



# Historical Reflections on the “In-Betweenness” of Latino Protestantism

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**Abstract** “Historical Reflections on the ‘In-Betweenness’ of Latino Protestantism” offers historical reflections that engage with key social and cultural developments that have shaped the experiences of Latino immigrant communities of faith. The perspectives on Latino Protestantism provides a deeper understanding of the historical contexts in which HANA congregations serve and grow.

Martínez, Juan Francisco. 2015. Historical Reflections on the “In-Betweenness” of Latino Protestantism. *Common Ground Journal*. [v12 n1 spring]. ISSN: 15479129. [www.commongroundjournal.org](http://www.commongroundjournal.org). EDCOT. Form: eJournal. Pages: 26-30. Keywords: hana, in-betweenness, latino, mestizaje.

## INTRODUCTION

Latinos<sup>1</sup> are now the largest minority group in the United States. That change has been a long time coming, though demographic growth has not yet translated into political, social, economic, or religious power of the same proportions. Part of the reason is that the term *Latino* comprises a multitude of people that have little in common. People whose historical background includes any of over twenty countries (including the United States), people whose ancestors were in the Southwest before Jamestown was established, and the person who just crossed the border today, all are called Latinos. Because of the strange relationship between the United States and Latin America, a person born as a U.S. citizen on U.S. territory (Puerto Rico), becomes an immigrant when they move to the mainland United States. Nonetheless, Latinos will continue to grow faster than the U.S. population at large; we have higher birthrates than other groups in the United States, and the unique relationship between the United States and Latin America means there will likely be some level of continual migration from south to north into the foreseeable future.

Latinos are more religious and more Christian than the U.S. population at large. About 20% of the Latino population is Protestant, though there are countries in Latin America that have a higher percentage of Protestants. Latino Protestants have a very diverse history, often being doubly marginalized. Historically, they have been marginalized for their faith by Latino Catholics while U.S. Protestants have marginalized them because they are Latinos. This means that Latino Protestants have often lived in an in-between space ethnically, religiously, and socially. We want to explore this space through a historical reflection on the history and development of Latino Protestantism.

## AN IN-BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES

Juan González argues in his book *Harvest of Empire* that there is a direct relationship between U.S. intervention in Latin America and the subsequent migration north. The U.S. seizure of the Southwest from Mexico in 1848 made 100,000 Mexicans U.S. citizens (though second class) and began patterns of

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “Latino” in this paper, though many others use “Hispanic.” I use the terms interchangeably.

Mexican migration that continue to this day. (There are now places in Mexico where people have been migrating to the United States to work for more than four generations.) The war with Spain made Puerto Rico a colony and eventually Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens (though with no direct political representation), able to freely move to the mainland United States. That same war created a strange relationship with Cuba, which would later create its own migratory patterns. U.S. military interventions in the Dominican Republic and Central America created other migratory patterns.

Latinos have found themselves constantly in a place between presence and migration. The Mexicans who were in the Southwest when the United States took over became foreigners in their own land, because the new migrants from the East were now the “citizens.” So even though today the majority of U.S. Latinos were born in the United States, we are eternally foreigners. And the relationship between the United States and Latin America continues to be a complicated one, in that we can anticipate more U.S. intervention, which will create new migratory patterns. The late nineteenth-century Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz stated that Mexico’s biggest problem was that it was so far from God and so close to the United States. Nonetheless, we are linked, and this in-between relationship is likely to continue.

## **AN IN-BETWEEN IDENTITY**

Latino identity, as it now exists, began in the violent encounter between European conquerors, indigenous peoples and the later forced migration of peoples from Africa. There would also be other migrations from other parts of the world into Latin America, but it was these violent encounters that produced the *mestizo*<sup>2</sup> identities that define what it means to be Latin American, or U.S. Latino, today.

That original *mestizaje*<sup>3</sup> experienced a second type of *mestizaje* with the U.S. takeover of the Southwest and Puerto Rico. This encounter, also violent at the beginning, created new types of relationships. The “white” majority had a very inconsistent way of dealing with the Latino minority. On the one hand, the lighter skinned land owners become “honorary whites.” But their poorer and darker skinned relatives were treated as “Mexicans.” A few, mostly rich Latinos, married into the majority, but most remained separate. They had to learn how to “fit” in the society of the conqueror, even as they redefined their identity in this new reality. In practice most Latinos developed some type of polycentric identity, learning to fit in more than one cultural space, moving between the various cultural, ethnic and social poles that defined their lives.

The situation became more complex as Latino migration diversified. Today one of the most significant challenges is the fact that many Latinos live in places where the growing populations are other minority or immigrant communities. Another challenge is that there are a growing number of places where Latinos are the majority and newcomers need to understand how to “adapt” to their presence and cultural influence. Many younger generation Latinos face this in-betweenness as the experience of being polycentric in a multi-centric world.

## **AN IN-BETWEEN CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Christianity arrived in Latin America with the Spanish and Portuguese Catholic missionaries that arrived in the late 1400s and the beginning of the 1500s. The faith was imposed mostly by military force, resulting in outward conversions but an underground continuance of many of the traditional indigenous

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<sup>2</sup> *Mestizo* literally means to be of mixed race, specifically, European and indigenous. “Mulatto” is used to refer to people of mixed European and black African background. Historically, neither of these terms was used in a “neutral” or “scientific” way, but have always had a negative connotation. Nonetheless, U.S. Latino theology has taken the term to describe “Latinness.” In post-colonial literature it is a specific form of hybridity.

<sup>3</sup> In Spanish *mestizaje* refers to both the process and the result of the mixing of racial groups.

and African religious practices. In practice the result was an official Catholicism and a popular Catholicism that reflected a syncretistic combination of Catholicism and previously practiced faiths.

This was the faith practiced by the Mexican faithful at the time of the U.S. takeover of the Southwest. Both the American Protestants and Catholics challenged these religious practices. The Protestants only saw paganism, while the American Catholics saw a simplistic, childlike faith with little theological framing. Both worked very hard to change the Mexican Catholics. American Catholics removed most of the existing Mexican priests and worked very hard to Americanize the Mexicans. Protestant missionaries also evangelized and Americanized. U.S. Protestant missionaries were convinced that “Americans” were the new Israelites that had been given a new Canaan. Of course, in that interpretation the Mexicans were Canaanites who no longer had a right to the land and who would soon disappear. Nonetheless, many missionaries felt that the Mexicans should be evangelized before they completely disappeared as a people.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, 3-5% of “Mexican”<sup>4</sup> population of the Southwest was Protestant. It seemed like the Mexicans who wanted to “fit” in the new reality of the American Southwest thought becoming a Protestant would help. But Latino Protestants were already becoming a doubly marginalized community. U.S. Protestants wanted them to convert, but did not feel comfortable with having them in their churches. And several small Latino communities in the Southwest literally split into Catholic and Protestant sections.

But several important things happened in the first part of the twentieth century that redefined Latino Protestantism. On the one hand, by the 1930s most Protestant denominations had ministry among Latinos, with the evangelical groups growing faster than the historical denominations. But the most significant event was the birth of the modern Pentecostal movement at the Azusa Street Revival beginning in 1906. There were many “Mexican” converts at Azusa Street and they took the Pentecostal message back to Latin America and the Latino USA.

There was slow, but steady, growth among Latino Protestants through the middle of the twentieth century, with Pentecostals slowly becoming their largest group. The next major change occurred after 1965 when the United States changed its immigration policy and began to allow more people from Latin America to move into the country. While this change was happening in the United States, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement were changing the face of Christianity in Latin America. So when new migrants came, many of them were already Protestants. They came from dynamic churches and many brought their own pastors and churches, something that had not happened with earlier migrations. Because the percentage of Protestants in Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and El Salvador was higher than the percentage of Latino Protestants in the United States, the Latino Protestant population continued to grow as a percentage of the population. Tied to the continuing uneasy relationship between “American” and Latino Catholics, Latino Catholics in the United States continued to convert to Protestantism, particularly Pentecostalism.

The traditional interpretation among sociologists, and many Catholics, was that Latino conversions to Protestantism were part of the assimilation process into U.S. society. But numerous studies have demonstrated that at least Latino Pentecostals have higher ethnic identity maintenance than Latino Catholics. Nonetheless, the issue of structural assimilation affects Latino Protestants. Today one finds *Protestantes* and Latino Protestants, the former being people where ethnic and religious identity are closely linked and the latter being people whose Christian commitment is fairly separate from their ethnic identity (or they have a low Latino ethnic identity).

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<sup>4</sup> Through most of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries all Latinos in the Southwest were called Mexicans, even if they were born in the United States. During the massive deportations of the 1930s many U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were deported to Mexico.

Currently Latino Protestants clearly reflect various “in-betweennesses.” For example, Latino Protestant churches are growing, but many Latino Protestants do not attend predominantly Latino churches. Mainline churches claim to believe in diversity and openness toward Latinos, but Latinos, on the whole, are much more interested in Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Though two-thirds of Latinos have a Mexican background, Latino Protestants are much more likely to be of Puerto Rican or Central American descent, since Mexico is the most Catholic country in the world. This tendency is so strong that most of the nationally recognized Latino Protestant leaders are Puerto Rican.

Latino Protestants continue to grow in the space between migration and structural assimilation. They also inhabit a predominantly Pentecostal world that makes them very different from the majority of U.S. Protestants. This in-betweenness would seem to indicate that Latino Protestants will likely follow several trajectories as they look toward the future. Migration and proximity to Latin America will continue to be part of the equation even as Latino Protestants negotiate being a part of life in the United States.

### **LIVING AN IN-BETWEEN LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES**

Latinos continue to live in an in-between space in the United States. Politically, most identify with Democrats, though the Obama administration has deported more undocumented Latinos than has any other presidency. Latino Protestants tend to be more socially conservative than other Latinos, but find that Republicans are not sure that they want them in the party.

New Latino immigrants are continuing to redefine and reframe the story of Latinos in the United States. Most of the time these new immigrants do not know the history of U.S. Latinos and they bring their Latin American past into the U.S. Latino experience. At the same time some Latinos are structurally assimilating and are disconnecting from the story. Latino identity continues to exist in the bookends between migration and structural assimilation.

### **MAÑANA—A WAY OF BEING A FAITHFUL BELIEVER IN AN IN-BETWEEN PLACE**

The term *mañana* in its idiomatic usage means more than “tomorrow.” In practice it only means “not today.” In some circles it can become a form of escapism, a focus on a tomorrow that will never come. But *mañana* is also a powerful eschatological term. To believe in *mañana* is to believe in God’s future. The present may seem hopeless at times, but *mañana* is in God’s hands. *Mañana* invites us to live the reality of in-betweenness in hope, believing that God will bring justice and peace through Jesus Christ. Because we believe in *mañana* we can believe in a future where our polycentric identities will not merely be tools for survival, but will be recognized as gifts to more effectively serve the God who calls us to live in the in-betweenness of “already and not yet.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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