuba (1868-1898)* (Instituto Cubano del Libro, 2010), 35.

²⁷ Segre Ricardo, *Iglesia y nación*, 31.

²⁸ Segre Ricardo, *Iglesia y nación*.

The Shifting Religious Question (1870s-1945)

Historians have shown that growing diversity and disagreement over the role of religion defined the next period of Latin American history as political, economic, and demographic shifts sparked radical changes. Cities across the region grew rapidly, and internal and international migrants brought new levels of religious pluralism and diversity. Many republics saw a revival of African-descended and Indigenous traditions during this period. By the early-twentieth century, the region's first mass political movements began to emerge across the political spectrum. Meanwhile, states continued to take control over the social functions of the Catholic Church, from issuing birth certificates and performing civil marriage to administering public education systems. In response to these shifts, the Catholic Church turned to an increasingly militant group of lay activists to promote its causes in the crowded and diversifying public sphere.

In the busy cities of the early twentieth century, religious traditions merged and evolved through processes of formalization. In countries like Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, we see the beginnings of what Stefania Capone calls the 're-Africanization' of Afro-Atlantic religions.²⁹ The founder and early leaders of Umbanda in Brazil created an organized religious tradition that drew on African-descended practices as well as European spiritism and Catholicism.³⁰ Rio's Umbandistas created the Federação Espírita de Umbanda in 1939 and held the first Brazilian Congress of Spiritism and Umbanda three years later. This was the formalization of an ongoing process by which religious diversity became an 'integral part of the cultural multiplicity of a multiethnic people.'³¹ During the same period, in Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and elsewhere, *indigenista* folklore movements formalized native practices and beliefs, especially sacred music, dance, and storytelling. In the city of Cusco during

²⁹ Stefania Capone Laffitte, *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé* (Duke University Press, 2010); Markel Thylefors, "Modernizing God" in Haitian Vodou? Reflections on Olowoum and Reafricanization in Haiti," *Anthropos* 103, no. 1 (2008): 113-125.

³⁰ José Henrique Motta de Oliveira, "Entre a Macumba e o Espiritismo: uma análise do discurso dos intelectuais de umbanda durante o Estado Novo," *CAOS-Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais* 14 (September, 2009): 60-85.

³¹ Elton de Oliveira Nunes, "Teoria e metodologia em história das religiões no Brasil: o estado da arte," *História: Questões & Debates* 55, no. 2 (July-December 2011): 43-58. 46.

the early twentieth century, intellectuals and Indigenous performers created a standard repertoire of the region's traditions, effectively inserting Native Andean art and spirituality as a centerpiece of Peruvian national identity.³² Emphasizing the formal, artistic, and folkloric elements, the leaders of these movements found ways to make Native and African-descended traditions acceptable to the dominant society.

Meanwhile, people in frontier areas developed their own religious innovations that were distant from and hostile to modernizing national projects. Chilean sociologist Cristián Parker calls this the 'peasantry against the corrupt city.'³³ These movements responded to acute political and often environmental chaos by promoting a return to previous ways of life.³⁴ Perhaps Latin America's most famous rural millenarian movement (one that predicts the coming radical transformation of society) was the community that thrived in Canudos, Brazil during the 1890s. The 1889 transition from empire to republic and more than a decade of severe drought in the northern Sertão region provided the grim backdrop of the new religious movement at Canudos, which drew on the charismatic teachings of Antônio Conselheiro. Among other things, Conselheiro preached that the newly founded republic, and its separation of church and state, was the embodiment of the antichrist.³⁵ For over a year, the rebels at Canudos fended off the Brazilian national army before their Eden was entirely wiped out and as many as twenty-five thousand people had died. A few decades later, in the rugged terrain of the southwestern Dominican Republic, a middle-aged black farmhand named Olivorio Mateo Ledesma gained a following by performing faith healings and claiming to have been sent by God to initiate the end times. Liberal landowners accused him of practicing 'African obscurantism,' and after the United States occupied the Dominican Republic in 1916, Olivorio found his way onto a list

³² Zoila Mendoza, *Creating Our Own: Folklore, Performance, and Identity in Cuzco, Peru* (Duke University Press, 2008); Zoila Mendoza, *Shaping Society through Dance: Mestizo Ritual Performance in the Peruvian Andes* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), especially Chapter Two.

³³ Cristián Parker, *Otra lógica en América Latina: Religión popular y modernización capitalista* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 285-288.

³⁴ I.A. Cripa, "Las trayectorias de Manuel Benício, Heriberto Frías y las Guerras de Canudos en Brasil y Tomóchic en México en el final del siglo XIX," *Revista de Historia de América* 145 (2011), 9-28.

³⁵ Robert Levine, *Vale of Tears: Revisiting the Canudos Massacre in Northeast Brazil, 1893–1897* (University of California Press, 1995).

of 'suspect individuals.'³⁶ He died in a shootout with Dominican and U.S. forces in 1922. Around the same time in the north-central Peruvian Amazon, hundreds of natives from the region's tribes gathered under the guidance of an Asháninka leader named Tasorentsi, who drew on native traditions and Seventh-day Adventism to preach resistance in the wake of the horrors of the rubber boom.³⁷ Tasorentsi was killed by the Peruvian military in 1924.

By the early twentieth century, reform movements from across the political spectrum began promoting versions of what the Argentine modernist Leopoldo Lugones called a new 'religion of the fatherland.'³⁸ Many of these movements took on quasi-religious forms, blending elements from multiple spiritual traditions. Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre's American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), which by the 1930s was Peru's most important non-Marxist reform movement, drew heavily on Christian and spiritist imagery.³⁹ The party hymn, the *Marsellesa aprista*, which is set to the tune of the French national anthem, urged followers to 'embrace the new religion.' In Nicaragua, Augusto César Sandino's guerrilla struggle against U.S. occupation (1926-1934) likewise wove together an eclectic mix of spiritual influences that included the Theosophist tradition, Seventh-day Adventism, and the recently founded Magnetic-Spiritual School of Buenos Aires.⁴⁰

Immigrants brought their religious traditions into these fluctuating political settings and played a major role in Latin America's evolving societies.⁴¹ Politicians regularly debated the virtues of welcoming non-Catholic immigrants, with many liberals

³⁶ Mats Lundahl and Jan Lundius, *Peasants and Religion: A Socioeconomic Study of Dios Olivorio and the Palma Sola Religion in the Dominican Republic* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 2.

³⁷ Fernando Santos-Granero, *Slavery and Utopia: The Wars and Dreams of an Amazonian World Transformer* (University of Texas Press, 2018).

³⁸ Mallimaci, *El mito de la Argentina laica*, 32.

³⁹ Imelda Vega-Centeno, *Aprismo popular: cultura, religión y política* (CISEPA-PUC, 1991).

Fredrick B. Pike, *The Politics of the Miraculous in Peru: Haya de la Torre and the Spiritualist Tradition* (University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

⁴⁰ Alejandro Brendaña, *Sandino: mística, libertad y socialismo* (Centro de Estudios Nacionales); Marco Aurelio Navarro-Genie, *Augusto "César" Sandino Messiah of Light and Truth* (Syracuse University Press, 2002).

⁴¹ Klaus Gallo, *The Struggle for an Enlightened Republic: Buenos Aires and Rivadavia* (ILAS, 2006).

promoting the arrival of Protestant Europeans as part of their modernizing vision and conservatives often warning against the deterioration of the Catholic national community.⁴² In Argentina, Chile, Brazil and elsewhere elites aimed to stamp out Native resistance to national expansion by populating frontier regions with 'civilized' Christian immigrants from Europe.⁴³ By the 1880s, Chile's southern frontier region was home to thousands of European migrants who the government recruited to establish new settlements in the wake of the last great Mapuche uprising. In this region, where Catholic missionaries had long dominated the school system, Protestant German, Swiss, and British colonizers established private schools that effectively broke up the Catholic monopoly on Chilean public education.⁴⁴ Cities in Argentina and Uruguay took in massive number of immigrants as well, with major influxes of Protestant and Jewish Europeans among others. Other countries like Peru and Brazil were home to significant immigration from Japanese and Chinese communities who brought their religious practices. Many immigrants from China, for example, established themselves as respected herbalists and healers, practicing traditional Chinese medicine in cities and towns from Cuba to Chile.⁴⁵

Primarily, however, the growing immigrant presence brought mainline, progressive Protestantism to Latin America.⁴⁶ These North American and European Protestants developed alliances with the anticlerical liberal politicians of the day. Together, they advocated for and often achieved, the general secularization of life cycle events for Latin Americans, with the church in most nations losing its monopoly over the registration of births, marriages, and deaths. For example, Peru's first religious

⁴² Mónica Baretta, "Análisis de una polémica fundacional: inmigración, religión y desarrollo económico en la Asamblea Constituyente argentina de 1853," *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso* 19, no. 1 (2019): 41-55.

⁴³ Mallimaci, *El mito de la Argentina laica*, 18.

⁴⁴ José Manuel Zavala Cepeda, "Los colonos y la escuela en la Araucanía: Los inmigrantes europeos y el surgimiento de la educación privada laica y protestante en la región de la Araucanía (1887-1915)," *Universum* 23, no. 1 (2008): 268-286.

⁴⁵ Patricia Palma, "Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Cases of Peru, Chile, and Cuba," *Chinese Medicine and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2023): 330-338.

⁴⁶ Juan Fonseca Ariza, *Misioneros y civilizadores: Protestantismo y modernización en el Perú (1915-1930)* (Fondo Editorial PUCP, 2002).

tolerance law came after Protestants and progressive activists generated public outcry when the Catholic Bishop of Puno led a gang of laypeople in a violent attack on the Seventh-day Adventist mission in the Andean region of Puno.⁴⁷

New people and new ideas also fueled the height of liberal anticlericalism across Latin America. Anarchist and socialist movements drew followers from the growing urban working classes, though their impact on electoral politics was limited. In most cases, it was liberals who did the anticlerical work. In Guatemala, the liberal dictator José Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) oversaw the construction of temples to Minerva, the Roman goddess of knowledge, as monuments to liberal, secular education.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, in Mexico, the 1917 constitution and subsequent reforms institutionalized the Revolution's anticlerical agenda.⁴⁹ During the late 1920s, thousands of lay Mexican Catholics took up arms against the government's anticlerical policies, such as the expulsion of foreign priests and closing of churches among other measures, provoking the Cristero War. Tens of thousands of rebels from distinct classes and regions joined the cause to 'kill and die for Christ the King.'⁵⁰ Yet even in this polarized context, the sides of the religious question were blurred. Some priests and devout laypeople split off from the Roman Catholic hierarchy to form the pro-revolutionary Mexican Apostolic Catholic Church, for example.⁵¹

Many of Latin America's Catholic elites and politicians found success during these years adopting and adapting a series of new social teachings coming from Rome. Vatican teaching under Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) took a turn away from 'the reactionary ultramontanist of Pius IX' and steered the church towards forms of social

⁴⁷ For an excellent study of the early impact of Seventh-day Adventism in Peru see: Yael Mabat, *Sacrifice and Regeneration: Seventh-day Adventism and Religious Transformation in the Andes* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022).

⁴⁸ Sullivan-González, *The Black Christ of Esquipulas*, 129.

⁴⁹ Adrian A. Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929-1940," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 1 (1997): 87-120.

⁵⁰ Fernando M. González, *Matar y morir por cristo rey: Aspectos de la cristiada* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2001), 17-18.

⁵¹ Matthew Butler, "Sontanas Rojinegras: Catholic anticlericalism and Mexico's revolutionary schism," *The Americas* 65 no. 4 (2009): 535-558.

and political engagement that addressed the problems of the modern, industrialized, and democratizing world.⁵² The reformers who institutionalized welfare programs in Latin America used arguments that were ‘infused with Catholic understandings of work, gender roles and social relations.’⁵³ Throughout the region, the church’s social turn inspired a new malleability in the application of Catholic thought to society’s debates and problems. In Brazil, both the right reformist regime of Getulio Vargas and Latin America’s largest fascist movement, Ação Integralista Brasileira, drew influence from Catholic social teaching as they competed for power and influence.⁵⁴ In Chile, historian Sara Walsh has shown the important role played by Catholic intellectuals in the promotion of eugenic policies and the conceptualization of *la raza chilena* (the Chilean race).⁵⁵

Pope Leo’s successors, especially Pope Pius XI (1922-1939), continued to promote the church’s social teachings, primarily by recruiting laypeople into organizations like Catholic Action. Bishops founded national Catholic Action branches throughout Latin America during the 1920s and 30s with the aim of re-Catholicizing society and asserting church interests in political debates. In many instances, Catholic Action and similar organizations functioned as a political lobby for the church. In the words of Dain Borges, the growing power of anticlerical liberal and leftist options during these years had ‘goaded the Catholic clergy and laity into new forms of political and social organization.’⁵⁶ Militant lay organizations brought together workers, members of the

⁵² Knight, *Bandits and Liberals*, 103.

⁵³ Andrés Biehl and Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, “From Reciprocity to Welfare: Rerum Novarum, Catholicism, and Early Social Security in Latin America,” *Religion Compass* 16, no. 10 (2022): 1-12. 4.

⁵⁴ Marcos Gonçalves, “Caridade, abre as asas sobre nós: política de subvenções do governo Vargas entre 1931 e 1937,” *Varia história* 27, no. 45 (2011): 317-336; Giselda Brito Silva, “Catolicismo e Integralismo como lugares de produção do conhecimento histórico entre o Brasil e Portugal em começos do século XX,” *Revista lusófona de Ciência das religiões* 7, no. 13-14 (2008): 485-492.

⁵⁵ Sara Walsh, *The Religion of Life: Eugenics, Race, and Catholicism in Chile* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022)

⁵⁶ Dain Borges, “Catholic Vanguard in Brazil,” in *Local Church, Global Church: Catholic Activism in Latin America from Rerum Novarum to Vatican II*, ed. Stephen J.C. Andes and Julia G. Young (Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 22.



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educated middle class, and elite conservatives in a corporatist structure that at once promoted reform and aimed to maintain deep rooted social stratification.⁵⁷

Cold War Religiosities (1945-1990)

The Cold War period in Latin America was marked by violent political and social turns. Populist movements across the political spectrum competed for control and authoritarian regimes established themselves throughout the region. Urbanization and industrialization continued to accelerate and were accompanied by improvements in standards of living for some and a growing wealth gap that left many others behind. New social questions, especially those related to gender and sexuality, brought the role of religion back into public debates. Evangelical Christian traditions grew quickly and gained relative acceptance during these years as well. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church underwent major changes during and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This was a period of increased ecumenicalism—in this case, cooperation between Catholics and non-Catholics—and the emergence of strong movements that we might call the ‘religious right’ and the ‘religious left.’ Many of the period’s political and economic movements were explicitly faith-based and some of the most dynamic religious communities were those that aimed to assist the poor with their social and economic woes.

Protestant churches grew rapidly during the mid-twentieth century. Part of the story was demographic. In 1961, according to Enrique Dussel, around 90 percent of Latin America’s over 200 million people were Catholic. Yet the region was home to only around 40 thousand Catholic priests compared to over 20 thousand pastors and ministers from other Christian churches.⁵⁸ But it wasn’t just the increase in supply that attracted converts to Protestant churches. It was also the kind of Protestantism that was on offer. By the 1960s, Pentecostal churches had gained ground on the deeply rooted but small Presbyterian, Adventist, Methodist, and Baptist churches that had established themselves in previous decades. Unlike many of their more hierarchical counterparts, Pentecostal churches emphasized Holy Spirit baptism and other

⁵⁷ Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *Religion and Revolution in Peru, 1824-1976* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

⁵⁸ Enrique Dussel, *Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Nova Terra: 1972), 144.

experiential practices that provided a direct path to God for all members. These churches also made service to the poor central to their missions. In Central America, for example, the Assemblies of God, one of the twentieth century's largest Pentecostal churches, established childcare services, while other Pentecostal churches set up legal and medical assistance programs.⁵⁹

Over the past four decades, scholars of Latin America have debated the reasons behind the rapid growth of Protestant, and especially Pentecostal churches. Recently, the conversation has broadened to include the region's wider religious diversification.⁶⁰ R. Andrew Chesnut has argued that an unregulated and competitive 'spiritual economy' emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century. The most successful competitors in this religious marketplace were the 'spirit centered traditions,' especially Pentecostalism, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and African diaspora religions.⁶¹ Meanwhile, growing attention to non-Christian religious traditions like Buddhism and Islam has shown that Latin America's religious transformation extends beyond the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy.⁶²

The region's infamous Cold War dictatorships interacted with religious communities in ways that had less to do with political inclinations and more with the contingencies of the given national context. The Catholic Church was generally a vocal opponent of human rights abuses throughout the region.⁶³ Anthony Gill has argued that in

⁵⁹ José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), 66.

⁶⁰ In the Spanish-language academy, this debate began earlier with studies like Cristian Lalive d'Épinay's provocative *El refugio de las masas: Estudio sociológico del protestantismo chileno* (Editorial del Pacífico, 1968). Two English-language texts published in 1990 marked a new era in the study of Latin American Protestantism: David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant: The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (University of California Press, 1990); David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Blackwell, 1990).

⁶¹ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶² Frank Usarski, ed., *O budismo no brasil* (Lorosae, 2002); Ken Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2021).

⁶³ Alexander Wilde, ed., *Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America Past and Present* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

countries where Catholicism's dominance was seriously threatened by competing groups, as in Chile, the church stood more firmly on the side of the people. Where there were fewer threats to the church, as in Argentina, the Catholic hierarchy tended to be less critical of the authoritarian regime.⁶⁴ During the period of military dictatorships in Brazil (1964-1985), the Catholic Church took on a conciliatory role, negotiating for peace in behind-the-scenes meetings.⁶⁵ Virginia Garrard-Burnett's research on the brief regime of Latin America's first Protestant head of state, Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt, reveals the unique intersections of race, class, and religion at the height of the government's genocidal war against the Mayan community.⁶⁶

Liberation theology is perhaps the best-known phenomenon of Latin America's Cold War period. While this movement burst onto the global scene following the 1968 meeting of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, the progressive activism of liberation theology had deeper roots in Christian democracy and the right-wing Catholic integralism of previous decades. Dom Hélder Câmara, one of Brazil's most prominent liberation theologians, had been a far right integralist in his youth.⁶⁷ Peru's Gustavo Gutiérrez, who wrote the 1971 book that gave liberation theology its name, was a devoted member of Peru's Catholic Action during the 1940s when the organization had intimate ties to falangist and fascist ideologies. The liberationist turn provided new leadership potential for laypeople, exemplified in the grassroots organizations often called Ecclesial Base Communities, a feature that separated it from previous top-down lay movements. This was a movement with much less clerical oversight than Catholic Action and other lay organizations. And yet progressive Catholics tended to view popular religiosity as superstition, limiting their potential for growth. The Chilean group *Cristianos por el Socialismo*, for example, viewed popular religion as a 'false praxis of liberation' because 'it does not break the chains that enslave the

⁶⁴ Anthony Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and State in Latin America* (Chicago University Press, 2010).

⁶⁵ Kenneth Serbin, *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁶⁶ Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt 1982-1983* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶⁷ Ivanir Antonio Rampon, *O caminho espiritual de Dom Hélder Câmara* (Paulinas, 2013).



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people.⁶⁸ Scholars have shown that alongside these Catholic movements an impactful Evangelical Left was gaining steam as well.⁶⁹

By the 1960s, religious Latin Americans found themselves involved in a multifaceted culture war. Questions over gender and women’s rights took center stage, drawing many religious leaders and activists into public debates. Throughout the region, feminist and queer rights movements promoted changes to norms and laws surrounding issues like women in the workplace, reproductive rights, and diverse expressions of sexuality. In many cases, an early post-Vatican II support from Catholic priests bolstered the region’s first legally accessible contraceptive pills.⁷⁰ But by the 1980s, with a regional and international turn away from Vatican II’s progressive legacy, a coalition of conservative Catholics and Evangelicals positioned themselves as a powerful lobby against progressive reforms related to gender and sexuality. New lines formed, dividing religious people and leaders not primarily by their faith traditions, but by their political and social views.⁷¹

Concluding Thoughts: Our Present Moment

At first glance, the present state of religion in Latin America appears discontinuous with the early-republican past. Gone are the priest-politicians of the nineteenth century. Passed are the days of compulsory Catholic baptism and education. The Catholic Church is now officially separated from each of the region’s national governments, and the number of non-religious citizens is growing quickly across the board. Yet religion remains woven into both public and private life.

⁶⁸ Documento del Secretariado Nacional Cristianos por el Socialismo presentado a la Jornada Nacional de noviembre de 1972 (Santiago de Chile), cited in Parker, *Otra lógica*, 227.

⁶⁹ David C. Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁷⁰ Karina Felitti, *La revolución de la píldora: Sexualidad y política en los sesenta* (Edhasa, 2012); Raúl Necochea López, *A History of Family Planning in Peru* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁷¹ Maria das Dores Campos Machado, “Religião, cultura e política,” *Religião e Sociedade* 32, no. 2 (2012): 29-56; Matthew Casey-Pariseault, “La teología política del conservadurismo católico en el Perú contemporáneo,” *Discursos del sur, revista de teoría crítica en ciencias sociales* 1, no. 9 (2022): 41-59.

Much has been made of the statistics displaying Latin America’s declining Catholic population. According to the polling organization Latinobarómetro, between 1995 and 2024, the percentage of Catholics throughout the region declined from 80 percent to 50 percent, while during that same period the “Evangelical” population grew from 6 percent to 19 percent.⁷² Figures like these, showing Protestant growth and Catholic decline, continue to dominate popular discussions of Latin American religion. Yet, as scholars of religion remind us, these numbers only tell us part of the story. Behind the statistics lay additional layers of religious pluralism. As Alejandro Frigerio and Pablo Semán have shown, a “Catholic-centric” approach has limited our ability to truly account for the diversity of faith experiences, past and present.⁷³

‘Fluid’ is perhaps the best word to explain Latin American religion in the twenty first century. Take, for instance, Wagner, a young man from the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro with a Catholic mother and a non-religious father. Raised in the Catholic Church, Wagner recalls receiving a sign from God that he should not complete the sacrament of Confirmation, which would have marked his full entry into adult Catholic life. Soon after, he began attending an Evangelical church only later to identify as non-religious like his father.⁷⁴ Scholars have documented countless other stories of surprising and nuanced faith journeys: people that identify as Catholic but have never been baptized, divorced Catholics who reject confession but regularly attend Mass, and Evangelical Christians that ‘believe in reincarnation and past lives.’⁷⁵ These kinds of ‘passages’ in

⁷² Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2024*, 113. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.inep.org/images/2024/TXT/Latinobarometro-Informe_2024.pdf

⁷³ Alejandro Frigerio, “¿Por qué no podemos ver la diversidad religiosa?: Cuestionando el paradigma católico-céntrico en el estudio de la religión en Latinoamérica,” *Cultura y representaciones sociales* 12, no. 24 (2018): 51-95; Pablo Semán, *Vivir la fe. Entre el catolicismo y el pentecostalismo, la religiosidad de los sectores populares en la Argentina* (Siglo XXI, 2021).

⁷⁴ Silvia Fernandes, “Wagner: Itinerarios Religiosos de un joven brasileño sin religión,” in *La religión cómo experiencia cotidiana: creencias, practicas y narrativas espirituales en Sudamérica*, ed. Hugo H. Rabbia et al. (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2019).

⁷⁵ Hugo H. Rabbia, “Sobre identificaciones, congruencia religiosa y la autonomía de personas creyentes,” in *La religión cómo experiencia cotidiana: creencias, practicas y narrativas espirituales en Sudamérica*, ed. Hugo H. Rabbia et al. (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2019), 35.

and out of religious identities define many people’s spiritual lives throughout Latin America today.⁷⁶

The most striking change may not simply be the wider diversity of practices and beliefs, but people’s willingness to experiment with their faith in ways their predecessors could not. Indigenous and Afro-descended religious traditions not only persist but are practiced today with greater openness. In recent decades, Native communities in Bolivia have, with the encouragement of government officials, centered traditional, non-Christian, religious expressions.⁷⁷ Mapuche spiritual practitioners in southern Chile and Argentina have evolved their traditions to meet the demands of the present moment and situate themselves within the complex histories of their national communities.⁷⁸ Scholarship has shown that ‘some of the fastest-growing religious groups in Latin America include African diasporan religions such as Brazilian Candomblé, Umbanda and Haitian Vodou.’⁷⁹ In Venezuela and Colombia, popular devotion to María Lionza, a ‘divinity without borders’ rooted in both indigenous and African traditions, continues to grow and evolve.⁸⁰ At the same time Christianity still enjoys cultural hegemony and the victims of religious intolerance and violence are often members of Indigenous and Afro-descended traditions.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Patricia Birman, “Conversion from Afro-Brazilian Religions to Neo-Pentecostalism: Opening New Horizons of the Possible,” in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary (Rutgers University Press, 2007).

⁷⁷ Verushka Alvizuri, “Indianismo, política y religión en Bolivia (2006-2016),” *Croire aujourd’hui en Amérique latine* 108 (2017): 83-98.

⁷⁸ Ana Mariella Bacigalupo, *Thunder Shaman: Making History with Mapuche Spirits in Chile and Patagonia* (University of Texas Press, 2016).

⁷⁹ Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary, “Understanding Conversion in the Americas,” in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary (Rutgers University Press, 2007).

⁸⁰ Daisy Barreto Ramos ed., *María Lionza, divinidad sin fronteras. Genealogía del mito y el culto* (Universidad de los Andes, 2020).

⁸¹ Observatorio de Libertad Religiosa en América Latina, *Reporte anual* (OLIRE, 2024). [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://olire.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REPORTE-ANUAL-2024-1.pdf](https://olire.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REPORTE-ANUAL-2024-1.pdf)

The institutional Catholic Church remains a prominent presence in Latin American public life. In 2013, people from many faiths across the region rejoiced when the Argentine bishop, Jorge Bergoglio became Pope Francis, first Latin American Pope.⁸² And Peruvians proudly cheered the 2025 election Pope Leo XIV, a naturalized citizen of their nation.⁸³ Yet even amid these historic moments of pride, the Catholic Church's moral authority has been shaken by the sexual abuse crisis.⁸⁴ These tensions within the regional Catholic Church, alongside the spiritual fluidity and demographic shifts outlined above, show that religion in Latin America continues to shape society, culture, and politics in ways that require scholarly attention.

A review of the multilingual research on religion across the humanities and social sciences shows that religion is one of our most powerful tools for understanding modern Latin America. This kind of interdisciplinary lens brings into focus many of the parallels and divergences that define the region. More broadly, the study of religion in Latin America can enrich area studies itself, opening up a 'conversation with scholars working on the same global challenges in different geographic spaces.'⁸⁵

⁸² Roberto Blancarte, "La incógnita de Francisco," *Sociedad y Religión* 23, no. 40 (2013): 292-308; Fortunato Mallimaci, "El catolicismo argentino de Bergoglio y el papado de Francisco. Una primera aproximación desde la Argentina," *Sociedad y Religión* 23, no. 40 (2013): 211-244.

⁸³ Matthew Casey-Pariseault, "'The Pope is Peruvian': How two decades in South America Shaped the Vision of Pope Leo XIV," *The Conversation* (May 13, 2025).

⁸⁴ Véronique Lecaros and Ana Lourdes Suárez, ed., *Abuse in the Latin American Church: An Evolving Crisis at the Core of Catholicism* (Routledge, 2024); Matthew Casey-Pariseault, "Events in Bolivia and Brazil may signal a turning point for the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis in Latin America," *The Conversation* (June 14, 2023).

⁸⁵ Susan Hodgett and Thomas Ruys Smith, "Welcome," *New Area Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3.



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