

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, a visiting minister, on finding out that I intended to pursue graduate work, asked me what I planned to study. I answered, with all the enthusiasm that one beginning to anticipate grad school could, “Latin American Christianity.” His reply, relayed between discordant chuckles, left me shocked and more than a little bit angry. “Latin American Christianity? That should be easy. It’s all the same!” Perhaps this book began subconsciously as a reply to that challenge. More overtly, it is intended for students, professors, seminarians, the generally curious, and, yes, ministers who want a better understanding of the width, depth, color, and varieties of Christian faith in this important region.

Within the last twenty years there has been renewed attention to the many expressions of Christianity around the world. Church history texts that begin in Palestine, travel through Europe, and then culminate in the United States in a thinly disguised form of Manifest Destiny are no longer acceptable in the college or graduate classroom, and indeed they should not be. The Internet, to a great extent, has helped facilitate the interest in world Christianity, not only in the resources available and the personal connections individuals make but also in the daily news. Just this year, Orthodox priests with cross held aloft stood in the bitter winter night between protesters and police in the Ukraine. Arabic populations try to alert the West of the violence being suffered by millennia-old Christian communities in Syria and Egypt, and in parts of Africa, legislators debate the passage of draconian laws against sexual minorities drafted with the support of evangelical churches both there and in the United States. But why Latin America?

- It is the most urbanized region in the world, with about 80 percent of its population living in cities. Among those cities are some of the world’s largest: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City.
- While mainline and evangelical Protestant church membership continues to decline in the United States, membership in the Roman Catholic Church has remained steady, due principally to immigration from Latin American countries.
- For the last forty years, Latin American liberation theology has made a deep impact worldwide on how we think about God and our social responsibilities.

- Growing from 10,000 participants in 1900 to over 157 million in 2005 (and growing), Pentecostals now make up about 30 percent of Latin America's population. Their influence is being felt at all levels of society.
- In 2010, Hispanics became the largest minority group in the United States, affecting everything from what Americans like to eat to how Americans pray.
- Immigration reform, relations with Cuba, border security, employment, education, and the social safety net are current hot-button issues that heavily involve and impact Latinos in the United States.
- In 2013, Jorge Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires, became Pope Francis, leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, over 70 percent of whom live in Latin America.

Latin American Christianity stands poised to play an even greater role in the future of the faith worldwide. It is both Western and global, heir to European, African, and indigenous theologies, worldviews, and spiritualities. No religion, including Christianity, is monolithic. Whether one is a believer or not, Christian traditions are products of cultures and worldviews interacting with one another. The "great traditions" of denominations and dominant powers and the "little traditions" of local customs and observances collide, collude, and come together within larger cultural contexts to create varieties of faith and devotion. For the Christian, this is to be expected and valued being that Christianity itself begins with the story of incarnation within a particular people, place, and time.

This book is designed to serve as both an introduction and reference to this variety. General overviews to church history or world Christianity spend only a few pages on Latin America out of considerations of space and focus. While there exist several excellent introductions to Latin American Christianity, these cannot devote sufficient space to the particularities of each country. Most students and scholars may not have the time or the resources to read the multivolume collections available in Spanish or Portuguese for the purposes of a paper or lecture. As a handbook, this work aims to expand the information given in other, more general resources while also condensing in accessible blocks of information the histories, facts, devotions, and biographical data spread out over a large swath of books, articles, and web resources.

In roughly the last two centuries, the meaning of "Latin America" has been debated again and again. There are several popular uses of the term:

Geographic: For many, especially in the United States, the name refers to everything south of the US border, including parts of the region that speak English (Belize, Bermuda, Grenada, Barbados), French (Haiti, Martinique), and Dutch (Suriname). The historic and cultural differences make this definition too broad for our use.

Linguistic: Strictly speaking, this would point to all regions in the Americas that use a Romance language. It was in this sense that the French sought to make allies of the Ibero-American countries in the nineteenth century to counter the political and economic weight of Anglo-America

and Teutonic Europe. While narrower than the usage above, it is still too broad, forcing one to include not only Haiti and Guadeloupe, but also French-speaking Quebec.

Historical/Cultural: These are the regions that have been united by a common historical experience of Iberian conquest, colonization, and nineteenth-century independence movements, which were then followed by a period of populist regimes and civil wars until the present time. This is the definition used in this book. It is identical to Ibero-America but with the important caveat that the region's cultural identity cannot be defined solely by Spanish and Portuguese domination; Amerindian and African elements have been equal components (all in various combinations in various proportions) in the formation of a new cultural identity that is more than the sum of its parts. It is a cultural *mélange* to which are constantly added new elements: Italian, German, Japanese, Arab, and Korean, among others. Under this banner, I also include the Latin American diaspora in the United States. The migration of Mexicans, Cubans, and Central Americans into the United States, as well as the movement of the US border over parts of what were once Mexico and the Spanish Empire, has resulted in a continuity of culture that transcends political boundaries. A growing Hispanic demographic and the fact that the United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in world and one has further reason to include it within our definition.

Readers will note that I use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* interchangeably to describe the populations in the United States that have their roots in the cultures and histories of Latin America. I do so to avoid repetition, aware that the terms carry certain sociopolitical connotations. The same goes for the words *indigenous*, *native*, *Indian*, or *Amerindian* used to designate the peoples living on this continent before European contact. Because dates, events, and narratives have sometimes been conflicting, absent, or difficult to ascertain, I have tried to reconstruct them to the best of my ability. Any errors or omissions contained herein are strictly my responsibility.

The end result you hold in your hands has been my constant companion for well over a year now since its inception. The trials, hopes, visions, and tears of a continent have informed and enlightened my own perspectives of the Christian religion not only there, but as I explore the faith in the United States and elsewhere. These very same stories of human failing and human potential have grieved and energized my soul. In addition to assisting readers in their research I hope it will also lead them to appreciate the beauty and color of a people in this sun-kissed region. On this level as well I hope this book serves as a guide to fellow Hispanics seeking to recover a past too often ignored by the churches and the academy. In the words of the Brazilian Protestant theologian Rubem Alves:

The historian is someone who recovers lost memories and distributes them as a sacrament to those who have lost the memories. Indeed, what finer communal sacrament is there than the memories of a common past, punctuated by the existence of pain, sacrifice and hope? To recover in order to disperse. The historian is not an archaeologist of memories. The historian is a sower of visions and hopes.

This work would have been impossible without the gentle guidance and support of Will Bergkamp, Lisa Gruenisen, and the patient team at Fortress Press who have allowed me this small contribution to academia. Many thanks to the Reverends Paul Baille and Justin Eller for their insight into ministry along the Mexican border and the Bolivian highlands, respectively. I continue to be indebted to my teachers, whose voices linger and inform my efforts. The congregation at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chicago has accompanied me through times of joy and struggle; in their encouragement, their ministry has challenged me to step out of the comfort of the mythical ivory tower. This is the point where one would say a few sentimental words of thanks for one's spouse or significant other. Seeing as that is not possible, I will continue to be grateful for the endless well of faith and support that is my mother, Eva. She taught me to pray in Spanish when I was four and, decades later, continues to remind me that faith must be a matter of the heart and hands as well as the head. Besides, what kind of Latin boy would I be if I did not acknowledge my *mamita*? Finally, for the companionship of dogs, demanding to play on a summer afternoon or curled at my feet on a polar vortex night, good Lord, we give thanks.

Joel Morales Cruz

Commemoration of Bartolomé de Las Casas, 2014