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The influence of poverty, anomie, and spiritual needs on religious affiliation in El Salvador

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Among Latin American countries, El Salvador is, along with Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil, one of the countries with the highest percentage of Protestants—between 15 and 20 percent of the country's population (Green 1997:213; Williams 1997:183). Protestant affiliation, including the classical Reformation Protestant, Pentecostal, and Neo-Pentecostal churches, increased significantly during the 1970s and 1980s, a time during which El Salvador experienced a bloody civil war (Williams 1997:182-184).

Scholars of religion in Latin America have perceived Protestant affiliation as the product of the social disorganization produced by the civil war or/and the increase of capitalist modes of living. A second factor acting in favor of Protestant proselytism has been the failure of the economy in Latin America to empower most of its population to leave the ranks of poverty and underemployment (Green 1997). These views are summarized in the following quote by Williams (1997).

"The dramatic growth of Pentecostalism in El Salvador after the mid-1970s is undoubtedly related to the deepening political and economic crisis that plunged the country into an unending cycle of violence and despair. The crisis enveloping Salvadoran society affected every Salvadoran family to some degree. Poor Salvadorans saw their sons dragged off by the military to become cannon fodder in the hills while the wealthy sent their sons and daughters abroad or retired behind their walls and barbed wire. The social dislocation resulting from the war and economic crisis created increasingly precarious conditions for the majority of Salvadorans...The crisis manifested itself in the massive displacement of the population during the 1980s. (P. 183)"

In addition to the former explanations of religious affiliation in Latin America, other scholars have pointed to the failure of Catholicism to address the spiritual needs of the poor (Shaull and Cesar 2000) and their deeper quest for salvation, liberation, and eternal life (Vázquez 1998).

Although these three explanations are very compelling and follow the main sociological traditions, Marxist, Durkheimian, and Weberian, respectively, recent research on religious affiliation in El Salvador and other Latin American countries shows that further theoretical analysis is necessary. In what follows, I intend to clarify the diverse factors involved within each broad explanation and to analyze the solidity of those factors in view of recent scholarship on religious affiliation in Latin America.

EXPLANATIONS OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Either independently from each other or combined, three major explanations are cited in the literature on religious affiliation in Latin America. The first account is based on poverty or economic strain; the second is an explanation built on anomie or social disorganization; and the third explanation considers the spiritual needs of believers. In the first case, poverty leads individuals into the ranks of Protestantism for several reasons. Some individuals, especially women, may want to restrain their husbands, or other relatives, from dilapidating their meager resources in vices, mainly alcohol and prostitution, and reorienting them to satisfy their household needs (Chesnut 1997:56-59; Williams 1997:180). In addition, Protestant churches may offer some network support, directly subsidizing some households with food, money, or providing their followers with job connections (Chesnut 1997:104; Garrard-Burnett 1998:123-124). In some instances, employers may consider an advantage to count with a Protestant church goer, as an indicator of labor discipline and punctuality (Wilson 1997:154; Williams 1997:184). These resources may have become particularly important during the harsh economic
recessions that Latin American countries have faced during the last three decades (Cardoso and Helwege 1992:223-248; Green 1996:90-111; Thorp 1998:201-239). Furthermore, poverty may increase the risk of becoming ill and not having access to health care, resulting in a reduced life expectancy of the poor. Impoverished individuals look for health in the realm of the divine, converting to (Protestant) Pentecostalism believing that their faith will become the key toward a miraculous cure. The connection between poverty, illness, and Pentecostal affiliation is clearly stated by Chesnut (1997):

While several Pentecostal denominations in Brazil have attracted growing numbers of those employed in the formal economy, Pentecostalism in general remains a religion of the informal periphery. The complex relationship between this religion of the Spirit and poverty holds one of the keys to understanding its unbridled growth during the past four decades. More generally, the rise and fall of almost all forms of religion in Brazil and the rest of Latin America can be explained on the basis of their relationship to poverty-related illness...Pentecostalism’s response to the affictions of material deprivation has determined its success in recruiting Brazil’s poor. (P. 14)

The social disorganization or anomie explanation focuses on the changes brought within the country, especially to the rural areas but not limited to them, by the progress of capitalism and the advent of civil war in the 1970s in the case of El Salvador, or earlier in other countries, such as Guatemala (Garrard-Burnett 1998:112). Thousands of rural inhabitants were uprooted from the combat zones migrating to the cities, where they built shanty towns in the peripheral areas (Americas Watch 1991:108). Adding to the civil war, increased land concentration to take advantage of new opportunities in cotton, sugar cane, and cattle ranching, left a larger number of peasants and rural workers landless and with limited options (Wilson 1997:149; Williams 1997:183). Analyzing the Guatemalan case, Wilson (1997) asserts that in relation to the Protestants:

[T]heir membership and national influence remained small until the troubled times following the overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954 tended to favor crisis conversion. Against a backdrop of the ongoing deterioration of the rural agricultural sector and the unsettling cold war climate, developments made many sectors of Guatemalan society especially vulnerable to change. Armed insurgency, death squads, intensification of religious concerns, and a major earthquake all created a search for reassurance. (P. 149)

Once in the towns and cities, out of their social networks of kin, community and church, the new migrants found new attachments in the communities they now inhabited. Due to the very limited number of priests to attend to their religious and community needs, the networks available were most likely Protestant (Chesnut 1997:40; Williams 1997:186). Protestantism offered some alternatives to the Catholic Base Communities and their theological option for the poor. The Protestant churches, particularly the Pentecostal ones, were oriented toward a religious interpretation of the new social order, away from social change and politics and focused on an individual conversion within the Holy Spirit (Garrard-Burnett 1998:130-132). This alternative faith also offered more safety for the practitioners, even those still living in rural areas, who would not have to risk their lives in social activism linked to Liberation Theology (Chesnut 1997:40-41; Garrard-Burnett 1998:110; Williams 1997:184-186). Thus, the Protestant Pentecostal churches especially limited themselves to the spiritual needs of their members and the transformations felt inside them (Shaull and Cesar 2000). Vázquez (1998: 86-87) claims that Pentecostal Protestantism, which includes most Protestant converts in Latin America (Cleary 1992; Williams 1997), responds to concrete material and psycho-cognitive needs of the poor. Essentially, “what the poor finds in Pentecostalism is a theology that blends moral asceticism, Holiness, and escathological hope.” In the Brazilian case, Vázquez (1998: 199) argues that the lack of interest for collective action among the poor derives from “the context of an uncontrollable inflationary spiral and the ever-present threat of job loss.”

The conclusion coming out of most studies of religious affiliation in Latin America, and particularly in El Salvador, indicates that individuals affected by several dimensions of economic strain, or by a variety of factors increasing their state of anomie, are more likely to join a Protestant church rather than the Catholic one. In order to summarize and clarify several of these influential economic and anomic factors discussed in the literature on religious affiliation in Latin America, the following hypotheses are established. Hypotheses 1 to 3 listed below are based on the economic strain explanation of religious affiliation. The second set of hypotheses, Hypotheses 4 to 9, focus on factors of anomie. As I will argue below, some of these hypotheses relate to the theory focused on the spiritual needs of the believers.

**ECONOMIC STRAIN AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION**

**Weberian class and religious affiliation (hypothesis 1).** Individuals without resources, such as the landless and the homeless, with limited educational attainment, low job experience – usually the younger workers – or workers in low status occupations, such as service, manufacturing, crafts, the informal sector, non-unionized workers, rural workers, seasonal workers, and the unemployed, are more likely to affiliate to Protestant churches than to the Catholic one.

Coleman, Aguilar, Sandoval and Steigenga (1993:114-116) find that Protestants, on average, rank lower on socioeconomic variables (monthly income, educational attainment, and occupational status) than do Catholics and exhibit considerable similarity to nonaffiliators.

The contention that Protestant churches respond to the spiritual needs of the poor more adequately than the Catholic church, expressed by Shaull and Cesar (2000) and by Vázquez (1998), is put to test in hypothesis 1. If this hypothesis is invalidated, it would suggest that individuals with limited economic resources have no preference for Protestantism over Catholicism, and therefore, that Protestantism does not respond to the spiritual needs of the poor more adequately than Catholicism.

However, in a study on Salvadoran religious affiliation of shanty town inhabitants in several Salvadoran cities, Soltero and Saravia (2003) find that less resourceful persons are not more likely to leave Catholicism in favor of Protestantism. In the sample studied, only individuals in middle status
occupations such as technical or administrative support, as well as retired people, are more likely to affiliate with Protestantism rather than with Catholicism. Seasonal workers, the non-unionized, the landless, as well as those who rent or own land tend not to have a particular preference for a religious faith or they tend to remain unaffiliated.

In addition, Soltero and Saravia (2003) report that educational attainment does not make any difference to the likelihood of joining Protestantism. However, the same study discloses that the youth have a higher probability of joining a Protestant church. Along these lines, Gómez and Vázquez (2001) contend that Protestant churches offer an alternative way for Salvadoran youth to negotiate the tensions between the local and the global, to affirm identity, community, and place in the face of globalization.

These outcomes contradict the theory that Protestantism responds to the spiritual needs of the poor more adequately than Catholicism in El Salvador’s less resourceful suburban areas (Shaull and Cesar 2001; Smith 1998; Vázquez 2000). Thus, less resourceful individuals in the sample studied by Soltero and Saravia (2003) have no (statistically significant) preference between Protestantism and Catholicism compared to more resourceful ones. Hence, believers’ spiritual needs may or may not take them to another church, independently of their (Weberian) social class background, as demonstrated as well by the existence of Protestant churches with middle and upper middle class constituencies in Central America (Cleary 1992; Garrard-Burnett 1998).

In a study of Guatemalan highland Maya, Smith (1998) reports no differences in lifestyle between poor Protestants and poor Catholics.

Gender and religious affiliation (hypothesis 2). Females are more likely to be attracted to Protestant churches than males.

As Chesnut (1997) writes:

...Pentecostals in Belém and across Latin America are predominantly female...[T]he corps of dedicated ushers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, and visitors (visitadoras) are the lifeblood of the Pentecostal movement. With the exception of the IEQ [Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular], men compose the hierarchy of Pentecostal churches. However, female members largely run the daily affairs of the churches. (P. 22)

Vázquez (1998) considers that Protestant churches help to preserve the integrity of the family unit, offering a safe space for women and children who have been the main victims of economic restructuring and neo-liberal policies. Eber (2000) argues that women convert to Protestant groups before their husbands do, due to the alcohol-free world these groups offer. However, although scholars have emphasized the appeal of Protestantism over Catholicism for women (Smith 1998), some authors have been cautious about overgeneralizing findings based on specific sites and the variety of women’s roles inside and outside churches, which does not guarantee a greater appeal to women across the board (Peterson 2001). Indeed, Peterson (2001: 30) argues that in El Salvador, “progressive Catholic communities offer many women support, both material and moral, for their efforts to cope with domestic problems such as a husband’s departure or alcoholism.” Similarly, Soltero and Saravia (2003) find no difference between men and women in terms of their likelihood of joining a Catholic or Protestant church.

Medical care and religious affiliation (hypothesis 3). Individuals lacking access to medical care for themselves or for their families are more likely to affiliate to Protestant churches than the Catholic church.

According to Vázquez (1998), given the spread of endemic diseases and lack of an adequate health system in Latin America, divine healing may be one of the few psychological and physical options for the poor. Similarly, Chesnut (1997) emphasizes the relevance of faith healing within the Brazilian Pentecostal community:

Unlike the placebo patient, who has only her pills, the Pentecostal has recourse to an entire community of spiritual medics, her irmaos na fe (brothers and sisters in faith), ready to pray for her health. Even medical science is beginning to recognize the therapeutic value of prayer. According to recent research, ritual acts, such as prayer, might actually activate the human immune and endocrine systems. Researchers are also investigating the potential medical benefits of dissociated states of consciousness, such as crentes experience in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (P. 87)

In agreement with the previous views on faith healing, Smith (1998) asserts that the provision of a more traditional kind of medical assistance to the public is an important aspect of Protestant churches’ attraction to believers. Nevertheless, Soltero and Saravia (2003) show that when people have access to medical care in their community, joining Protestant churches is less likely, but if access to medical care exists only outside their community, the probability of joining a Protestant church increases.

ANOMIE AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Geographic region/civil war and religious affiliation (hypothesis 4). Individuals living in those provinces more affected by the civil war are more likely to affiliate to Protestant churches than those in areas less burdened by the civil conflict.

The presence of the Frente Martí de Liberación Nacional (Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN ) was most
prominent in the states of Chalatenango, Morazán, Cuscatlán, San Vicente, Usulután, and Santa Ana, where, during different periods, temporary or well-established revolutionary local governments were present (Montgomery 1995:119; Moreno-Parada 1994:110-111). The relation between church activism and geographic location in Guatemala is clearly expressed by Garrard-Burnett (1998):

There are a variety of reasons, then, why Protestant congregations rushed in to fill the void left by the Catholic Church in El Quiché, as well as in other places in the conflict zones where the Church hierarchy failed to offer support to its endangered flock. Political expediency obviously accounted for some of this; if a strong Catholic identity was conflated with political radicalism, then it made sense for those who were not politicized to jettison the identity over which they still had some control. One alternative was to become Protestant, which even in the late 1970s may still have had a political valence of neutrality (i.e., “not Catholic”) rather than one of outright political complicity with the government. It is worth noting that potential converts may have perceived this as an acceptable option partly as a result of concientización, for it was only after Vatican II that the Catholic Church categorized Protestants as “separated brethren” within the Kingdom of God, rather than as heretics damned to perdition. (P. 131)

This hypothesis has been contradicted by Soltero and Saravia (2003). They find that people in their sample living in the Salvadoran departments most affected by the civil war—Santa Ana, Usulután, Morazán, Chalatenango, Cuscatlán, and San Vicente—are not more prone to join Protestant religious faiths rather than Catholic. In addition, those living in Usulután or Cabañas are less likely to affiliate with Protestant churches than Catholic and in several other departments (states), there is no clear pattern of affiliation.

Political orientation and religious affiliation (hypothesis 5). Supporters of the right-wing party Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, or ARENA) are more likely to attend Protestant churches than those who support the leftist FMLN.

This hypothesis echoes concerns related to a right wing political orientation, or at least a passive, personally inward orientation expressed by some Protestant—mainly Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal—churches (Green 1997:210-211; Stoll 1990:135-179), although other researchers have found that, in El Salvador, Protestants are not political apologists for the right nor supporters of the insurrectionary left (Coleman et al. 1993:133) and that political affiliation with ARENA, the main right wing political party, or to the FMLN, the most important leftist party, does not make any difference regarding the likelihood of religious preference.

Smith’s (1998) review of the connection between religious affiliation and political preference shows that such a connection has no well defined pattern in Latin America. Gómez (2001) argues that Christian churches as institutions in El Salvador have withdrawn from the political arena. Therefore, Salvadorans from different political views seem unlikely to connect their political preference and religious participation.

Migration and religious affiliation (hypothesis 6). Individuals who have experienced migration, either internal or international, are more likely to affiliate with Protestant churches than their counterparts who do not have such an experience.

Williams (1997:183-186) explains that the hardship and the changes that migrants have experienced in El Salvador are among the main reasons to join Protestant churches, especially in the marginal areas of Salvadoran cities. In contrast to the idea that migrating families find Protestant networks easier to access than Catholic ones in Latin American cities (Cleary 1992; Williams 1997), Soltero and Saravia (2003) find that only individuals who have experienced international migration are more oriented to join Protestant churches in El Salvador, maybe because return migrants, mainly from the US, may have been more socialized into Protestant networks. Furthermore, an internal migration experience makes no difference in terms of what religion the individual is likely to choose.

Marital status and religious affiliation (hypothesis 7). Individuals who are single, divorced, separated, or widowed, are more likely to participate in Protestant faiths than married individuals or people living with a significant other.

According to Chesnutt (1997:62), “[t]hose who feel betrayed are more likely to seek consolation in religion, which is often a safer strategy for dealing with adultery than direct confrontation.” Furthermore, given that female-headed households constitute the most immiserated social stratum of the impoverished classes, especially if they have children to support, these single or abandoned women may look for some support in the Protestant church to recover some of their social and spiritual integrity (Chesnutt 1997:67-78).

Soltero and Saravia (2003) do not find that marital status has any statistical relevance for religious affiliation. These findings cast doubt on the belief that Protestant churches “make a greater effort than Catholic base communities in getting husbands to accompany their wives to church” (Smith 1998:28). However, the presence of children may make a difference, as Eber (2000) and Chesnutt (1997) explain, keeping children from dying is a strong incentive for individuals, especially women, to convert to Protestant groups. Eber (2000:222) argues that “Protestants’ greater openness to non-Indigenous medicine attracts women whose husbands’ conservativism and vested interests harm them or their children.” Nevertheless, Soltero and Saravia (2003) also contend that “the more children a family has to raise, the less resources it may have
left to dedicate to religious activities and the greater the probability that such household heads become non-affiliated” (to any religion).

Civil war repression and religious affiliation (hypothesis 8). Individuals who experienced civil war terror or repression in their kinship are more likely to belong to Protestant churches than those whose families were not victimized.

Indeed, Protestant churches may have been perceived as a shelter or as a safer ideological alternative in a situation of violent armed repression, as Garrard-Burnett (1997) explains:

One important factor in the LAM's [Latin American Mission] success in Guatemala was the country's climate of growing instability. The great LAM crusade coincided precisely with the first guerrilla mobilization, to which Pres. Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes responded with such measures as the imposition of martial law, curfews, and the pronouncements of a state of siege... As the counterinsurgency campaign heated up, the evangelicals seized the opportunity to emphasize their message of a spiritual alternative to communism and an offer of haven in a climate of increasing repression and political uncertainty. (P. 110)

Similarly, in El Salvador, the military perceived and acted against the association between the Catholic Christian Base Communities and the insurgency by assassinating several Catholic priests, nuns, and massacring their parishioners (Berryman 1986:58-78; Williams 1997:184), although Williams (1997:190-191) does not find a significant statistical support for ARENA among the Protestants in his sample. Along these lines, Soltero and Saravia (2003) find that individuals who experienced a death in their families during the civil war have no preference for any church.

Community organizations and religious affiliation (hypothesis 9). The presence of community organizations in the individual's neighborhood may increase this individual's probability of joining the churches participating in such organizations.

As Chesnut (1997) attests, it is common that in poor suburban areas of Latin America, the only type of community organization present is a Protestant congregation:

Sociologist Bryan Roberts's discovery in the late 1960s that evangelical churches were one of the few types of voluntary associations functioning on the urban periphery of Guatemala applies to the slums and shantytowns of Brazil as well. Left to fend for themselves by an indifferent, if not antagonistic, state, the urban poor must create their own mutual aid associations. In late twentieth-century Brazil, Pentecostalism stands out as one of the principal organizations of the poor. (P. 104)

In support of this hypothesis, Soltero and Saravia (2003) pinpoint the presence of community organizations in the area where the person surveyed lives as a factor in increasing the probability that the individual selects Protestantism over Catholicism, which may indicate that Protestants actively proselytize while in their roles as members of community organizations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, in relation to the three theories of religious affiliation reviewed in this study—economic hardship, anomie, and spiritual needs of the poor—this analysis indicates that, for the most part, explanations based on economic hardship and (Weberian) class are not supported by most empirical research performed thus far. The findings on class and religious affiliation also suggest the need to review the argument that Protestant churches respond to the spiritual needs of the poor more adequately than the Catholic church (Shaull and Cesar 2001; Smith 1998; Vázquez 2000). My review of the literature above shows that individuals' spiritual needs may not be restricted to the poor but present throughout society, as the middle and upper middle class constituency of some Protestant churches may attest (Cleary 1992; Garrard-Burnett 1998). In consequence, it will be necessary to distinguish between economic or anomie factors, and spiritual needs as separate variables in a future restatement of this perspective.

This discussion also directs us to the complexity of the explanations of religious affiliation based on anomie factors. First, as mentioned above, the results indicate that migrants within El Salvador do not tend to prefer Protestant churches over the Catholic church, unlike international migrants who show a preference for Protestant churches. Second, availability of community organizations, mostly Protestant, is confirmed to be a significant factor favoring Protestant churches, thus ratifying scholars’ observations that Protestants are more willing to engage in communal participation than Catholics (Cleary 1992; Smith 1998; Vázquez 1998). However, the disarticulating effects of the civil war are not corroborated by the empirical literature on this topic, nor are the effects of the urban population's magnitude (Soltero and Saravia, 2003), as suggested by subcultural identity theory (Peterson et al. 2001).

Thus, a relevant conclusion is that the economic and anomie factors that influence religious affiliation are not equally relevant. Some of these factors are found to be more prominent than others, and therefore, researchers should be cautious in grouping them without any distinction, either theoretically or empirically. The implications for future research on religious affiliation point to the importance of avoiding a superficial reference to the economic strain or anomie theories. It is imperative to focus research agendas and design future studies capable of testing explicit paths and mechanisms of affiliation. Thus far, the literature on religious affiliation in Latin America has been prolific in providing hypotheses. It is now necessary to test these hypotheses critically and systematically.

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The New Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador, El Salvador. Photo by Timothy Ballard.