

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Changing Landscapes of Faith: Latin American Religions in the Twenty-First Century

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This essay reviews the following works:

The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America. Edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston, and Stephen C. Dove. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 830. \$250.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780521767330.

Native Evangelism in Central Mexico. By Hugo G. Nutini and Jean F. Nutini. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 197. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780292744127.

New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa. By Stephen Offutt. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 192. \$80.18 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107078321.

The Roots of Pope Francis's Social and Political Thought: From Argentina to the Vatican. By Thomas R. Rourke. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. Pp. vii + 220. \$80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781442272712.

Latin America today is much more than simply Catholic. To describe it as such would obscure the complicated cultural history of the region while belying the lived experiences of believers and the dynamic transformations in the religious field that have distinguished the *longue durée* of colonial and postcolonial Latin America. 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. Indeed, deep indigenous Amerindian, colonial European, and displaced African roots have intermingled for centuries and vie today for status and influence among the myriad believers who make up the multicultural tapestry of New World faith and belonging. At the same time, new religious movements along with extremely successful Protestant proselytization campaigns have come to shape the diverse character of religious life as we know it from the Caribbean to Central and South America. The four volumes reviewed here offer a snapshot of this diversity and indicate the trends in scholarship that attempt to render it comprehensible in comparative terms.

While acknowledging the diversity of Latin American religious cultures, no discussion of contemporary religion in the region seems adequate without first situating Christianity as, for better or worse, the gravitational nexus of moral and religious life in countries from Mexico to Brazil. For perfectly good reasons, the literature on religion in Latin America has been dominated by studies on the history of Christianity, particularly Catholicism, and reflections on the role of the Christian church in power politics. Besides perhaps capitalism, since the modern era began no cultural institution in the Americas has been more influential than the Christian church. Today, Catholic and Protestant churches predominate almost everywhere in Latin America, prevailing in moral and political authority from neighborhoods and municipalities up to state and national governments. From popular enthusiasm at the community level to wider trends in aesthetic, economic, and political transformation, Christian culture—and increasingly, charismatic evangelical Christian culture in the form of Pentecostalism—has featured prominently in shaping Latin American society.

While one version or another of Christian culture endures and advances, the churches themselves are in transition and, as a logical result, so too are the societies and peoples who have embraced them. Protestant inroads into Latin America have transformed the landscape of faith to a degree many scholars have described

as staggering. Just fifty years ago 90 percent of adults in Latin America identified as Catholic, a number that has fallen to 69 percent today. Even as Catholic supremacy wanes in many countries, evangelical and especially charismatic forms of Protestant Christianity wax. At present, nearly one in five adults in Latin America consider themselves Protestant, and of those, two-thirds identify as Pentecostal-charismatic Christians (the most popular version of Protestantism in the region). The differences fueled by these changes are numerous and offer scholars a promising opportunity to reexamine enduring questions in the history, anthropology, and sociology of the region as well as to pose new questions about cultural change, globalization, political economy, nationality, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and other important intersections of social life and religion that have long animated research on the region.

The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America is a good place to start for orientation in religious studies of Latin America. In a crowded field of companions, edited volumes, and introductory texts, there remains a place for curated compendiums that might serve as lucid, conversant guides through dense or varied subject matter. Apparently, the reference genre itself, despite the wide accessibility of online resources, is still viable (dare I say thriving?) today. The reason, one imagines, must be based on the persistent demand for reliable, expert summary information of the highest quality. (More cynically, their usefulness is nowhere near a reflection of their value to publishers, like Cambridge University Press, who stand to make considerable profits from institutional libraries that no longer purchase encyclopedias but may be duped into acquiring their more contemporary—and just as pricey—cousins). At best, for academics and scholars, these sources can serve as assets when considering new research topics or catching up on new developments in a field. For nonexperts, these texts offer readings that can enrich a scholar's thinking on an unfamiliar topic without requiring that they conduct an exhaustive review of the canon. To assemble a worthwhile volume is no small task, especially when the assignment is as wide-ranging as religions in Latin America and the possible topics for inclusion are seemingly limitless. Which religions to focus on, at what point in time to begin a historical review, what aspects of religious life to privilege, what trends in religious change to cover, how best to bridge disciplinary conventions—these are only a few of the many important decisions volume editors need to make, and that is before they delineate what exactly is going to count as “Latin America.”

The category of “Latin America” is itself an analytic invention, shorthand to refer to cultures and communities that ostensibly share in ways that are critically important. However arbitrary it may seem at times, the approach does, nevertheless, allow for productive comparative couplings by permitting the exploration of themes like globalization and religious change across diverse geopolitical boundaries at greater levels of abstraction. This is especially useful when considering the historical legacy of global cultures like Catholicism and the pervasive influence of charismatic Christianity today. This is a point effectively stressed in the editors' introduction, though in different terms, when they posit that theirs is a timely volume because of “the historical and contemporary centrality of religion” in Latin America, a region growing in global importance, where the religious field as a whole is undergoing “an extremely rapid process of change,” and that Latin America represents an opportune site for comparative studies because of its “religious distinctiveness in global comparative terms” (1). They add to this the fact that the current “de-Catholicization” of Latin America is unique among world regions and has emerged from “disproportionately nonwhite, grassroots sectors” (14). “Latin America,” they write, noting its distinctiveness, “used to mirror Latin Europe in its religious field, but has now shifted somewhat in the direction of the United States, driven by Pentecostals' rejection of syncretism in favor of a pluralistic model of the religious field” (15). Unlike in Europe, they tell us, where “the new religious pluralism results more from immigration and secularization,” Latin American religious change is largely the result of conversion and changes internal to the region (17). Concluding their introduction, the volume editors make a very plausible prediction for the future of religion in Latin America, which they tell us will entail a “slimmer but revitalized” Catholicism; a “large, stable (and highly fragmented) Protestantism”; and “a considerable sector of non-Christian religions and of ‘non-religious’” (16). This prediction is fleshed out and substantiated in the following forty-eight essays that demonstrate the diverse and changing face of religions in Latin America.

Included, of course, are essays covering necessary, though predictable topics, such as “The Intellectual Roots of Liberation Theology” (Ivan Petrella) and “Latin American Pentecostalism as a New Form of Popular Religion” (André Corten and Ashely M. Voeks), but just as welcomed are the unexpected chapters like Amos Megged's contribution, “New World ‘Savages,’ Anthropophagy, and the European Religious Imagination,” and Matthew Butler's chapter, “Liberalism, Anticlericalism, and Antireligious Currents in the Nineteenth Century.” All of the topics are treated with sophistication, and the varied inclusions are smartly chosen, as are the contributing authors themselves, several of whom have written about the region for decades. Chapters run the gamut from essays addressing the changing terms of the religious field—Andrew Orta's nice

essay “Inculturation Theology and the ‘New Evangelization,’” and an equally fine essay by David Lehmann, “The Religious Field in Latin America: Autonomy and Fragmentation”—to essays highlighting the religious diversity of the region such as “Spiritism in Latin America” by Sidney M. Greenfield, and “Neither Catholics nor Protestants: Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists, and La Luz del Mundo,” by Patricia Fortuny and Henri Gooren. Essays range from the historical (e.g., “Religion in the Pre-Contact New World: Mesoamerica and the Andes” by David Tavárez) to the analytic (e.g., “Indigenous Peoples: Religious Change and Political Awakening,” by Timothy J. Steigenga and Sandra Lazo de la Vega, as well as “Religion and Gender in Latin America,” by Kevin Lewis O’Neill).

The nature of scholarship today—the production of knowledge and its distribution—preclude the possibility of “definitive” reference compilations of this kind; there is simply too much information out there. The volume is not, therefore, an “essential reference” as the publisher claims—it is, however, a useful one. Sometimes we might not know what to look for, or know intuitively what themes are relevant, or fully comprehend the scope of thematic possibilities engendered within a given subject area. It is here I think that the collection shines. I enjoyed reading “The Baroque Church” (Pamela Voekel), and I found Christine Kovic’s chapter, “Human Rights: An Ongoing Concern,” to be an informative treatment of religious organizations and their role in support of contemporary human rights movements in Latin America. One of the more effective chapters in the volume is Stephen Selka’s “African Diaspora Religions in Latin America Today,” which offers a concise introduction to the topic, not just by defining the subject of African-derived religions ably, but also by discussing to good effect the central themes of interest and major issues of concern in the literature. He ends his chapter with a strong and useful (even if Cuba and Brazil heavy) bibliography.

Countries routinely left unexplored in the wider literature remain unexplored here. Uruguay, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Panama, though referenced sporadically, are largely absent in any meaningful way from the volume, while we get more than enough material on Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and the other usual suspects. (This is not the fault of volume editors—there is simply less scholarship on the religious cultures of those countries, and it is high time that scholars took notice!) Thematically we get the familiar “church/state relations” as well as the “conversion of a continent” material but are not treated to greater exposition of indigenous religions, new religious movements, critical issues of religion and modernity, to say nothing of newer, rich areas of research such as studies in embodiment and material religion, critical feminist and LGBTQ perspectives on religion, performance and musicology, religion in literature, or even something as fringe as, say, “narco-religion.” The field is fertile with fresh possibilities that need only to be cultivated.

The restricted length of the chapters, most ten to fifteen pages, limits their utility, of course. One way of overcoming this limitation (which, in fairness, besets the genre) would have been to include, along with every chapter, more substantial supplemental bibliographies. Many of the chapters simply do not give us more to read on the subject, which limits the volume’s usefulness to serious scholars. For example, the chapter “Asian Religions in Latin America,” by Jeffery Lesser, while unusually stimulating, is much too brief (five pages in all with seven bibliographic references—six of which concern Japanese religion alone). A passing mention on page 726 of syncretic “Afro-Okinawan sects” that emerged in Latin America in the 1960s, featuring “possession by African and Okinawan spirits,” is exactly the kind of intriguing tidbit that leave readers wanting more and begging direction for further reading. However, here, and too often throughout the volume, we are not apprised of where to look next. I found many of the chapter bibliographies underdeveloped and, therefore, functionally limited. Nevertheless, I see this more as a missed opportunity than a weakness of the volume per se. What the volume editors do accomplish is well worthwhile, and the volume’s strengths as a basic reference far outweigh any nitpicky shortcomings.

A particularly good example of recent writing on the growth and transformation of evangelical Christianity, not just in Latin America but also globally, is Stephen Offutt’s erudite and measured book *New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa*. Offutt considers the evangelical movement in transnational perspective through a comparative consideration of evangelicalism in El Salvador and South Africa, where one-third and one-quarter of their respective populations are some version of evangelical or Protestant. Characterizing both countries as exemplars of what he calls “new centers of evangelicalism,” Offutt joins a growing chorus of observers highlighting the changing face and influence of evangelical Christianity in the global South.

He describes these centers as becoming more socioeconomically diverse, better connected internationally, and increasingly socially engaged (2). At the same time, through transnational spaces of exchange and influence, these centers have a growing global impact. No longer just storefront churches in poor neighborhoods, the movement is increasingly associated with booming megachurches in middle-class

suburbs. As evangelical leaders and “entrepreneurs” think bigger and bigger, engaging with the state and the world in social ministries on an ever grander scale, evangelical institutions in the global South are progressively more transnational in scope. As a result, Offutt argues, evangelical identity is being recreated in the complex intersection of local and global initiatives where local actors take advantage of the international resources at hand to create new organizations and social institutions, which in turn may come to have significant political and global reach.

Offutt concerns himself with the “internal dynamics of global evangelicalism” and the “religious motors of change that drive them” (3). To this end, he proposes a framework for understanding the internal dynamism of the evangelical movement (the new centers of evangelicalism) rooted in the idea of “religious social forces”—a concept for locating the intersecting relations between local religious actors, organizations, and institutions with global resources, institutions, and networks, in an effort to reconcile the individual agency and innovation of believers with the concurrent transnational webs of religious influence within which they operate, respond to, empower, and transform. The framework highlights internal sources of change in the evangelical movement and is a helpful way of envisioning the interplay between local religious actors and the supranational religious processes in which they play an important part. Despite the wide scope of the framework Offutt puts forward, and despite privileging religion (or “religious forces”) as the main agent in religious change, he takes strides not to be reductive by acknowledging the interconnected nature of human experience, the very complicated dynamics of cultural change, and the inextricable roles played by economic, political, and other social forces in religious transformation.

Many of Offutt’s conclusions support the observations of other scholars, such as the facts that the new centers (using his term) have become increasingly effective at exporting religion through missions and mastery of media and social outreach; local religious initiatives tend to be more sustainable and effective than those imposed from the outside; and evangelicals are becoming more involved in politics at every level (155–158). Adding to this, he also gives us helpful, relatively novel insights into the ways in which individual religious actors operate in relation to global religion and how they synthesize the local and global resources at hand. He does this through the image of the “local entrepreneur,” ambitious community members who mobilize these resources in new and unique ways.

Offutt’s book fits nicely into the increasingly robust literature on global evangelical Christianity, with its focus on global relationships and issues as they relate to the lives of believers. Thanks to largely qualitative and ethnographic research—vital and welcome approaches to the topic—we get a good sense of how the religious “entrepreneurs” central to Offutt’s analysis engage the public and the world, with examples from both South Africa and El Salvador. Offutt’s volume should be read for its learned analysis and its effective ability to draw together a considerable amount of information on two very different countries and make it work.

In *Native Evangelism in Central Mexico*, Hugo and Jean Nutini explore homegrown, independent evangelical churches that, according to the authors, have received less attention in the literature on Protestantism in Latin America. The authors are accomplished ethnographers and set their sights on two “native sects” in Central Mexico: one “liberal, egalitarian congregation” (*Amistad y Vida*) and one “rigid, stratified congregation” (*La Luz del Mundo*). The book reads like ethnographies of old, as the reader is informed of the kinship organization, ideologies, and worldviews of the two communities under investigation. The Nutinis demonstrate their bona fides as anthropologists of Mexico with straightforward and incisive description and analysis throughout. Unfortunately for readers, they just as clearly show their unfamiliarity with (or at least their unwillingness to engage with) the anthropology of Christianity and studies of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America. As a result, interest in the book will be narrowly restricted to students of Mexico and those interested in the traditional ethnography of the region and issues specific to the culture of Central Mexico.

On the one hand, *Native Evangelism* succeeds as a singular monograph on an underappreciated node of religious diversity in Central Mexico, where Catholicism continues to predominate and where very little research exists on conversion. We learn about the principal theologies and practices of community members, which the authors do a good job of contextualizing for the reader in historical and cultural terms. They also do a good job of locating the stakes of conversion in Central Mexico for those who choose to exchange Catholicism for born-again redemption. On the other hand, the book does little to complement other research on Protestant conversion in Latin America because it forsakes a common comparative language shared in much of the literature. Despite what is otherwise a very precise and meticulous historical and cultural account of the region, demonstrating knowledge that only comes with deep local engagement over time, the authors, puzzlingly, choose not to make important connections with existing scholarship and to situate their work within an already vibrant literature on evangelicalism in Latin America.

In the preface the authors announce that they will not engage in a review of the literature on evangelical Protestantism in Latin America—but perhaps they should have. This refusal leads to a bewildering election of terms like “evangelist” instead of “evangelical” or “Protestant/Christian convert”—the more common translations of *evangélico*—and frequent use of the term “sect” to refer to Pentecostal and other Protestant churches which, apart from sounding old-timey, is a strangely “etic” designation as it is highly unlikely that converts refer to their own churches as “sects” (Catholics in Latin America often disparage Protestant churches as “*sectas*”). Not using a more standardized terminology confuses an already murky field of comparative terms; after all, across Latin America, *cristiano* and *evangélico* tend to be terms used to refer to any non-Catholic Christian; and so, even “evangelical” in this context is imprecise, especially considering the difference in how that term is deployed historically in the United States and elsewhere. Because several of their basic analytic terms differ from the norm, I found it difficult at times while reading to imagine what these communities look like in relation to similar communities throughout the region. At one point the authors refer to “Assembly of God” as an “obscure, splinter group of the evangelical sects” (12). It should be noted that Assemblies of God, founded in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914, claims a worldwide membership of nearly 67 million people in 212 countries and is the world’s largest Pentecostal denomination.

Lack of engagement with existing literature and a common scholarly language hurts the comparative utility of *Native Evangelism*. How do these communities in Mexico compare with other like groups in other countries or even other parts of Mexico?¹ Scholars are increasingly interested in the social and cultural dynamics of evangelical conversion as a global movement, and the unique transformations that follow as communities reconcile the moral and theological particulars of their new faith with traditional culture and broader concerns of gender identity and sexuality, family and work relationships, economic practices, political participation, and more. Making an effort to connect their findings and analysis to common themes and discussions in the literature would have benefited readers interested in evangelical Christian culture more generally but who may have less interest in Mexico specifically, while also demonstrating to what degree the author’s observations are analogous to those scholars studying similar churches elsewhere.

Although the core research for this book was conducted over ten consecutive summers (1996–2006), Hugo and Jean Nutini have worked in the region for a very long time (around fifty years). And yet, while there is an impressive scope to their account, we get surprisingly little intimacy, something desirable when discussing a religion of affect, moral transformation, and everyday struggle. Ideally, it is this intimacy that ethnography, at its best, promises to deliver. Spiritual and emotional dimensions of faith and conversion are often lost when we rely too heavily on survey data—strategies more effective in gathering ethnographic insight on say, political participation or land use, but less successful when considering the personal, complex, and often contradictory religious lives of believers. The Nutinis’ volume will appeal to not so much to students of evangelicalism in Latin America as perhaps to those interested in the more specific place of independent evangelical churches in the cultural history of Central Mexico, and those looking for detailed accounts of *Amistad y Vida* and *La Luz del Mundo* (Mexico’s largest “native” evangelical church) and their relative social position and reception in Mexican culture.

Finally, *The Roots of Pope Francis’s Social and Political Thought*, by Thomas R. Rourke, takes an in-depth look at the historical and theological foundations of Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s social thought and his trajectory from auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to the Chair of Saint Peter in Rome, Italy, as the 266th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. The election of the first “Pope from the South,” in 2013, signals, according to Rourke, the ascendance of the Catholic Church in Latin America from “reflection church” (a church relying on others for direction and innovation) to “source church” (a self-sufficient church that plays a leadership role). Usefully, Rourke situates Bergoglio’s pastoral initiatives as well as his views on social, economic, and political questions in the context of his experience as a priest in Argentina and his exposure to the culture and history of Latin America. Unlike many observers who highlight elements of newness in his teachings, Rourke stresses renewal and consistency with historical convention, convincingly showing that the vision Pope Francis maintains for the Church is very much in line with and rooted in the Catholic Church’s long-held traditions.

The volume will appeal to a general readership who wish to understand more about who Pope Francis is, his intellectual genealogy, and what role his personal history and cultural context might have played in developing his theological vision. Rourke’s synthesis of thousands of pages of Bergoglio’s writings is a reward to readers who seek a detailed sketch of the Argentine Pope’s political and social thought as it

¹ Compare, for example, Kurt Bowen, *Evangelism and Apostasy: The Evolution and Impact of Evangelicals in Modern Mexico* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), a better exemplar of the genre.

evolved over time. Rourke highlights the special influences of Jesuit history, the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology (as well as the Vatican's response to it in the 1980s), and, perhaps most significantly, a line of thinking in Argentina called *la teología del pueblo*, "the theology of the people" (a sort of localized, depoliticized liberation theology), on Bergoglio's pastoral interests and teaching. Pointing to a renewed focus on missionary outreach and respect for the importance of culture in the adoption of the Gospel in locally relevant terms ("inculturating evangelization"), Rourke describes Bergoglio as a "true reformer" who has adopted "with regenerated force the missionary thrust he had first learned from Saint Ignatius" (198).

The composite picture of Pope Francis that emerges is almost exclusively laudatory. Rourke portrays him as an original thinker whose writings reveal an independent but authentic Christian vision that at times has placed him "at odds with liberal, radical, and restorationist elements in his own order, the nation, and the world at large" (197). Virtually no explicit criticism of the Church, the history of Jesuit missions, or Bergoglio himself will be found here. This is notably contentious in the context of Argentina, where the Catholic Church has been roundly criticized for its complicity in the Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s. Bergoglio himself is not beyond reproach and has received considerable criticism for his failure, at the time, to publicly denounce the military government and to firmly condemn those responsible for the "disappearing" of some thirty thousand people. Lamentably, Rourke avoids this topic almost entirely. In fact, his overall account is so affirmative and celebratory one gets the impression that Rourke himself has strong Christian commitments. This may be off-putting to some readers, but given that the work is largely an intellectual biography, it does not unduly detract from the basic arguments of the book or its essential contributions.

Although we have yet to see what sort of long-term impact the first Latin American pope will have on the fortunes and tenor of Catholicism in Latin America, election of an Argentine pope is, at the very least, an indication of a global religious landscape in transition. Latin America itself, where nearly 40 percent of the world's total Catholic population resides, is increasingly more central to the future orientation of the Church as a whole and will ultimately be an indicator of things to come.

These four books offer insights into the developing trends characterizing religion across Latin America and help contextualize religious transformation in the region. The story of religion in Latin America, no less than anywhere else in the world, is not limited to private belief or some hermetically sealed space of ritual and practice. What continues to make religion an enduring focus of social science and humanities scholarship is its inextricable involvement in spheres of life as varied as politics, literature, art, ethics, philosophy, economics, family ideology and organization, and the historical relations between them. The history of religion in Latin America is Latin American history. Today provides a wonderful opportunity for fresh evaluations, not only of Catholicism in the region, historical Protestantism, and Pentecostal-charismatic newcomers, but also of indigenous religions, secularism, African-derived religions, new religious movements, and all of their diverse exchanges. As communities around the region find ways of adapting and putting to use new religious tools for their own projects of uplift, healing, progress, happiness, escape, control, or salvation, novel research and scholarship will be essential to mapping the cultural changes inspired by a new generation of believers and their religious works in the twenty-first century.

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How to cite this article: Thornton, Brendan Jamal. 2018. Changing Landscapes of Faith: Latin American Religions in the Twenty-First Century. *Latin American Research Review* 53(4), pp. 857–862. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.341>

Submitted: 17 September 2017

Accepted: 16 October 2017

Published: 20 December 2018

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Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

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